Imagining Literature at the Point of Utterance

Gordon M. Pradl

How might we as English teachers encourage in our students primary acts of reading? But first, what is a primary act of reading? And further, does this presuppose a secondary act of reading?

Let me begin with a story. As a first-year teacher, I’d been hired under emergency certification, and so had no formal preparation for working in the classroom. My classes, not surprisingly, were in constant turmoil as I struggled through the required curriculum. On the other hand, I thought I was right on track, for I was mostly teaching as I had been taught. Thus, I continued demonstrating to the rebellious high school juniors in front of me the exact and only meaning of every poem, short story, and novel that we read together. Yes, I was giving them everything they wanted to know, just according to Hoyle, or at least everything they’d otherwise find in Cliff’s notes.

In January, during a particularly low point of this spoon-feeding routine, I entered the only class that seemed to be going fairly smoothly and was confronted by one of my wilder students brandishing a Rolling Stones album. He appeared to want some help, but first I thought I’d better get everyone seated and the daily lesson under control. Yet Bill persisted. It seems there was a poem on the back of the album jacket and, would you believe, its meaning was not all that transparent for this group of eleventh graders: there were some puzzles, some arguments even, regarding the poem’s interpretation. “Why not?” I wondered to myself, and so I leaped in.

We began to read the poem aloud—first me, then Bill did his version. The words didn’t make that much sense to me, so a bit apprehensively I asked 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, teaching literature,
especially when you haven't psyched out the text in advance. Yet, luck was
with me in this game of wits. After some initial floundering, by both me and
my students, I was able to see some glimmering of meaning 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 interpretation
game: "Twelve black bands for Christmas." It was 1966 and protest was
very trendy for my students. Our soldiers were dying in Vietnam and
already there had been martyrs to the civil rights movement. Such a context
led them to a funereal 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 connection I was able to make sounds all too obvious in retrospect.
I simply noted that a phonograph record was colored black and had six
bands on each side, but this 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 "funereal" connotations that
they had originally settled on served to give us some useful resonances
once the literal 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 begin in a partial state of ignorance, but you
do have strategies for reading through your ignorance. What you cannot
do is revel in your innocence. And so the "Twelve black bands for Christ-
mas" 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.

From this experience I have come to see primary acts of reading as
referring 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 in contrast to secondary acts of reading, or
those reading events where a reader, generally a teacher, is publicly "re-
porting" on the results of a previous encounter with a text. In a secondary
act of reading these "results" generally are cleaned up and carefully or-
nized, all to avoid giving students any impression that earlier messes or
confusions, mistakes or misuses, had existed and consequently needed to
be worked through.

But why consider such a distinction between primary and secondary
acts of reading? Before tackling this question, it will prove useful to
entertain two prior ones: (1) What goals do we have in studying literature?
and (2) What constitutes an act of reading literature?

Let's begin with the goals of literary study. For me, two stand out:
First, I'd like to develop in students an ability to interpret texts accurately
and alternately, imaginatively and boldly—for surely the key to reading
wisely is not so much to have one's own prejudices confirmed as it is to
be able to recognize, appreciate, and converse with varying points of view.
Second, I'd like students eventually to proceed with their interpretations
on some independent basis—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, I desire that
students become self-confident readers who also realize that many discrep-
ancies and alternatives arise once their readings are compared with others.
When the teaching of literature seems to be going most successfully, the
teacher is fostering secure and independent readers. Pleasure and play are
important here; I want students to enjoy exploring literary texts, not just
to pass examinations and end their reading careers forever.

Certainly much more could be debated about the goals of literary
study, including matters of how critical standards are to be established and
maintained, but for the sake of argument here I want to champion openly
the values of confidence and independence. But to understand these twin
values better, I need to clarify briefly what constitutes for me an act of
reading literature. In trying to describe the reading process I am immedi-
ately 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 that
plays havoc with a teacher's authority in the classroom, especially if the
teacher is willing to share this fact with the 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 students show up in September knowing not an
ounce of algebra, and thus the math teacher can have the illusion that there
are clear criteria for the grades at the end of the semester.

