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## Which Reader's Response?

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### I

Most Freshman English programs conceive of themselves as providing some form of introduction to university level discourse. The expectation is that students will leave English I (or whatever its designation) with the requisite reading and writing skills to enter a new discourse community, the world of the academy. Just what that means, however, is invariably in contention. Even within our own discipline, the acts of reading and writing have become the subject of much controversy. A recent review in *College English* gives some indication of one of the current divisions within the profession about exactly what we teach people when we teach them to read: "Despite the recent wrangle and heated debates among the various camps of literary criticism, there are quite a few of us—most, I would presume to say—who still teach the text in class. . . . When we press our students we find them uncertain in their reading because they are uncertain when dealing with the concentrated and compressed use of language in literature, and often mystified by the literary effects of syntax, figures of speech, diction, and imagery" (Laff 493-94). This article urges the position that the text is an autonomous structure whose meaning is to be unlocked by various formalist strategies. The student who has been made aware of the workings of irony, metaphor, and image clusters will have the tools to ferret out the "real" meaning of the sophisticated text. But as the quotation suggests, this position has, of late, become beleaguered. Subjective criticism, reader-response, and the concept of interpretive communities all point to a shift in attention. As articulated by David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, and others, reader-response theory puts its emphasis on what occurs in the transaction between reader and text. For Bleich, the attention is on the way a reader projects his own desires on a text; for Iser and Rosenblatt, the interest lies in the interaction between text and reader, what the text activates in the reader, and what the reader activates in the text; for Fish, the focus is on the communal assumptions that control the sorts of attention we pay to texts and thereby shape our readings of them.

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In all this interchange about what actually constitutes the experience of reading and its appropriate pedagogy, what seems to be overlooked is full awareness of the ideological issues these positions raise. For despite Stanley Fish's ingenious argument to the contrary, most of us feel that the theories, or beliefs, we hold about literature and interpretation should shape our practice.<sup>1</sup> Converts to reader-response theory see themselves effecting a more dynamic, more empowering classroom situation with readers who are being invited to make active and personal engagements with the texts they encounter. In principle I agree; in practice I am less certain. Whether we name ourselves traditionalists or members of the avant-garde, more often than not our classrooms communicate a set of dominant values and manners which the students transgress at their own peril; that is, they jeopardize their grades, or feel that they do, if they deviate from the kinds of opinions and the style of speech that we so clearly privilege. So an introduction to university level discourse becomes, in fact, an indoctrination into certain ways of confronting and valuing experience. Perhaps unavoidably, these favored modes reflect class, gender, and racial bias. The fiction of the "objective" stance haunts us no matter what methodology we employ.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is real. And while it may be inherent in any educational system, it is certainly more pernicious when unobserved. We can hope, however, that the more we sensitize ourselves to the potential coercive power of the classroom and our own authority within it, the less likely we are to unknowingly abuse them. But this demands a more honest look at the power relationships that a classroom embodies and the real heterogeneity that it so easily stifles.

I would like to offer some concrete examples of the kinds of conflicts that can surface when reader-response theory is actually practiced in the classroom and to consider some of their implications. Here is an account of a class that I observed beginning a discussion of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. The teacher, in fairly non-directive fashion, began by asking for responses to the opening chapter.

The chapter is filled with evidence of Wright's sense of disenfranchisement from a language community. The writing charts a poignant and complex relation to language as the young Richard learns words that he is punished for using, is forced to erase what he has written, and feels himself speechless in the presence of his anger and mistrust: "I held myself in, afraid to act or speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a

1. I refer here particularly to Fish's assertion in *Against Theory* of a total disjunction between theory and practice. Fish's argument rests on a putative division between "theory" and "belief." He claims that beliefs are somehow the very condition of consciousness, and so do not constitute consciously examined positions, while theories are either foundationalist, and therefore false, or antifoundationalist and so, by their own admission, less than theoretical. The distinctions make for interesting speculation, but the fact remains that all pedagogy rests on some notion of epistemology, whether fully articulated or not: commitments underlie our choices.

