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# Strategies in Teaching Literature: For or Against Interpretation

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**A**s I recall, through my many years of teaching literature, it has always been an initial problem to make the students shake off a kind of uptightness during their first encounter with literature. The first meeting is crucial. For one thing also, after many years of teaching the subject, I have realized that college students taking up literature are not all that ready to be impressed by stiff pedantry, a spouting of pompous lore and academic scholarship (which every young literature teacher, myself included, eons ago is oftentimes tempted to display).

The important thing is, even at the outset, the teacher should be ready to answer questions like: more than just the units I am supposed to earn, what is in it for me? More than just the flaunted scholarship, which is of course to a certain measure quite important but should be dispensed in small doses, what is called for is a heartening promise of what literature can offer to the serious, well-intending student, even the non-serious, not too well-intending one. Even at the beginning, a rapport must be struck between teacher and student, a connection, a kinship.

The teacher must open up the possibility of new vistas, horizons explored, new encounters, through the pages of the seemingly inert and dead literary text which the student is made to read, think, feel, experience, not just skim through. For here are people and places ready to spring to life from the pages of the book, to enrich their lives. But it is the teacher's magic wand which should, to a large degree, bring out this transformation: dead pages of literature turn into a living thing where manifold consciousness, the author's, the character's, the reader's own coverage through the literary text to work out the miracle. And how much richer and more human we all become in the process.

In the meantime, the most recalcitrant, resisting student, usually sitting in the backrow, tries to stifle a yawn, plays deaf and dumb if not actually dozes off before the teacher is even through with her impassioned, most of the time rehearsed intro.

The teaching of literature is really made up of a series of encounters. The teacher-student encounter is very important, if not the most important. For one thing the moment the bell rings to signal the conclusion of the first session, the teacher can, more or less, already feel if he has touched base. No, the next sessions are not yet mere complacent coasting along. It seems that the promise has to be kept, properly spread out through the entire semester. The connection must be maintained not necessarily in the sense of the teacher entertaining the students the best way he can or the students enjoying every minute of the lecture, which is of course impossible. The teacher must not think that he is out to amuse them, play along with them, horseplay with them, humor them, indulge their fancies everytime. This can be done once in a while but surely not all the time.

Learning, even the supposed to be light and pleasurable one, will always entail an amount of pain and unease. After all, the wrenching from one reality to another, from ignorance to wisdom for instance, will always be uncomfortable. There could be initial reprisals, indifferences, and as we teachers go through the noble task of extracting the most from a literary piece, reaching out to the student in the last row. There could be many chilling times when we feel like strange extra-terrestrial creatures behind the podium mumbling incoherencies to an audience estranged as they seem to be by time and space. But no matter, we have promises to keep.

And what are these promises? What does the student stand to gain in a session in literature?

Granting that there is effective communication of literature, in the real sense of the word communication, the student acquires a greater feel and sensitivity for the language, developing his special ear with reference to the sounds, rhythm, nuances of the word, etc. For indeed, the good author does wonders with language. It is therefore imperative that the literature teacher must himself be attuned to the power, the richness, the magic of language, must himself be articulate and speaks and writes, at least proper grammar and to a certain extent, romantic. Teaching literature is truly at times a romancing even in the unholy of hours, and the teacher must have the imaginative agility to shuttle to and from contrasting orders of existence winging away into heights of fantasy and swinging back to earth to grapple with the realities of the human condition. For literature replicates

life, communicates telling and felt truths about man and human experience as we know it, as we want to know it, and as we are made to know it.

And through this shared adventure in literature, the student gains a greater awareness of the realities surrounding him. He is made to see with new eyes the little details and seeming trivia of everyday existence erstwhile blunted by too much familiarity and glazed vision. Nature takes on sharper contour and colors, depths, and dimensions. But this sharing in literature can be quite a tricky affair. For instance, the proliferation of new literary movements, strategies, approaches evolving within the last decades have derailed the teacher's complacency having been grooved comfortably in the old and staid formulas of literature teaching which he had been used to falling back on, in the service of taking the line of least resistance.

For instance, one important question he must try to resolve or ponder on is: to interpret or not to interpret. And this in fact is the main problem of my lecture.

Literary interpretation is always relevant particularly to literature teachers, students, literary scholars, writers, humanities teachers, since it redounds to problems involving aesthetics, theories on art. We, literature teachers, usually are made to deal with problems of extracting meaning from literary works, validation of meaning, and such inevitably get tangled up with those of pedagogy. Debates and arguments about the subject of interpretation have been going on in recent years and those of us who wish to be aware of what is happening in our own discipline must be able to follow these.