Little such comfort exists for English teachers unless we close down
inquiry completely. Indeed, a forthright encounter with a literary text
immediately raises any number of value issues that can disturb us greatly—
were this not so, matters of censorship would never arise. As James Kastely
writes in his "Defense of Plato's Gorgias":

The terror that always lurks in a dialectical inquiry is caused by the
almost certain prospect of finding out that one is not who one thinks one
is. This openness requires enormous courage because in such an inquiry
one risks discovering commitments that were acquired inadvertently and,
even more likely, wrongs that were done unintentionally but for which the inquirer must accept responsibility. (1991, 102)

Being open to a text means possibly seeing a world view not our own, so it is always with caution that we expose our primary acts of reading.

Still, we simply cannot ignore that diverse and divergent readings are currently being taken seriously at the level of literary criticism in the work of the various reader-response and reception critics. With such a broadening of possibilities in the interpretive game played with literary texts, surely, as teachers of literature, we might begin to sanction a wider role for our students in the reading arena, and thus begin to look much more carefully at the demands, the constraints, and the opportunities they face as we try to encourage them to become mature, self-confident readers.

The fundamental tension that exists in the reading of any literary text involves the reader being torn between "finding" and "constructing" a meaning for the text. The literary text can be viewed as a special kind of aesthetic catalyst, one that both liberates and constrains the reader. It calls forth a range of knowledge, provoking associations both public and private, and in doing so it arouses our unique emotional and intellectual combining powers. This rush may be so great in fact as to encourage in a critic such as Norman Holland the idea that response, and hence interpretation, is finally an idiosyncratic phenomenon.

In *Five Readers Reading*, Holland (1975) explores specific readings by college students of Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily." Steeped in his psychoanalytic training, Holland reveals how widely variant interpretations can be. Confronted with Faulkner's tableau—"Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horseship, the two of them framed by the back-flung door"—the five readers in his study, though "well trained and fairly experienced," came up with dramatically different readings. Sam positions a frail, feminine Emily between her domineering father's legs. Saul sees Emily as a Hollywood figure in white and cuts her father down to a non-threatening size. Shep dresses Emily in "dark clothes" and suggests her father wouldn't mind using the whip to belt his daughter on occasion. Sebastian distances and types the characters: Emily as "the aristocrat," her father as "the original superego." Finally, Sandra brings Mr. Grierson down to a manageable size by changing him from "standing" to "sitting" (1–4):

Each of the readers had a different version of Emily and her father. He was standing, sitting; erect, sprawled; domineering, weakened; sadistic, protective; and so on—sometimes even to the same reader. Emily was dressed in white, as for a plantation ball, or black; frail, but godlike; fearful, but "the aristocrat." Some of these differences involve outright misreadings, but most do not. Conceivably, one could "teach" or coerce

these five readers into consensus, but even so, whatever in each person's character originally colored his [sic] perception of the tableau would go on coloring his [sic] perception of every other element in the story. What is that something, that ineffable effect of personality on perception? (4)

Faced with such variability, Holland concludes that it is the reader's "identity theme" (or the central life issue) that inexorably controls how a literary text is perceived and interpreted.

Such a formulation, however, inevitably leads Holland into contradictions, for the tyranny of the reader (or to express the opposite view, the reader's "creative imagination"), taken to an extreme, means that any social dialogue and agreement regarding a text becomes impossible. By choosing this route to explain the individuality of our responses to literature, Holland makes the fatal mistake of believing that a "private" language is indeed possible, even if it's clear that Emily is not an Eskimo (12). Although what's in my head may never match exactly what's in your head, I think we actually work within certain broad areas of consensus when it comes to interpretation, for our language is finally "social," not idiosyncratic. This, of course, doesn't prevent readings from shifting, expanding, and evolving as our interpretive conversations continue and we add new experiences and perspectives. Indeed, as F. R. Leavis reminds us, poems exist "in the criss-cross of utterance between us." Still, the renewed interest in the reader shown by Holland and others can serve as a useful corrective to that other tyrant of the poetic equation, the text itself.

Texts remain wonderfully problematic because inevitably they refer to more than themselves. As Carlos Fuentes observed,

The novel is a question that cannot be contained by a single answer, because it is social and society is plural. The novel is an answer that always says: "the world is unfinished and cannot be contained by a single question."