2. Mary Louise Pratt has recently explored this subject in some detail and with specific reference to Fish: "By treating signifying practices as the joyous and spontaneous deployment of unchallengeably held beliefs, Fish achieves a kind of innocence for interpretation . . ." (52). She argues that "With a few important exceptions . . . the new awareness of the relativity of interpretation and the social constitution of reality was translated not into a repoliticization but into the complementary effort to depoliticize" (34).

void" (26). Richard learns that words have power, as when he willfully chooses to interpret literally his father's injunction to kill the cat: "I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that, if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give serious weight to his words again" (11).

The teacher had probably wished to pursue some of these ideas, but the class fixed on the opening few pages where four-year-old Richard sets fire to curtains and is beaten so seriously that he almost dies. This specter of the young child almost killed by his mother claimed everyone's attention and what followed was a somewhat tense, very careful negotiation of conflicting cultural patterns and values:

One student began: "I really was upset by the violence of his home."

Another: "What do you mean, violence?"

First: "You know . . . the brutality . . . when he's beaten."

Second: "You mean when his mother whips him? That's not brutality. Do you think he should have set that fire?"

The teacher tried to move closer to the text: "How did Richard respond? What does he take from this experience?" But the class was much more engaged in the drama unfolding in their midst. Students seemed to want to assert their own values and beliefs, to legitimate the practices followed in their own homes; and yet at the same time they were fully aware of the risks involved in exposing one's home to the ridicule of outsiders.

One would need a sophisticated videotape to recapture the body language, the hedging, the qualifying gestures by which students sought to build allies and support before they hazarded opinions which would, in fact, "place" them in the eyes of others. The split in the group was probably in large part socio-economic; it was partly racial; it was partly geographic (several students having grown up in other parts of the country or in other countries). What was evident, however, was that for these readers the elaborate network of languages in which Richard develops was not the central issue. The central issue was the lurid example of the powerless child at the mercy of adults, and the riveting concern was to find out what other families are like and to argue the validity of one's own family practices over others. Further, and most important, these ideas were not neutral; they carried heavy overtones of moral and social significance. In expressing views on child beating, you very clearly put yourself on the line.

For the teacher this was a perilous moral dilemma. On what principles does one structure such a discussion? This teacher tried and succeeded in remaining neutral, although the students scanned her every gesture for evaluative comment. I respected the restraint on her part that allowed students the freedom to express themselves with this unusual degree of openness on such sensitive issues. This restraint meant, however, repressing the impulse to direct the discussion so that students might "see" her construction of the text, how violence is a negative, silencing weapon, how Wright's story is the flight from this repressive, destructive upbringing. In fact, there were at least two contesting readings at work in this classroom: the readings of those who really knew Wright's

circumstances but were not rejecting them as he was, and the readings of outsiders who could see the injustice of his circumstances but perhaps could never fully know them. Ideally, these readings would serve to illuminate one another, but in a context of such morally charged issues, that turns out to be extremely difficult to orchestrate. The teacher is not merely directing her class through a survey of methodological styles. If she is really eliciting reader response, she is opening a space in her classroom where diverse cultural codes of all kinds will be contested. What role, then, do her own values play in helping students to articulate and critique the values that inhere in their own responses to the text?

Here is another example that poses the problem. This is the work of a Black male student. Trying to relate his own life experience to some of those recounted in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Clark writes: "Learning how to survive came easy to me because of where I lived. Around my housing project, you either learned how to fight, and fight well, or be a punk, and get beat up all the time." He then recounts a time when he was given a Big Wheel bicycle that was immediately taken from him by a gang of larger boys who beat him up:

That night at home was hell for me. My father beat me, and called me a punk and a faggot all night until I went to bed. At dinner he made me eat with the dog in the hallway of our apartment. I thought my mother would have some sympathy for me, but she said nothing. I asked her how come pops was doing that and she said, "I don't talk to chumps, I talk to men." That morning I saw the kids that beat me up riding my bike. I went back in the house and got a baseball bat and ran out the door.

