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ABSTRACT

The idea of experience needs to be examined before the experiential aspect of literary reading can be understood, and before literary reading as an ethical practice can properly be defined. Open-mindedness is necessary when fostering student interpretations of a literary text, just as it is necessary for accepting the varying life experiences of others. The paper continues with a brief history of the concept of experience, concluding with an application of the experience concept to literary reading and suggesting possible uses of the term "text" which do not rely on a dualistic concept of experience, such as framing the idea of a text not as a representation of meaning but as a specialized language application for transforming an experience. (Contains 11 references.) (EF)

The problematic of experience: What goes without saying and shouldn't among researchers and teachers seeking to define literary reading as an ethical practice

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"My dear sir, in this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all." (Ishmael, narrator of Moby Dick)

What does it mean to live a life that includes reading? . . . More specifically, what does it mean to live a life that includes something called literary reading?

. . . Does it makes sense to talk about an ethics of reading according to which some ways of reading literature could be described as more or less responsible than others?

. . . The idea that there is an ethical dimension to the reading and teaching of literature has (as we all know) a long history, but during the past several decades, discussion around this issue has been complicated by the fact that even mainstream literary scholars like Wayne Booth (1988), Denis Donoghue (1998), Peter Rabinowitz & Michael Smith (1997), and Robert Scholes (1989) now presuppose that no argument concerning the ethics of reading will be worth its salt if it fails to take into account something called the experience of reading.

I wish I could say that I came today prepared to offer my own definitive answer to the question concerning what, if any, responsibility the reader of a literary work bears with respect to its author, the text in itself, and/or any other conceivable entity such as a community or some other aspect of the world-at-large. My more humble aim will be to focus on a corollary question the significance of which is rarely acknowledged by researchers and teachers seeking to define literary reading as an ethical practice: How do beliefs about experience in general constitute a background in relation to which claims about the experience of reading in particular become possible?

Nowadays teachers of literature feel more or less obligated to engage with what students say they experience when they read and references to the centrality of reading experience abound in scholarly discourse on the subject of literature instruction. Given the ease with which the word experience rolls off our tongues, it would seem that little or nothing needs to be said about it. I want to argue to the contrary that the very ordinariness of this word, which masks its complex history and currently problematic status, has become a stumbling block that needs to be removed. Recovering a sense of what is at stake as teachers and researchers gravitate toward one or another way of conceptualizing experience will introduce much needed clarity

into ongoing debates about the means and ends of effective literature instruction.

To illustrate my point, I refer to Jeff Wilhelm, author of a much-discussed publication entitled You Gotta BE the Book (1997). First off, let me underscore the fact that I do not view his case as singular; far from it. But his work does offer a particularly vivid example of what results when discussions about the experience of reading proceed on the basis of unexamined assumptions about experience in general. Wilhelm discovered that some of his middle school students were simply unable to engage with books because they had never learned what had become second nature for others. For example, he found that by devising classroom activities explicitly aimed at showing reluctant readers how to envision scenes and literary characters, make life-connections, and anticipate the outcomes of events, he could generate high levels of engagement and involvement among students who once said they hated to read. On one level, Wilhelm's teaching appears to be focused primarily upon making it possible for all his students to have engaging experiences with books.

However, when he turns to address the quality of those experiences, he illustrates the same tension that Jim Marshall found among the teachers he studied (Marshall et al., 1995). *(Say something about that study: Marshall sought out teachers who self-identified their work as grounded in reader-response theory. . .)* At one point, Wilhelm states unequivocally that "valid" reading is "an ultimate goal" of his teaching (p. 27). On the same page, his assertion that "personal meaning will differ from reader to reader and remain valid" is preceded and qualified by his assertion that a sense of "the author's intent and meaning, embodied in . . . the text" must be maintained over and against "the reader's consciousness." Subsequently, he develops a contrast between an individual's "private visions and experiences" and the "textual world" or "the text's ways of perceiving" (pp. 137-40). Moreover, one finds in Wilhelm's book many comments such as: "Their interpretations of a text's meaning often seemed very far off the mark" (p. 23); "They . . . would sometimes completely misread a story" (p. 78); and ". . . they sometimes missed, subverted, or violated important textual details" (p. 135).

You may at this moment be saying to yourself, "so what's the problem here?" . . . The problem is that Wilhelm has created a double-bind for himself and his students. Because he is unable to envision any other way of framing reading than as an encounter involving a reading subject and a textual object, Wilhelm sends a mixed message to his students. Do use your imagination to engage with and make something using the author's words, but watch out! You might get it all wrong. My argument is that Wilhelm can't conceive of any other way of talking about reading experience because he can't conceive of any other way of talking about experience in general. Let me hasten to add that considering the way the word experience has been used during the past two-hundred years, Wilhelm's stance is quite beyond reproach. Nonetheless, following a brief tour of this history, I will conclude my talk by alluding to a claim I develop more fully in a forthcoming essay *(to be published in RTE)*, namely, that reexamining my beliefs about experience in general has enabled me to think differently about the experience of reading literature.

Raymond Williams (*see* Keywords, 1984) argues that past uses of the word experience produced "a fundamental controversy" that remains unresolved (p. 128). Since the late eighteenth century the word has generally been understood in two distinct ways, which Williams

summarizes as "(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from reason or knowledge" (p. 126). The first definition conceptualizes experience in terms of one's capacity to process information and produce knowledge. In this sense the authority of experience is sustained by reference to objective evidence over and against mere opinion or groundless speculation. The second definition connects experience with subjectivity. According to Williams, "experience, in this major tendency, is the fullest most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought" (p. 127). He asserts that all the various and complex ways the word experience is used today can be traced to these two "radically different" definitions of "experience past (lessons) and experience present (full and active awareness)" (p. 127).