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 if not the most foolhardy among us. But we proceed anyway, because our need to interpret, or "construe" as the psychologist George Kelly asserts, is as fundamental as life itself.

Yet the tyranny of the text remains, partly because our own interpretations have always seemed to pale in comparison with the brilliance of our mentors. This fact of teacher dominance, I would maintain, has in large part come about because teachers end up revealing the results of their interpretive strategies, rather than the strategies themselves. Nonetheless, sitting in the classroom at the feet of the teacher, students can be 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 for the “fullest” appreciation of the poem.

Still, in being dazzled we can begin to feel less than secure about our own powers to make sense of texts, and this insecurity often stays with some of us who eventually become teachers of literature. As one teacher writes, it can be a constant struggle to assert oneself as a reader:

I had to shake off the feeling that someone else had already interpreted it better than I, that there was a right answer, that I was playing a guessing game—what does this mean?—and woe betide me if I get it wrong. I have often been aware that I am listening to the voices of critics or teachers and seeing the text through their eyes rather than facing the text myself; in fact, I may not see the text, but rather the critical text. It’s a bit like looking at a stage where the set has used a gauze for a transformation scene; when the lights are on in one position you see the painted gauze and when the lights change you see through the gauze to the scene beyond it. Somehow the focus of my gaze is not always directly on the text. . . . I have never been able to connect with notes given. Somehow notes move me away from the text. I concentrate on them and fail to match them up with my experience of the text, in fact I fail to experience the text any more except as an object described by the notes.¹

Much can get between students and their reading when the single right answer, the shortcut, is prized over confidence.

What I am suggesting here is that this transmission process via the “great performance,” which too often characterizes the teaching of literature in school, ends up blinding us to the fact that as uninitiated students we were not necessarily getting fresh, or what I am calling primary, 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 sanitized, 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 our literary education are we privy to a mature reader (the teacher it is hoped) encountering and engaging a literary text for the first time?

Because a teacher’s private acts of initial reading define in important ways the process of literary response and interpretation to be enacted in the classroom, these primary acts of reading 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 person. But distilled, or tidied up, these skills and this knowledge lose their efficacy for students. Faced only with the transmission of skills and facts, students are kept from practicing their own powers of response, interpretation, and understanding. On the other hand, when the teacher’s interpretive powers are displayed first hand in the midst of a collaborative community responsible for negotiating textual meanings, students begin contributing their own insights and understandings. A wisdom is passed on that is possible only via direct experience with a practitioner—it is never gleaned second hand from retreaded lectures or authorless textbooks. Through direct exposure and repetition students learn the necessary balance between what they bring to a poem in terms of their experiences and prejudices, their agendas and resistances, and what the poem (and that moment in history and culture) constrains them to bring. Nor will any such primary encounter be merely neutral or objective; there will always be a range of “reading positions” either consciously or unconsciously chosen, not the least of which remain class and gender.

An analogy that might be useful here is to think of how knowledge and skill is developed in apprenticeship arrangements. The master is continually teaching—overtly, to be sure—but more important, is continually modeling for the apprentice the many immediate and intimate aspects of the craft—including error making, error detecting, and error correcting. Without this direct contact with the practicing professional, the novice’s potential talents go undeveloped. But modeling should not be confused with cloning, for there is always the danger that what the novice picks up from modeling is a mechanical routine, one intent on identically reproducing a skill. In the case of reading literature, however, it’s qualities of mind that the teacher is trying to pass along: a certain courage strengthened by humility, a sense of patience in the midst of risk taking, a capacity for self-forgiveness tempered by both tenacity and vulnerability. And perhaps unlike other apprenticeship arrangements, our modeling must be characterized by disagreement and resistance, which is to say that the meaning we go about making of texts must be as much in dispute as it is in agreement if the social nature of reading as a continual act of learning is to be promoted successfully. To model this attitude of openness, this search for expansive and alternately realized connections, as teachers of literature we need to allow our students to eavesdrop on those moments when we are actually engaged with texts for the first time—in other words, to let them witness us in primary acts of reading, to show poetic evocation and interpretation as collaborative endeavors, to rediscover with them the “Twelve black bands for Christmas.”