In the broader sense, literary interpretation plays a significant role in the field of literary studies offering methods of discovering what texts really mean, dealing as it does with what is involved and what is at stake in literature and literary interpretation as practiced in any given period or era.

While exposure to literary theory is equally important, it does not necessarily mean that knowledge of literary theory makes for better interpretation of literary works. But needless to say, the only way to produce new and plausible interpretations, an exciting challenge, may be to translate or interpret a work in terms of a theory that is itself relatively new.

The study of literary theory and interpretation straddles several disciplines: Theology, Philosophy, Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, History.

An important background to literary interpretation is the three stages of literary theory, an evolving of sovereignties which plays an important role in the changes, modifications, interweavings of such in the problem of understanding and experiencing literature.

### Author Sovereignty

The romantic critics and theorists uphold this kind of sovereignty, giving utmost importance to the life and mind of the author. They believe that the intention of the writer must be approximated as much as possible in the process of interpretation. Biographies, authorial notes, footnotes are distinct aids. Who else after all is the best authority in deciphering the meaning of the work except the writer himself? In spite of T.S. Eliot's celebrated depersonalization theory, which separates the creating artist from the suffering man, the belief is that the author is still all there, whether as an impersonal authentic voice, the unconscious, or some kind of a peripheral hovering awareness supplying the images, the textural details, the stylistic devices. The author is still in there, the one and only authority. And to interpret a work correctly is to take stock of the author's authoritative presence. After all, a work is not just something that springs from nowhere like magic, through some ingenious sleight of pen. It is the product of an author's experience, conscious or subconscious, lived or imagined.

Classroom interpretations still presently work pretty much along this concept. That is why teachers usually make use as much as possible of references, researches, oftentimes assigning their students to interview authors, to get it straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

### Text Sovereignty

It was really in the USA that concentration in the text had become a central plank in what became known as the New Criticism school. Brooks, one of its major proponents, says: literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object. 'It is concerned with the work itself. Such matters as author's intention, mind, life, reader's responses are to be discounted.' The critical essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" of Wimsatt and Beardsley categorically state that no poem can be judged by reference to the poet's intention and the effect of the poem on the reader. It is what is internal or intrinsic to the poem, what can be discovered from the very text of a work that is to be the major concern of the interpreter; everything that is external and not part of the work as a linguistic entity is what is to be discounted. Wimsatt and Beardsley also attack the attempt to interpret and judge poetry by confusing the poem with the cause or the result.

Roland Barthes in an essay "The Death of the Author," 1968, declares that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing

begins as the author dies." The scriptor, not the writer; he is born simultaneously with the text.

Both the formalists and the Marxists are also text-oriented. Formalism which emphasizes form over content concentrates on the nature of the writing act itself in isolation while Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as implicit in the text as fundamental. Marxist criticism however does not exclude writer and reader totally. Sovereignty in the text has taken in a generally sociological context. And again, back to Wimsatt and Beardsley. They too believe that emotion is generated by stylistic or technical aspects of the work, that the reader's response must have its foundation in an achieved aesthetic structure within the text itself.

### **Reader Sovereignty**

This new approach in the form of the so-called reception or reader response theory shifts the sovereignty to the reader and is related to what we call in philosophy phenomenology. Edmund Husserl, Father of Modern Phenomenology, believes that the only thing that we can be certain of is our own consciousness of the world. This is not yet totally reader-oriented, for it still tries to enter the world of the author through the text, and the text in turn allows the reader access to the author's consciousness. This is still basically text-oriented, something like formalism, but aims to capture not form but experience. And for Husserl, meaning is neither subjective nor objective. The text's meaning then could be expressed in a number of different ways but still remains the same, fixed once and for all, something identical with the author's intention. Phenomenological criticism therefore in a way allows an author-text-reader interaction but this time with the reader given preeminence as receiver and mediator, unlike the previous orientations. Author and text have reigned long enough. It was time to give the reader the limelight. Reader-oriented groups claim that the reader had always been underprivileged when the fact is, literary texts do not exist without him. For literature to happen, they insist, the reader is as important as the author. The new reader response movement is phenomenological, and considers the reader's experience as at the center of the literary process. The text sets the terms, the author provides the text, but the reader's own store of experience and knowledge will take a major part in the whole literary exercise.