Clark's paper continues to recount a parallel experience in *Black Boy*. After describing the trip to the grocery store where Richard's money is stolen twice, he concludes:

Richard's experience is not so distant from my own experience. We both were victims of outside forces that invaded our privacy. In my case, I had my bicycle taken from me; Richard had his money stolen.

Once you have had something taken from you, you feel intruded. You feel as though somebody has violated your space.

When Clark turns his attention to *Native Son*, he begins to talk about situations where people are out of control and act self-destructively. He says: "Bigger Thomas has trouble controlling his emotions. The problem centers around the fact that Bigger is not really in charge of his own life. . . ."

Then Clark compares Bigger's violence with his own. Bigger picks up a brick, hits his girl friend, and throws her down an elevator shaft.

When my girl friend and I got into a fight, I lost control just as Bigger did, but thank god my frustrations weren't that great that I would have killed my girl friend. . . . While I was in the act of doing that to her [pushing her head back against a wall] I never knew what I was doing. It was like I was programmed to do it.

But his opening statement gives the only clue to Clark's ultimate evaluation of these events:

This paper will attempt to show how people learned to survive in a poverty stricken neighborhood. How they learned to value pride as a main part of life. I will show examples of times when people had to be strong in order to keep their pride.

Reading this paper, I am riveted, like the students in the class I observed, by the disparity between Clark's experiences and my own and by the enormous gulf those differences open between us. On the one hand, Clark demonstrates potential as both a reader and a writer. He is able to move between the written text and his own life, and he attempts to interpret both. He recounts with some vitality feelings as well as events. Yet, on the other hand, the "reading" he gives these experiences is quite different from the readings I have learned to give them, and these differences have very little to do with the extent to which Clark or I understand the working of metaphor or syllogism.

Much critical debate proceeds as though the world were divided between old "new critics" and new "post-structuralists," but the divisions in the world are, in reality, much deeper and more complicated than that. The "interpretive communities" that we recognize in our theoretical discussions have already chosen to accept mainstream values and academic practices, by and large. When most students enter college, they have already committed themselves to the use of standard written English to express acceptable white middle-class values. The boundaries of legitimate deviation and dissent are always clearly marked. To cross them is to fail.

In most classrooms the machinery for censoring "aberrant" responses is clearly in place. If the students never use "I" in their writing, if they are directed always to the most formal and structural kinds of analysis (How does the point of view affect the narrative? Comment on the use of sensory detail.), then it is not likely that we will have to deal with the real diversity of "interpretive communities" in the classroom. Differences in race, gender, class, and traditions that "place" us all are ostensibly left at the parking lot while we on the campus take the "objective" stance of scholars. But current research across the disciplines insistently reminds us that even for the most committed scientist there is no empirical truth directly available to the researcher; everything is mediated by the questions we ask, the instruments we use, our desires, and our purposes. So in all interpretations we are situated by virtue of innumerable codes, traditions, shared assumptions; as feminists, ethnographers, and students of all minority literatures can document, the assumed neutral response is, in fact, one which has merely naturalized the dominant.

Looking again at Richard Wright, with the help of Clark's reading, I am struck by the ways words trap and betray the young Richard, by the extreme estrangement that leads the boy to see "coded meanings" written in "cryptic tongues" across the surface of his life. And I fear that even in the most open discussions of texts, teachers often send subtle but firm messages about which readings should be shared, condoned, and supported, and which readings mark the reader as aberrant. The text we teach, then, is still a moral one, structured by reigning ideological values, and the effect of our teaching is, most often, to silence whatever experiences lie outside the dominant community.

For the teacher committed to fostering a plurality of readings, there are still always privileged modes of analysis, privileged values, privileged ways of reading the world. At the least, we need to move sensitively through the diversity of

student responses, conscious that we both empower and disempower these responses. With the interpretive skills we foster, inevitably comes the ability to silence, to marginalize, and even to nullify what is alien or threatening. Our “interpretive communities” are not merely methodological options. They are social divisions more deeply etched the more we are oblivious to their exclusions.