Whenever we are “shaping at the point of utterance,” we 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 in advance of our utterances we sometimes think we will have nothing
to say. Despite feeling bound by the traditions and conventions of interpretation, we often manage to break loose and use the past to enlarge, and in turn claim, our own experience of the poem. In this way response inspires the birth of responsibility.

While we may seek to encourage in our own students such primary acts of mind, frequently the risk is too great and so we keep them innocent of the secrets of our inner processes. Until we first get it "right" we hesitate to practice openly as teachers of literature. For we are always thrown back to matters of confidence. Working on the text before being exposed to the critical or skeptical eyes of a class protects us with a veneer of superiority; the students get to make the "mistakes," not us, and how easy to allow this appearance of knowing more to serve as our means of controlling the responses of students.

The enterprise of learning, however, can never escape the need for dialogue, the need to resist closure, and it is precisely this kind of commitment that is promoted when primary acts of reading bump up against each other. In this sense, as Bakhtin says, "all real and integral understanding is actively responsive." In other words, the context for meaning-making, for interpretation, always remains in motion. Discourse, according to Bakhtin, forms an ongoing chain of responses:

[The speaker] does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth. . . . Moreover, any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others—with which his utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builts on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (1986, 69)

When as teachers we return to our initial readings, we appreciate precisely the kind of enterprise reading involves.

Our comprehension of any literary text involves conversing both with the words on the page and the meanings we assign them. The exact words before us provide a field of indeterminacy because the meanings that result from our interpretations remain only representations, and thus seemingly "imperfect." This, however, is not a useful characterization of our act of interpretation since it constantly places us in search of some "perfect" or "ideal" interpretation, one which we can never find.

On the other hand, our acknowledgment of the participatory quality of reading signals a beginning of the postmodern spirit. Interpretation thus becomes richer or poorer, not true or false. And accordingly, our study of reading might better focus on inquiry processes and discrepancy resolution. Such a study keeps the interpretive conversation going as it keeps us as readers returning to matters of evidence, both external and internal. Yet frequently as teachers we allow our interpretations to proceed as though we arrived at their conclusions automatically, that we actually know what these answers mean. By doing this to our students we short-circuit their questioning processes, which first involve taking in the poem as is, warts and all, then allowing the false starts and inaccuracies to unfold accordingly. Returning to our primary acts of reading is an important way of reaffirming poetry as a shared celebration.

There are, of course, many ways to encourage primary acts of reading, though what approach we choose will depend in part on how we distinguish between professional graduate students of literature and students from other levels and situations. Still, our intent in each instance will be to spark a dialogue which encompasses the multiple voices and complexities seeking expression in our classrooms. By sharing with our students some of the flavor of our stumbling early efforts with a poem, we grant students 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"—a phrase lifted from the Amazing Carnak, a character portrayed by Johnny Carson on his late night TV show. 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 a class set of each poem which he then places 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 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 begin a conversation about our responses and how we might bring all the parts of the poem into some coherent interpretation. It is important here that the students know I have no hidden agenda, so they can get right to work on their own interpretations rather than trying to guess what's in my mind. And when the students feel comfortable enough to bring in texts on their own, just as Bill did, I know that authority in the classroom is at last being shared.

On other occasions, I give voice to my interior dialogue 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. I also try to expose the biases that derive from those factors of class, race, and gender that make up the particular coordinates of my perspective. 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 a number of times. I might write these contradictions on the chalkboard before talking through other responses that begin to appear more satisfactory to me. Though my “meaning” for the poem may be far from complete at this stage, it is time for the whole class to begin to chime in. And so we continue sharing our emerging readings together, each owning the poem in a primary way, because there are no previous interpretations to inhibit or inhabit us.

