Close Encounters of the First Kind: Teaching the Poem at the Point of Utterance

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How might we as English teachers encourage in our students primary acts of reading? First of all, however, we must ask, what is a primary act of reading? And further, what does the idea of a primary act of reading imply about such things as secondary acts of reading?

But let me begin with a story. It's my first year of teaching, yet because I've been hired under emergency certification, I've had no real teacher training preparation. Of course, my classes are in constant turmoil as I struggle through the required curriculum. On the other hand, I think I'm right on track, for I'm simply teaching as I was taught. Thus I continue demonstrating to the rebellious juniors in front of me the exact and only meaning of every poem, short story, and novel. Yes, I am giving them everything they wanted to know, just according to Hoyle, or at least everything they'd otherwise find in Cliff's notes.

Well, in January during a particularly low point of this spoon feeding routine, I enter the only class that seemed to be going fairly smoothly, and I'm confronted by one of my wilder students brandishing a Rolling Stones album. He appears to want some help, but better to get everyone seated and the daily lesson under control. Yet Bill, yes I remember his name to this day, persists. It seems that there's this poem on the back of the album jacket and, would you believe, its meaning is not all that transparent for this group of eleventh graders. Like there are some puzzles, some arguments even, regarding the poem's interpretation. "Why not?" I wonder to myself, and so I leap in.

We begin to read the poem aloud as a class, first me, then Bill does his version. The words don't really make a whole lot of sense to me, so a bit apprehensively I ask the class, "Does anyone have some suggestions about what these lines mean?" No big deal, right? You're allowed to get their opinions. But shouldn't I know the right answer first? Otherwise, how would I be able to tell if they were getting it right. Complicated business this teaching, especially when you haven't psyched out the poem in advance. Yet, luck is with me in this game of wits. After some initial fumblings, by both me and my students, I am able to see some glimmering of light in the words spread before us.

The text of the poem has long since escaped me, all except the opening line that helped establish my credibility for the first time with these students who otherwise were so skeptical of the teacher's infernal poetry game. The opening line: "Twelve black bands for Christmas." You see it was 1966 and protest was very trendy for my students. Our soldiers were dying in Vietnam and already there had been martyrs for the civil rights movement. Such a context led them to a funeral interpretation of the line: people were mourning by wearing black arm bands. Yet this image really didn't fit with the rest of the poem, and my students could be honest about this discrepancy because for once in my class we were having a genuine conversation; it was no dummy-run performance for my benefit.

The contention I was able to make sounds all too obvious in retrospect. I simply noted that a record was colored black and had six bands on each side, but the association was quickly assimilated by the class. And in the subsequent exchanges they taught me some things about their record culture that from my perspective was
already receding on the far side of the latest generation gap. Even the "funeral" connotations that they had originally settled on served to give us some useful reverberations once the direct reference between the black bands and a phonograph record had been established.

What we recaptured that day is the freshness that's possible when you face a poem openly for the first time. Inadvertently, I was modeling a primary act of reading: you may begin in a partial state of ignorance, but still you have strategies for reading through your ignorance. You never just revel in your ignorance. And so "The twelve black bands of Christmas" became a symbol for the many other occasions that year when together we looked at poems that I hadn't already made up my mind about.

The point of my story is to suggest that by primary acts of reading we refer to those reading events in which readers are working their way through a text for the first time, with all the gold or dross, insights or false starts, that might entail. This is in contrast to secondary acts of reading, by which we mean those reading events where a reader, generally a teacher, is publicly reporting on the results of a previous encounter with a text. In a secondary act of reading these "results" are generally carefully organized to avoid giving any impression that earlier messes or confusions were being worked through.

But why focus on this distinction between primary and secondary acts of reading? Why would it matter? An answer to this question, however, requires us to consider two earlier ones: (1) what are the goals of literary study and (2) what constitutes an act of reading literature?

Let's begin with the goals of literary study. Presumably we can agree that among our significant goals in pursuing the study of literature, two stand out. First, we want to develop in students an ability to accurately, imaginatively, and boldly interpret literary texts. Second, we want students eventually to proceed with their interpretations on some independent basis—in other words to be able eventually to read on their own without depending upon either teacher or secondary sources to tell them what the right or correct response should be. In short, we desire that our students become self-composed about their membership in whatever interpretive community they choose to belong to. Or perhaps more simply, the goal of literature instruction is to foster secure and independent readers, readers who truly enjoy exploring literary texts.