What is critical here is that silencing and marginalizing do not educate; they alienate instead. While we may create classes that seem to voice our values and our standards of judgment in our preferred language, what we are often creating is only an extremely cynical pragmatism, students who do not think of their work in the university as a serious exploration of ideas and values but who see it as a manipulation of teachers. They give us what we want; we give them what they want. In return for an A, they will say whatever we wish them to about everything from their own lives to Shakespeare’s. To have the ability to effect change in minds, we have to be able to interact with minds and, ideally, to allow the various minds before us to interact honestly with one another.

## II

In *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez gives us what he calls “an American story” (5) and “a book about language” (7). It is his account of his education and the role he felt it played in severing him from the culture of his home. As a Hispanic student in a California parochial school, Rodriguez literally had to give up his own language to enter into the world of schools. His autobiography records this transition from the private, Spanish-speaking sphere of intimacy to the public, English-speaking sphere of American institutions and the force of what is lost and repressed in this movement. Estrangement from the home is presented as the inevitable cost of education; the way in which the privileged language of school represents a privileged set of cultural values that demean the values of home is clearly documented at every turn.

When my fourth-grade teacher made our class write a paper about a typical evening at home, it never occurred to me actually to do so. “Describe what you do with your family,” she told us. And automatically I produced a fictionalized account. (178-79)

Rodriguez’s final judgment seems to be that education has at once cut him off from the culture of his birth and at the same time empowered him to examine and name that experience. He sees the move into the silence of reading and abstract thought ultimately as a way of giving voice to feeling. What initially was a move into silence becomes a way out of silence. Finally, it is, in his view, the Mexican migrant workers and his own parents who, lacking a public identity, remain locked away in their silence, alien and estranged.

To read this autobiographical account is to remember one’s own adaptation to the world of schools and the distancing from other experiences that it required, the awkwardness, the growing sense of the inappropriateness of one’s “real” self. But because Rodriguez’s process of acculturation is more violent than

mine, his account throws into relief the domination of one culture over another, the ethnocentrism and complacency of such educational imperialism. Rodriguez draws on Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* for his central image of "the scholarship boy," who like a "blinded pony" (243) is constrained and limited by his precarious position between cultures. In Hoggart, however, the losses of this transition are even more clearly depicted. "The scholarship boy" for Hoggart has lost much of his natural vitality; using only a part of his capacities, he grows to be an unimaginative, slavish imitator of his models. Hoggart, then, makes a clear case for the ways in which education can "declass" someone and simultaneously alienate him from himself and any possibilities of using his education as a transformative experience.

When we consider the social purposes of education, this process seems inevitable. If education is to reinforce the status quo and the lines demarking privilege, then it is an initiation into the values and manners of the dominant class. As such, it demands that its initiates give up any modes of behavior that conflict with the dominant values. Of course, most of us would prefer not to define our labor in this way. We don't generally view ourselves as apologists for a system or members of a conspiracy to inculcate a specific set of values. Yet the evidence of Rodriguez is compelling. What he feels he must give up to become "educated" is his own rich and nurturing culture, and his education succeeds so far that he himself comes to support this infringement as inevitable.