Quoting Stanley Fish: 'the true writer is the reader.' The reader response exponents no longer see meaning as immanent in the texts awaiting its release or discovery by the reader's interpretation. This is an objectivist illusion. This so-

called reception theory, another name for reader response theory, which examines the reader's role in literature, his reception of a literary experience is part of the more recent development of hermeneutics in Germany. Literature through the reader involves the claim that the literary work should be regarded not as an object whose properties the reader seeks to know but rather as an experience.

This debate is still ongoing and remains quite spirited. Author? Text? Reader? Who is final arbiter in the reading-interpreting process? Again, Hirsch speaking for the author: 'the meaning of the text belongs solely to the author who should have the exclusive rights over its disposal.' The New Critics or Formalists proclaim for all the world the supremacy of the text, *explication de texte* (go to the text). The text will provide the answers. The Reader Response exponents on the other hand bring back to the scene the importance of the reader. It is the reader who puts meaning into the piece, who else? These are the three sovereignties. And the poor, confused teacher is simply at a loss.

Modern literary criticism has become increasingly technological, in an age of technology. Literary interpretation is seen as an exercise in the conceptual dissection (a biological image) of the literary object, like a scientist dissecting a guinea pig in a laboratory. Students in literature classes are sometimes even told that their personal experience of a literary work is some kind of an irrelevancy to the analysis of the work. And sadly, literature and English teachers, bewailing the fact that their students find literature as irrelevant are actually themselves promoting the very irrelevancy that they lament. Anything that adds color and life and excitement to the teaching of literature - where the student is concerned - is welcome.

But then, also we have to remember that the literary work is not a manipulable object completely at our disposal; it is a human voice out of the past or out of the page if you please, which must be listened to, brought to life and most of the time made to pass on an idea, or message or experience. Let me now focus on literary interpretation as a strategy. To interpret a work is to understand it. To understand is to experience it. When any truly great work of literature is encountered, it transforms one's understanding, for to experience is to understand not better but differently. When we experience a work, our understanding of life is transformed and we see life in a new and fresh way. Part of this experiencing is not only hearing what is actually said but hearing what is not said. In fact, one definition of poetry is reality seen in a different light. I cannot speak on literary interpretations without touching on theme.

There is this so-called hermeneutic experience, this encounter with a work of art, an objective-subjective experience which is central to the concept of literary

interpretation. This is intrinsically historical, according to one Georg Cadamer. But history, he says, is one continuing chain, an ever—flowing river, not just a passive static chain of events in the past. The historical encounter with a work of art, literature including, is to consider it as a living dialogue between past, present, and future. This historical slant of the hermeneutical experience is to understand a work in the light of the present. Interpretation calls for one to render explicit a work's meaning today bridging historical distance. And the hermeneutical experience is to be led by text. There is this need to feel the objective claim of the text in its full otherness without at the same time making it mere object for our subjectivity. An interpretative act is not forcible ravage, a rape of the text. Rather, it is a mutual communion between reader and text. The historical element brings the author into the partnership and the text becomes their field where the mediation between author and reader takes place. The problem of literary interpretation is in the last analysis one that hinges on understanding; understanding as "lived experience," concrete not abstract, a phenomenology of understanding that is inextricably related to the problem of meaning. But meaning may change with time. Hermeneutical interpretation always stands in the situation in which the interpreter himself stands.

Literature through language creates worlds within which disclosures of truth are made possible. Even a relatively short text can open to us a world different from our own but one which we are able to understand and experience. Thus, it is the poet who is more than any other writer capable of bringing about this experience of disclosing truth, and the reason behind this is, quoting Wallace Stevens, "Through the poet's eyes, we are made to see the world again." It is the poet who, getting out of the rut, the groove of the ordinary, the customary, opens up endless possibilities of experience. But obviously, the interpreter must himself share something of this openness and sensitivity to these possibilities.

I keep using the word understand. It is interesting to note at this point that the poet-structuralists believe when we try to understand. We can only really stand under, on account of the instability of signification.

### **Back to Literary Interpretations**

The moment that one opts for literary interpretation, he tends to deemphasize form which passes over the issue on human significance (how a great work is to be made relevant to humanity through interpretation) eventually starving literature through this denial of its perceived relationship to the reader.