Beyond these abstractions, however, what might the discourse of a primary act of reading actually look like? It might be instructive if I finally revealed my vulnerability and enacted the beginning of an initial reading encounter. To do this, I have just now opened an issue of College English (December 1990) and found the following poem:

The Outfielder

The line drive is always hit hard,
and right at him in center.
He thinks the greats have names that sound alike
and he recites one of them
each time he raises his glove: Willie, Mickey,
Kirby. Names of boys who grew and grew
and never grew up. Now he races
toward the wall, his back to home,
and he could be running from anything.
his cap tumbling toward the thick green sod
easily as a leaf tumbles from a branch
in fall, easily as his memories
of being a clumsy kid tumble
just out of reach, and the baseball tips
just off the oiled webbing of his mitt
and into the grandstand
where the old men sit, sipping beer, smoking
 cigarettes,
too lazy to reach for the souvenir.
Jack Driscoll/Bill Meissner

I read this poem through once, note how unusual it is to find a poem that is written by two people, and then wonder how the poem inscribes me as being a male and reasonably knowledgeable about baseball. Would a woman or someone unfamiliar with America’s national pastime be able to find her way into this poem? Is its theme any more than nostalgia and a man’s refusal to grow up and face maturity? Then I go back to the lines for a second time and my mind tumbles deliciously with the language of enjambment: “green sod/easily,” “branch/in fall,” “tumble/just,” “tips/just.” The dropping flow of words seems to me just appropriate here (how smoothly “just” and “appropriate” go together) for building up the suspense of whether or not that ball will be caught, and then the final act of being “clumsy” once again as the ball caroms off the outfielder’s glove and into the stands where age contrasts indifferently to youth—the old men at a younger age no doubt would have scrambled madly for what now has become a home run ball (where is the batter in this sequence of events?)

At this point my eye merely stares at the poem glancing up and down along the lines, noting, for instance, another reading of “back to home” as if the wall were a place he returned to. I wonder why the names of the greats “sound alike” as this is not something that would have occurred to me, and why recite them—is this some magic chant that will grant this outfielder a power he does not really possess? Then I see that these first names (all of which I can attach to a real baseball star’s last name) all end in “y,” a diminutive form that in the next line will be reinforced by the theme of boys never growing into men. Then “running from anything” strikes me as referring to the outfielder himself as running from maturity. Skipping to the end of the poem for a second I find that the adjective “lazy” bothers me (this is the outfielder’s perspective or is it?). I’d rather see the old men, not as lazy, but as tired and perhaps as being beyond the need of souvenirs, since they themselves are the real souvenirs of baseball’s past glory days, not the physical ball itself.

I leave the poem unsatisfied, in need now of students joining the dialogue of response, for I feel unresolved about the poem’s unity (not that poems need unity or closure). Is this a portrait of a specific ballplayer? A picture of arrested development? A linguistic tussle with language? An allegory for America’s refusal to come of age? Am I in the grandstand cheering or on the field trying to spear that ball as it begins to soar over my head? I find the poem neither difficult nor persuasive, but still I feel a growing investment in it—curiously as my eyes circle the words a strong image of the racing outfielder appears before me, and I end up pondering the issue of so many men refusing to set childish pursuits aside. Yet what have I already censored or covered up here during my brief first-time encounter with this outfielder? If, for instance, you didn’t know the game of baseball, what would an “outfielder” signify?

In reading back over the last three paragraphs I recognize that they could hardly pass as coherent literary criticism or explication—but that is precisely my point. Primary acts of reading go in many directions at once, changing right before our eyes. But if students never have such messy reading behavior legitimized, they tend to develop an insecurity about their responses. In displaying our “weakness” we do not seek to pass on ignorance; rather, we wish to assert the primacy of the mind’s meaning-making capacity. Trusting our shared responses, we gradually build toward higher
levels of satisfaction and appreciation. In playing with a poem’s possibilities we invite ourselves into the dialogue of recursive criticism.

In closing, I might add that my choice of the Johnny Carson character has been instructive to me. The Amazing Carnak routine, it seems to me, 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 or any works of literature. By imagining 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 as teacher-readers supply answers; instead, the poem is an answer in search of the student-reader’s original question.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Jenifer Smith for allowing me to quote this passage from her teaching journal.
2. I am indebted to Pam Gilbert for this term.

Afterthoughts

Gordon M. Pradl

As teachers of literature we hope each young reader will approach a new poem with great expectations, trusting to shape some meaning out of its words as they are being performed within the mind. But, as this volume makes clear, the question is always: Whose meaning will be shaped? Whose ordering of the world recognized and legitimized?