I want to argue that the definitions of experience as stated above, while they are indeed complex, may not be as contradictory as they appear to be at first glance. This conclusion follows my reading of Arnold Berleant (1991), whose work like that of John Dewey (1934) situates aesthetic perception within the broader spectrum of human experience. According to Berleant a "dualistic tradition of separating consciousness from an external world" is so "deeply ingrained in modern thought" (p. 14) that the very structure of experience is presumed to be the site where subjectivity and objectivity meet. Everyday usage of the word experience, then, might be understood without contradiction as allowing for an emphasis on either its subjective or objective dimensions because in both cases the structure of the whole remains implicit. Just as they do for many words, speakers simply draw upon context clues to distinguish between two possible meanings of the word experience. No fundamental controversy remains, except, of course, from a standpoint that rejects the commonsense and therefore dualistic definition of experience as the mental space where subjectivity and objectivity meet.

It is precisely from that standpoint that Berleant (1991) launches his critique of "an array of tendentious and obstructive dualisms, especially that of subject and object, which are widely accepted as fundamental truths" (p. xiii). He explains how eighteenth century empiricism became a dominant point of reference for what was at that time the fledgling field of aesthetic theory. This particular confluence of historical movements, he argues, produced a coherent set of beliefs about art "that have since acquired the stature of unquestioned and inviolable dogmas" (p. 11). Among them three are most pertinent to understanding the resilience of the double-bind I described earlier. They are: (a) art consists primarily of objects that (b) possess a special status, and that (c) must be regarded in a unique way. These dogmas are so pervasive that many, like Wilhelm, find it difficult to imagine any other way of talking about literary experience.

Nonetheless, As Berleant points out, "a clear alternative to the dualistic claims of the empiricist tradition lies in the claim for a continuity of experience, joining perceiver with the world in complex patterns of reciprocity" (p. 15). Moreover, the actual practice of artists points to the growing irrelevance of the traditional axioms. Again, I quote Berleant, who writes:

> The assumption that art consists primarily of objects has been challenged and undermined in both obvious and subtle ways. With increasing frequency during the past century, the art object has

> become less important in the aesthetic situation and at times has vanished altogether. In the visual arts this change appears clearly in the sequence of movements that began in the late nineteenth century and has continued to the present: impressionism, cubism, futurism, dadaism, expressionism, abstract expressionism, optical art, conceptual art, Happenings, and performance art. It was an evolution that started with the dissolution of the representational object within the traditional painting, shifted to the perceptual experience of the painting, and concluded with the disappearance of the painting itself (p. 20).

Berleant also describes similar trends taking place during the past century across a range artistic endeavors including the writing of drama, poetry, and fiction.

Influencial philosophers as well, beginning with Nietzsche and including for example, Heidegger, Gadamer, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Foucault, challenge us to think again about how we conceive of experience in general and thus of literary experience in particular. On this side of the Atlantic, Richard Shusterman (1992) credits John Dewey with developing a theory of experience that insists on "the fundamental continuity of a host of traditional binary notions whose long assumed oppositional contrast has structured so much of philosophical aesthetics." According to Shusterman Dewey's philosophy amounts to an "assault" on dualistic thinking based upon rigid "dichotomies of body and mind, material and ideal, thought and feeling, form and substance, man and nature, self and world, subject and object, and means and ends" (pp. 13-14). The central problem addressed by traditional aesthetic theory, namely how to account for the existence of art objects and perceiving subjects, is transformed by Dewey's radical concept of experience as active, engaged, and ultimately productive, not merely as a more or less accurate reflection of reality. Shusterman argues that "for Dewey, the essence and value of art are not in the mere artifacts we typically regard as art, but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived" (p. 25).

How then might one respond to the question I raised at the beginning of my talk without resorting to dualistic language? As I confessed earlier, I am not prepared to attempt a definitive answer. Moreover, I doubt that a definitive answer is even possible given the complexity, and contentiousness of the issue. I am prepared however to close with some thoughts concerning my present exploration into possible ways of using the word, text, that do not rely on a dualistic concept of experience. Alongside the word, experience, the word, text, stands out as one of those "plain things" that examination reveals to be among the "knottiest" of all.

I have argued that unexamined assumptions about experience have contributed to the widespread habit of using the word, text, to denote some type of object requiring interpretation by a reading subject. Somewhat paradoxically, as claims regarding textual objectivity are pared down, so to speak, to a bare minimum, as in references to 'black marks on a page,' the assumption that a text must be viewed as representing something beyond itself becomes more apparent as does the corollary assumption that experience must involve an encounter between inner and outer realities.

Following Dewey (as well as Iser, Oakeshott, Rorty, and others I've mentioned) I believe it is possible to conceive of experience in non-dualistic terms and that the effects of making such a move are

useful and exciting especially with respect to the framing of literary reading as an ethical practice. For example, readers would no longer be obligated to see themselves as attempting to do justice to artistic objects demanding a corresponding subjective presence. The assumption that a text in some way must contain or represent meaning would be superceded by other possibilities such as my own notion of textuality as a specialized way of using language to work on and thus transform experience. Presently, I am exploring ways of framing ethical reading practices based upon a notion of doing justice to an ever-expanding reading/writing event whereby a literary work of art *becomes what it is* as experience.

In closing, let me say that one of my purposes today has been to invite the difficult questions I suspect many of you have already begun to formulate. Please raise them in the discussion phase of this session or, if you prefer, you can reach me at the address which appears on the title page. I leave you to ponder the following statement made by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993), whose work as much as any other has helped me to think differently about what it means to live a life that includes reading: "Our concern is to view the experience of art in such a way that it is understood as experience. . . *All encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event*" (p. 99; emphasis in original).

Thank you

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