Here is where the idea of demythification of literature comes in, this extracting of the relevance of a work on the basis of its perennial human significance. Form should never be made the starting point of a literary interpretation nor should it be singled out and labeled as the only truly aesthetic element. Form is never separable from content. There is no pure aesthetic: no art for art's sake. True love of literature is not and has never been pure delight in form; love of literature is a responsiveness to the *saying power* of literature. Its saying power is its *staying power*. More than craftsmanship, and sheer sensuous pleasure, literature's timeless significance lies in bringing about a freshness of understanding that can only be understood in terms of a breaking down and opening of one's old way of seeing.

Now considering the diverse strains of the strategies and insights regarding literary criticism and theory and literary interpretation, a question of moment is, should interpretation be then the be-all and end-all of literary appreciation? Should we bother to interpret at all? How conclusive is literary interpretation? How important is it in the total anatomy of the poem-reading experience? How vital is it for the reader to understand a literary work's meaning or theme or point or message, to decipher, to dissect, to decode? Along this line, we hear three voices:

1. Of course, we interpret, extract meaning, because meaning is an essential part of a literary work. It is not the only part of the so-called being of the work, but it is a vital part. And the objective of any reader, his aspiration, is to interpret intelligently, rather, to work close to what the work's real meaning is.
2. But what is the real meaning: the author-intended, the text-based, or the reader-received? And that's the rub. How may we know the poem's real meaning? After grabbing hold of what is passed off as meaning by a majority of intelligent readers so-called, by reference materials which literature teachers are sometimes at a loss without how sure are we as to its accuracy? Is there any way of knowing with absoluteness, with finality, considering the so-called undecidability of text, quoting Barthes? Well, we interpret nevertheless, choosing to be governed by whatever sovereignty we please. But we interpret. Otherwise, what is the poor literature teacher to do with a poem in an hour's session? Never mind if we are not too sure of its accuracy. (This is the popular voice.)

3. Yes, the rub is: how sure are we that interpreting a work's meaning allows us to come close to the essentiality or being of a work, or some works, at least? *Interpretation is passe.*

### Non-interpretation

Let me now elaborate on this kind of strategy or approach.

If one's primary interest is in interpretative decisions, most literary theory will be of little use, though one will have to make certain theoretical decisions in the process of interpreting, like whether or not authorial intention should count heavily in one's determination of meaning. Critical theories do not in fact really attempt to provide techniques to solve local problems of interpretation.

Stanley Fish's presentation of *Affective Stylistics or Literature in the Reader*, claims that the literary work should not be regarded as an object whose properties the students seek to know, but rather, as an experience of the reader, so that "false starts, errors, changes of mind, are to be thought of not as undesirable experience but part of the experiencing of the work." (*Literary Theory in the Graduate Program*, Jonathan Culler)

Emphasis on interpretation presupposes emphasis on the importance of content, what art is trying to say. Quoting Susan Sontag: 'whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.' How aptly she puts it further: 'to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world.' The world, this world is depleted enough, impoverished enough. Surely, in a literary work, there is more than just meaning that an intending reader should focus on. Perhaps, at this point, it is apropos to be reminded of MacLeish's reference to a poem's being more than its meaning, "A poem must not mean but be." Interpretation, based on the dubious theory that a work of art is neatly composed of details of content, violates art - turning it into a mental scheme of categories. Sontag is not trying to say that literature cannot be paraphrased - but the question is how? "Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities."

While exponents to interpretation emphasize matter rather than manner, content rather than form, the non-interpretation exponents consider the importance of attention to form. Stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation; attention to form silences it.

John Crowe Ransom, a formalist, refers to this tension in a poem between its structure (paraphrasable argument) and texture (metaphorical efflorescing) which constitutes the poem's essential dynamics. Texture defies interpretation. It is the poem's increment, not its ostensible argument, that plus factor which is its poetry. Poetry therefore that is more richly textured than logically structured yields very little in the interpretative process.

There was a time when it was quite an intellectual feat to interpret the different levels of meaning of art. The contemporary approach is to focus not so much on the ideational value of art as on its sensuousness, its sheer transparency, the experience of the "luminosity of the thing in itself," quoting a title of an anthology of *Cheslaw Milosz*. What is important is to recover the senses in a world that has shelved them in favor of the intellect. We must learn how to see the thing in itself ... its pure being, not what it says but what it does to us ... our experience of it. Again, quoting *Sontag*, what we need in place of hermeneutics is "an erotics of art."