Certainly more remains to be debated about the goals of literary study, but let's now turn briefly to what constitutes an act of reading literature? In trying to describe the reading process, we immediately are overwhelmed by the diverse ways readers go about responding to and interpreting texts. For, contrary to the wisdom that is conveyed in all too many literature classes, more than one reading is possible for any given literary text. Not a surprising fact when you think about it but one which plays havoc with our authority in the classroom, especially if we are willing to share this fact with students. Just compare the English teacher's dilemma of having to shuttle between "knowledge" and "interpretation" with the supposedly secure position of any math teacher and you'll get the idea—there at least appears to be a "right" answer in math. All those Algebra One students show up in September knowing not an ounce of Algebra One, and thus the math teacher can have the illusion that there are clear success criteria for the grades at the end of the semester.

This fact of multiple readings is currently being taken seriously in literary criticism as we see in the work of the various reader-response critics. By implication, as teachers of literature, we need at least to sanction the role our students play in the reading equation, and we need to look at, much more carefully, the demands, the constraints, and the opportunities they face as we try to nurture them into mature, self-confident readers.

Let us look at the fundamental tension that exists in the reading of a literary text, as readers are torn between finding and constructing a meaning for the text. The literary text initially can be viewed as a special kind of stimulus, one that both liberates and constrains readers. As stimulus, it calls forth a range of knowledge, associations both public and private, and in doing so it activates our unique emotional and intellectual combining powers. The rush may be so great, in fact, as to urge on a critic such as Norman Holland the idea that response, and hence interpretation, is finally an idiosyncratic phenomenon.

Such a formulation, however, leads to contradictions, for the tyranny of readers (or to express it more positively, their "creative imaginations") taken to an extreme means that any social dialogue and agreement regarding a text is impossible. By focusing exclusively on the reader, we make
the fatal mistake of believing that a "private" language is indeed possible. Although what's in my head may never entirely match what's in your head, I think we can still reach enough consensus on interpretation not to get lost in the dead end of solipsism. Yet a renewed interest in the reader, as long as it is held with discretion, can act as a useful corrective to that other tyrant of the poetic equation, namely the text itself.

Texts remain problematic because inevitably they refer to more than themselves. Even while we are having difficulty figuring out what internal connections the words and phrases are pointing to, networks of external cross-referencing must be dealt with. Add to this the burden of deciphering the author's intentions, and the act of interpretation is enough to frighten off the bravest among us if not the most foolhardy. But we proceed anyway, because seemingly our need to interpret, or "construct" as the psychologist George Kelly asserts, is as fundamental as life itself.

Yet the tyranny of the text remains, partly because our own interpretation always seemed to pale in comparison with the brilliance of our mentors. The results of their interpretive strategies are revealed to us, seldom the strategies themselves. Nonetheless, we are dazzled by all the information and the penetrating connections made transparent at last, connections both within the verbal icon of the poem itself and beyond it to the world of cultural experience and history that provides the necessary context of our fullest appreciation of the poem.

What I am trying to suggest here is that this transmission via the "great performance," that for the most part characterizes the teaching of literature in school, ends up blinding us to the fact that as uninitiated students we were not necessarily getting fresh readings or interpretations. Rather, we were witnessing readings arrived at in advance and thus all the false starts, contradictions, and digressions had conveniently been removed. Quite simply we were audience to secondary acts of reading. And furthermore, even after it's cleaned up, the teacher's secondary act of reading is still only one reader's reading of the poem. Such a characterization naturally overstates the case, but the question remains, how often in the course of the average person's literary training is he or she privy to a mature reader (the teacher?) encountering and engaging a literary text for the first time?