In an earlier age, governed by the authority vested in both the text and the teacher, meaning was rarely viewed as presenting any special problem. Yet now that for more than a generation we have acknowledged “reader response” and “social context” as contributing in central ways to how people actually read literary texts, we must finally come to understand that these concepts also influence how each of us develops as a reader, in terms of both attitude and competence. This notion of reader development points to what I would call the “great moments of truth” in one’s literary education. Such moments are those various occasions when a developing reader shares a “reading response” with someone in authority. Often, these responses that students are publicly exposing will be “flawed” or at least discrepant in some way when compared to the response of the teacher, who is both more experienced and in a position to judge the students’ offerings. Consequently, how the teacher receives student responses will go a long way toward determining the subsequent willingness of students to reveal and be comfortable with their later responses. In short, how the teacher acts during these initial “reading-response encounters” is very much the basis for supporting the kind of reader the student will eventually become.

As I understand them, the reading qualities most valued by the teachers represented in this volume are confidence and resistance. In conversing with the various descriptions and arguments presented in each chapter, I have concluded that while these two qualities work together in important complementary ways, a certain confusion reigns when their relationship is not developmentally honored. As I see it, genuine resistance requires an initial position of confidence, yet in building confidence, resistance is already brewing.

Confidence describes those readers who take charge of their own readings. They are “inner-directed” and not insecure about their own judgments. Yet,
just because confident readers are not dependent upon the sanctions of authority does not imply that their responses are insulated from any social consequences or influence; arrogance and close-mindedness are never the hallmarks of a confident reader. Instead they actively seek to enter collaboratively into the marketplace of ideas where their responses might be tested and accordingly extended or modified. To emphasize confidence, however, might be a signal that there is indeed a solitary “self” in charge of one’s readings, a self that can be seen in some way as being totally separate from or free of the culture and society that is always “writing” that self. On the contrary, we can only get a complete picture of a literary education if the reader as “self” is seen as socially constructed, for it is along this epistemological dimension that confidence bonds with resistance.

Resistance grows out of an awareness that certain authority groups in society are not honoring the collaborative agency of its individual citizens. What anyone with a social agenda is interested in resisting includes all those constraints that would impose forms of conduct exclusively from outside the locus of an individual’s intentions. Resistance invokes a pedagogy dedicated to fostering within students a critical frame of mind so that they might be responsible for acting, not merely for being acted upon. Of course, having said this, we immediately become concerned with questions of power and control, and it is precisely literary texts, with their wealth of ambiguity and indeterminacy, that open up occasions for individuals to disagree with the interpretations and strictures of authority.

What interests me as I debate the various authors in this book is where and when resistance begins. Must it begin with a teacher inculcating students against the repressive aspects of society (sexism, racism, classism), or might it begin with a teacher supporting each student’s unique filling in of the gaps that make up a literary text and then helping them to understand better their particular responses and interpretations? In other words, how can teachers encourage and nurture naturally occurring resistance, instead of imposing it?

If we are interested in forms of resistance that are not dogmatically dictated we should be encouraged by the fact that each variant reading at every stage in a reader’s development exists as a potential act of resistance. This is because the mere individuality or subjectivity of each reading already calls into question the “correct” interpretation it stands in opposition to. But how these readings either surface or are suppressed depends upon the pattern of socialization surrounding the reader. Two competing patterns seem to mark the major conceptual struggle that exists today within all of our intellectual categories: our vertical means of dominating versus our horizontal means of connecting.

Vertical socialization reinforces rather than challenges existing hierarchies; control remains external to the individual. Such a program of education in the service of outside authority constantly usurps a person’s agency, namely a person’s ability to interpret and shape events—some hidden agenda makes the world go round, but students are always prevented from accessing it. In the context of a literature class, vertical socialization leaves little room for those responses and interpretations that are at odds with a pre-defined curriculum and the teacher who manages it.

In contrast, horizontal socialization emphasizes our collaborative connectedness with others; it sees control as a mutually constructed phenomenon, not something outside of an individual’s dominion. Education from this perspective invites autonomy because it realizes that commitment to the ongoing conversation of the group derives from collaborative opportunities, not from imposition. In short these competing positions are value laden and in a “declared” democracy they separate out those who would preach democracy from those who would live democracy, with all the mess that it entails.