Richard Ohmann in *English in America* pushes us much further toward analysis of this cultural aggression. He offers a critique of English studies that reveals more purpose and coherence in the dominant pedagogic and critical practices than most of us would have guessed or can be comfortable granting. His analysis of "New Criticism," for instance, shows it to be a "flight from politics" (79), a way of ensuring that literary studies be dispassionate, dissociated from moral values and action, an activity that never calls into question the social realities that everywhere underlie its work. Ohmann's discussion of the Advanced Placement literature course in high schools and freshman composition texts used in colleges shows how well our most cherished educational strategies contribute to forming a professional elite trained to author the kind of memos that form the subject of *The Pentagon Papers*. In Ohmann's view, our work constantly reinforces a tendency to abstraction, a type of problem solving that never questions the terms in which the problem is posed, in short, a rhetoric of bureaucrats and technicians. If this is the case, as I am sadly persuaded it all too often is, then it is no wonder that the educative process pays lip service to diversity but in its inmost workings homogenizes, insistently demanding a style and practice that masks differences and subsumes us all in a generalized, unsituated, false unity. The sense of loss in Richard Rodriguez's schooling may, then, be more a consequence of the restrictive, controlling mechanisms that house themselves in our educational designs than a development inherent in the move from private world to public world. What renders his real experience inappropriate for the assigned fourth grade composition is not unalterably given in the demands of higher levels of cognition. With the increasing sophistication of rhetorical structures, he is

also being indoctrinated into a value system that cannot accommodate his difference. If he is to take his place as practitioner of the skills we teach, he must be homogenized, separated from the emotional and stylistic idiosyncrasies that define him as a product of particular social, cultural, historical, and familial circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Framing my observation of students with the insights provided by Rodriguez and Ohmann, I am more than ever persuaded that as English teachers we are the unconscious purveyors of a constellation of unexamined values. Only with serious and determined effort can we even imagine the possible marginalizing effects of each of our interpretive gestures. With the current prominence of reader-response criticism, it is particularly easy to deceive ourselves about the openness and inclusiveness of the “interpretive communities” we are shaping. In a mass media culture that everywhere encodes its values in dress, speech, food, and gesture, it is impossible to imagine a value-free arena for human behavior. Surely the classroom, where one is judged on one’s progress in mastering the skills for success, is a highly charged space where proper manners are modeled and aped. If Richard Rodriguez knew by fourth grade that his real life had no place in the essays written for school, what possibility is there that at age eighteen we will hear his real judgments and responses in open class discussion of literary texts? Any classroom discussion of literature is carefully limited by what students think the teacher thinks appropriate.

A reading of Paulo Freire suggests at least one model of what a different sort of practice might be. Freire’s work with Latin American peasants in massive literacy campaigns and programs of agrarian reform has led to a pedagogy of liberation that is not, of course, exactly transferable to our own circumstances within educational institutions in this country, but that can certainly help us to reconceptualize the teacher-student relationship and the ethical content of our teaching techniques. In his introduction to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull writes:

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (15)

If we grant this position, which is complemented by Ohmann’s work, then we must look more searchingly at the subtext of our present classroom practices and the alternatives to it.

Freire describes a technique for establishing *conscientizacao*, “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (19). This technique develops from a style of teaching that sharply focuses on the students’ own circumstances and

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3. Nicholas Coles speaks to this point very succinctly: “Criticism cannot effectively criticize or move beyond the privileged canon since its primary service is precisely to maintain that privilege” (665).

how they, as individuals and as a group, can be helped to greater self-awareness and more complex understandings of their own reality. Freire contrasts the "banking" concept of education as instrument of oppression with the problem-posing concept of education as instrument of liberation. In the former, the teacher "deposits" the content to be stored. In the latter, the teacher dialogues with students in order to problematize and re-pose the issues being considered.

The task of the dialogical teacher in an interdisciplinary team working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to "re-present" that universe to the people from whom he first received it—and "re-present" it not as a lecture, but as a problem. (101)

This procedure involves an effort to surface the group's "thematics," those areas of contradictions central to this group's circumstance that are the natural focus of their concerns. In this effort, as in the entire process, teachers and students are partners; teachers do not impose their views on others, but serve, through dialogue, to build larger contexts in which to consider ideas put forward. Perceptions are shared and then held up for reinspection. The participants in this way reach "a perception of their previous perception" (108). Through this deepening self-consciousness comes a larger synthesis, a fuller sense of totality.<sup>4</sup>

What this might mean in the classroom we initially observed is that students with different ways of reading the child-beating episode would be forced to confront one another, and the assumptions on which these different readings rest would have to be examined. In this way ingrained habits of making meaning, both in the text and in the world, come under examination; and while the classroom still helps to elaborate and refine perception, it no longer assumes that we all start with the same set of associations or commitments. Not only are interpretive techniques introduced here, but the meanings we each derive from them are examined, so that reading is not viewed merely as a special skill applicable to courses in English Departments, but rather as a necessary transaction we all hold with the world. Reading becomes the study of how we make sense of things, focused both on shared texts and on what we, as individuals and as a group, make of them.