What I am suggesting is that the teacher's private acts of initial reading are what finally define the process of literary response and interpretation, and as such they should serve more openly as the source for our pedagogy. The teacher as mature reader marshals particular skills of perception and knowledge in arriving at a satisfying reading. And these readings themselves will inevitably be evolving as is the reader. But distilled, these skills and this knowledge lose their efficacy for our students. Faced only with the transmission of skills and facts, our students are kept from practicing their own powers of response and interpretation. On the other hand when the teacher's interpretive powers get displayed first hand in the midst of a collaborative community, we begin to see true sparks of insight. A wisdom is passed on that is only possible from direct experience with a practitioner—it is never gleaned second-hand from retreaded lectures or authorless textbooks. Only through direct exposure and repetition can students learn the necessary balance between what they bring to a poem and what the poem (and that moment in history) constrains them to bring.

An analogy that might be useful here is to think how knowledge and skill is developed in apprenticeships. The master is continually teaching, even overtly to be sure, but more important continually modeling for the apprentice the many immediate and intimate details of the craft. Without this direct contact with the practicing professional, the novice's potential talents go undeveloped. It's like the problem of educating scientists for the third world. The task of teaching science there may be relatively easy to the extent teachers and texts can be imported, but the real difficulty is in providing opportunities for students to work alongside real scientists to allow students the chance to eavesdrop if you will. What I would claim is one of our chief duties as teachers of literature is to allow students to eavesdrop on those moments when we are actually engaged with texts for the first time—to let them witness us in primary acts of reading, to reconsider with them the "12 black bands for Christmas."

Whenever we are "shaping at the point of utterance," we ingeniously seem to put the world back together in new and surprising ways. I have borrowed this phrase from Jimmy Britton who uses it to describe those moments when the intentions behind our thoughts find natural expression in our words, even as we think we will have nothing to say. Though we may feel locked in systems of
tradition and convention, nonetheless we do not merely recapitulate our chains, but rather we use them to enlarge, and in turn claim, our own experience. Such primary acts of mind we seek to encourage in our own students, but frequently the risk is too great so we keep them innocent of the secrets of our own inner processes. Until we first get it right we hesitate to perform openly as teachers of literature.

There are many ways to encourage primary acts of reading, though what approach we choose will in part depend on how we distinguish between professional graduate students of literature and students from all other levels and situations. Still our intent in each case will be to spark a dialogue which encompasses the multiple voices and complexities seeking expression in our classrooms. By sharing with students some of the flavor of our early stumbling efforts with a poem, we grant them the integrity of their own readings. And in doing so we help to demystify the anxiety of the ideal reading.

One of the many possible strategies for teaching the poem at the point of utterance I call “And now the envelope please . . . or . . . the amazing Carnak.” First, I have a colleague choose several poems which I haven’t read yet. Generally, these will be from recent poetry magazines or literary journals, though it is always possible to find some golden oldies. The colleague photocopies class sets of each poem and places them in separate sealed envelopes. At appropriate times during the normal flow of the curriculum, when I get the urge to be daring, I have a student select one of these envelopes from my file cabinet, where I have been safely storing them, open it and distribute copies of the poem to the class. At this point I do one of two things. Sometimes I’ll simply have as many students as possible read the poem aloud, and then as we mull over the meaning of the words, we simply begin a conversation about our responses and how we bring all the parts of the poem into some coherent interpretation. What is important here is that the students know I really have no hidden agendas, so they get right to work on their own interpretations rather than trying to guess what’s in my mind.

On other occasions, I give voice to my interior monologue as I encounter the lines of the poem for the first time. As I read down the page, I stop to express what is immediately popping into my head. I note connections, feelings, personal associations, and my expectations about where the poet seems to be going next in the poem. What’s fun and genuine about this is the fact that by the time I get to the end of the poem, I have contradicted myself several times. I might write these contradictions on the chalk board before talking through other responses that begin to appear more satisfactory to me. Though my meaning for the poem is not complete at this stage, it is naturally time for the whole class to begin to chime in. So we continue sharing our emerging readings together, each owning the poem in a primary way, because there are no previous meanings to inhibit us.

Finally I might add that my choice of the Johnny Carson character has been instructive to me. The amazing Carnak routine draws its humor in part because it reverses our normal expectation of the discourse sequence that exists between questions and answers. A person is wise who can answer questions, but someone is wiser still who knows that paradoxically we only begin with answers, not questions—the real trick is figuring out what the question is. And so it is with reading poems. By teaching the poem at the point of utterance we can see again that the poem is not simply an occasion for a set of questions to which we supply answers. Instead, the poem is an answer in search of our original question.

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