To interpret or not to interpret then. Or to go beyond interpretation. Considering these diverse strains, we should at this point be ready to accord the new teacher of literature the right of free voice as to methods or approaches or strategies. But what the literature teacher should remember is that no amount of immersion in literary theory can compensate for a teacher's want of sensibility and innate taste, which are not in themselves sufficient conditions for good literature teaching but certainly the absence of which is unforgivable. But very importantly, he is a good reader, and in reading, he is flexible and open-minded, ready to put his beliefs into question. The reader with strong ideological commitments is less likely to be open to the transformative power of literary works. He should not be too ready to blame the literary text's abstruseness and obscurity to what poststructuralists abstractly call textual indeterminacies, the way *Barthes* would take a modernist text and allow all distinct meanings to be dissolved into one free play of words. An erotics of art, indeed ... and here, there is no way of arresting this exuberant dance of words, both readerly bliss and sexual orgasm, into a determinate sense, the reader simply has to luxuriate in it. But certainly this will not do, in a classroom of young literature students. The teacher must one way or the other tame this into a stable meaning.

But what is dangerous even for the most enterprising teacher to claim is that a literary text means whatever we want it to mean, in the service of reader response or reception theory.

And whatever one thinks of the new theories on literature, there is no doubt that they have seriously challenged orthodox ways of viewing literature, like the predominance of the text-oriented theories of *New Criticism* and *Formalism*.

We can no longer talk about the meaning of a text without considering the reader's contribution to it, neither can we totally dismiss the presence of the author's voice in the text, even in the most indirect or unconscious sense. And quite importantly also, we cannot touch meaning, without touching form.

Finally, I believe that while there are some guidelines for teaching, some strategies to take stock of, the literature teacher must be free-wheeling to some extent, footloose and fancy free and ready to improvise, deviate from rote, even get mired up perhaps along the way.

And quite significantly, he must not have been fossilized into forever falling back on the old and staid literary faiths and traditions of his Ancient childhood but must be ready to move on with the times brushing up on new waves and movements in order to teach with greater flexibility, adaptability, adjustability, and creativity.

And also, the teacher must be a lover, in the broadest sense; and in order to be one, as Shelley reminds us, he must have the capacity to imagine intensely, because being able to imagine intensely, he will have the capacity to identify with all kinds of creatures and characters of the author's creation, and being able to identify with others like and unlike him, he is able to more readily love.

I know it can be quite cold and estranging and lonely, sitting behind that table, in front of abstract presences. It is really all up to the, most of the time, beleaguered and challenged confused teacher to make each abstract presence materialize meaningfully in the course of the semester. How? And how may he know that he has indeed succeeded in accomplishing this? Fact is, he may not know at all, or right away. The wonderful residual effects of one well-handled literature class are not readily recognizable or discernible. It may happen that in one unexpected moment in the future, one student of one literature class way back under one Miss Santos, plain, spinsterish, lovelorn, loveless but passionate literature teacher is elevated into a higher plateau of human understanding and sympathy because of a recalled and shared book experience that has sunk in and turned blood coursing in his young veins way back. Perspectives unexpectedly fall into place, paradigms shift and priorities rearranged.

Although this is too much to expect, this could happen as it had happened, this growth into humanness and imagination which is so abstract the teacher is bound to miss it in the young within the span of a semester, and so the teacher must in the meantime just settle for his own good feeling of self-satisfaction, a feeling that he has delivered the goods. This is the most we can hope for. Already in itself a tall order, but certainly something, perhaps the only thing that could see us through the rigors of a most of the time unappreciated commitment and dedication.

By way of concluding, reading literature for one's own personal pleasure is one thing, teaching it to students, quite another. One does not have to puzzle over content, interpret, in the process of reading for personal entertainment. He simply allows language to wash over, allowing meaning to slowly unfold by itself, as interwoven with the pleasure of the experiencing. Its erotics is inextricably merged with its hermeneutics. As is always the case, in fact. But teaching poetry or literature is quite another thing. The teacher cannot chuck meaning altogether. Content is usually that solid something students hang on to, for jotting down in their lecture notebooks. What about poems that are essentially experiential, one that virtually does not seem to be meant to convey a message, point, or moral? Fortunately, works like this are bane of any anthologist of literature textbooks for students, for they are virtually unteachable. They may only be shared. And for that matter, most of the stuffs of literature are not taught but shared, and we really are more of literature sharers than teachers, and every literature session is a sharing to one secret sharer. For instance, how does one teach lines like Cummings' somewhere I have never travelled gladly beyond any experience, etcetera. I do not know what it is in you that opens and closes.

How does one teach Villa? We can only guide, by giving extrinsic details about his art - but the true experiencing of his ineffable poetry remains a personal case.