In Freire's accounts of his activities, one sees reader-response techniques contextualized. The participants in these discussion circles are bringing their whole selves to bear on the exchange. Their idiosyncrasies, their particular cultural circumstances, are the subject of investigation; they are not extraneous to it, to be repressed as embarrassments. Also, the role of the teacher is more clearly defined. Not the arbiter of truth, but not a mere facilitator either, the teacher is part of this process which is moving in a politically expressed direction. This teacher problematizes responses in order to build a more culturally

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4. Kathleen McCormick, in "Theory in the Reader: Bleich, Holland, and Beyond," offers some strategies to stimulate these kinds of interactions. In discussing these activities, she says: "In short, students discover that they already possess historical perspective and cultural awareness and that these can be deepened" (838).

and politically aware conception of reality, a conception coextensive with action.

The subtext of this pedagogy (made explicit in the process) is that individuals are not subordinated to an authority structure, or to the authority that structure invests in its teachers; learning is not a pre-set system of manners and procedures transferred from one person to another; and abstraction, which masks differences of class, culture, race, and gender, is not a necessary concomitant of complex thought. Because teaching is not a neutral activity, because institutions within our society are clearly implicated in an intricately elaborated power structure, it seems evident that disregard for these realities is, in fact, support of them. If our teaching is to be liberating, enabling our students to transform themselves and their world, it will have to be consciously so.

Freire says:

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world and change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action—reflection. (76)

The statement reanimates for me the strangled silences of Wright's and Rodriguez's worlds. It also speaks to the sullen silences of so many of our students who submit to their educations as the necessary cost of making their way in the world. How many who dutifully copy their notes for the test and painstakingly tailor their essays to what they understand to be our expectations feel vitally engaged in their own educative process? There seems a marked degree of alienation in even some of the most gifted and ambitious. Education becomes a joke or a scam; you learn to manipulate it as you learn to manipulate all the other repressive systems of the society. It is difficult to invest any degree of honesty or integrity in what is perceived as a huge, faceless bureaucracy that processes you from kindergarten through law degree and at various stages lets you through or knocks you out according to its own will. Most of the students I meet cannot even imagine using their educations for their own purposes. When I suggested to one student that reading literature had some connection with reading life, he was startled. When I have suggested to others that they might have some control over the course of their own educations, they were intrigued but disbelieving.

Reader-response theory is a gesture toward opening up dialogue with students and problematizing questions of authority, but it can only be a significant gesture when appropriated by teachers who recognize the forces against which such freedom must contend. Unless we consciously set ourselves the task of making room for contesting views and urging serious, committed, personal interchanges, we will simply be presiding over the same "academic" exercises in a slightly more dynamic format. I opened this paper with some examples of student responses that I think don't often get registered in our discussions. The relative frankness in both Clark's paper and the classroom discussion on Richard Wright is most often censored much earlier. A more calculating student, like Rodriguez, would have repressed these responses by fourth grade.

I don't wish to be misunderstood as arguing for a classroom without a teacher or even for a classroom where instruction in metaphor and syllogism has no place. But as I hear the peevish voice of frustrated students complaining about teachers who "read too much into texts," I am convinced that these are students who have not felt themselves invited "to name the world and change it," as Freire would wish. Rather, they are those who feel they have had something taken from them, those who feel, as Clark does, that somebody has violated their "space." It will take our most determined efforts to help them find and value their own voices enough to enter into the process of naming and renaming, that dialogic action which constitutes Freire's "pedagogy of knowing."

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