By placing confidence before resistance I inevitably reveal how deeply I have been socialized by a “personal growth” model of English teaching. But I would never want to view confidence as merely the result of a solipsistic journey, nor would I want to ignore the gross social and cultural injustices and inequities that prevent groups and individuals from developing their own intentions, their own agency. It seems to me, however, that resistance operates best from a position of confidence and self-possession, one that values autonomy and collaboration. I think, for instance, of Naomi’s response to Bruce Dawe’s poem, “Elegy for Drowned Children,” as it’s revealed to us in Alison Lee’s chapter, “Unfixing Meaning.” To me, what Naomi has constructed of the poem is a reading success, not a reading failure, but because it was labeled a failure (despite the surrounding contexts that would have “saved” it) I wonder how safe Naomi was made for future resistances. Of course, her “failure” is not so much a matter of her response as it is of her “misreading” the communicative event the “examination system” was forcing her to participate in. But this is precisely my point: the communicative event in which a student offers a response needs to be taken much more seriously as an important stepping stone in the development of a reader. If we begin with the students’ natural variant responses to literary texts, we keep the process of resistance internally connected to their own intentions and agency, without imposing our own beliefs. Yet, within the matrix of the developing conversation, our own concerns will inevitably find expression and our students might come to deal with them dialogically and not have to face them as monologic propaganda.

Some might object at this point, arguing that current repressive conditions are so pervasive as to be invisible and thus anyone with an alternative social agenda can never just sit around and wait for things to happen. I would only question how often we have taught in ways that promote confidence and encourage collaboration and the social testing of our own
responses. When readers feel secure enough to share their actual experiences with a literary text, voids in any neatly inflicted interpretation will always appear. However, those school readers (many of whom later become non-readers) who have been forced out of the conversation system, who have learned that their readings are not to be respected, will remain silent, and thus the dominant social forces will have won the day. Silence always preserves the fiction that there are no alternate points of view. On the other hand, a literature education that binds together confidence and resistance provokes the possibility of each reader imaginatively recreating the other's perspective. For this to happen no reader's perspective can be denigrated or neglected.

Rachel Collyer, a high school student from Suffolk, recently shared her "reading history" with me. As with all such self-reflections I have managed to obtain, I see in it a remarkable story of independence and resistance, one that we as teachers might build upon if we would only listen. In describing one particular experience with English, Rachel writes,

I read books as naturally as I would breathe. I did not really enjoy first year English though as we were always made to read books as a class, one person would read and then the next. This bored me so much that I would find myself reading ahead and when it came to my turn to read I would not know where the rest of the class was. I never did like reading out loud, I still don't really. It doesn't seem quite the same because you know the people listening won't appreciate the words the same as you. I mean, the words that to you visualize one thing could be seen as something completely different to anyone else. When I read I get caught up in the story, letting my imagination run wild and if I have to read the words out loud then I find that I go too fast, so I have to go more slowly and then the pictures do not flow as freely.

Already Rachel sees the range of indeterminacy within the classroom even as she is determined not to deny or bury her own reading style. The question I keep facing is, will I be able to use such student resistance to further instruction or will I permanently force them into the position of outsider? In this instance, at least, Rachel is already a confirmed reader, but what of those more hesitant, those students whose interests are already attracted elsewhere?

Wonderfully, as I see it, literature constantly threatens to undermine existing conventions and categories. The challenge, the pleasure, the celebration. Yet, when we keep students from enjoying literature, which is what the issue of confidence is all about finally, we unwittingly separate them from the possibility of change and self-determination. Resistant literacy is very much about seeing how one's reading position is determined, but this can only happen when you are aware of all the competing positions that surround it. I see Rachel's confidence shining through when she concludes her history with, "Various books make me think in different ways and kind of stimulate my mind into a different way of thinking. In my opinion a person who enjoys reading is very much more broadminded than a person who detests reading as each new book contains a different person's point of view." The challenge and prospect of this collection, for me, has been to reconsider the force and possibility of individual students' reading. If I will only listen carefully enough to them and grant them their due time and respect, then maybe at that point teaching might begin.