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Encounters: Relationship in the Study and Teaching of Literature

Cover Page Footnote

Cristina Vischer Bruns has taught composition at Saddleback Community College in Mission Viejo, California. She is pursuing an interdisciplinary Ph. D. in English and Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research explores the function of literary study and its implications for pedagogy at the college and university level.

Encounters: Relationship in the Study and Teaching of Literature

Cristina Vischer Bruns

After almost ten years of teaching composition, I now find myself turning my attention to teaching my first love, literature. Like most conscientious teachers tackling a new subject area, I've sought to acquaint myself with the recent developments in the field, only to be bewildered by the variety of pedagogical approaches that have passed in and out of popularity in the past several decades. In my classroom, should I focus on the text itself or on the reader's response to it, on the cultural situation from which the text arose or on the divergent readings of the text that are possible? The pattern of progress in literary studies, where a new theory is built upon the discrediting of the "old" theory, leads one to assume that only that which is most recent is valid and leaves me feeling that I must reject much that seems potentially beneficial as I attempt to follow the latest advances in literary theory.

But what if these various approaches might be seen as compatible rather than oppositional? Stanley Fish once described his method as "the surveying of the critical history of a work in order to find disputes that rested upon a base of agreement of which the disputants were unaware" (2071). Locating such a "base of agreement" is my hope in this examination of recent trends in literary education so that my classroom practice might benefit from the strengths of all of these trends. Rather than making contradictory claims, perhaps these apparently conflicting approaches can be seen as offering various aspects of some broad and valuable shift in our conception of the study and teaching of literature.

As a lens to clarify what that shift might be, I will use a concept from the work of theologian Martin Buber. He claims that human beings tend toward two different ways of perceiving other persons and entities around them. One way he terms "I-It," sees others as things, static objects detached from the self. The other way he terms, "I-Thou," sees others around her as beings that can and do affect the self and that respond to the self. This latter way of perceiving others is relationship, reciprocal and mutual. And it is the move toward relationship, the shift from I-It to I-Thou, which can link the recent trends in literary pedagogy.

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Literary Education Without Relationship

Those of us trained in the methods of New Criticism rarely had an opportunity to encounter relationship through literary study. While authors and readers or students were necessarily part of the literature classroom, they were viewed as “It,” detached objects with no role in the meaning made in the literary event. The text carried the meaning, and the teacher imparted that meaning to the students who merely received it. The particular identities of the reader, the author, and the other students had no bearing whatsoever on the meaning of the text as conveyed by the teacher. Written in 1971, George P. Elliott’s recollection of a memorable class he taught serves as an example of a teacher-centered I-It approach, and one in which even the text itself is hardly a factor:

[. . .] at ten past one in the afternoon, I walked into a classroom with 70 or so students in it and began to talk about the Book of Job. [. . .] I had only the foggiest notion about what I was going to say, and 75 minutes to fill. What in fact I did was to ask a central question to which I did not have an answer in mind, explore all the answers I could think up and dismiss them one after another, and then with a minute to go come up with a good one. The stillness in the room that last minute and the opening of my voice as I said what came into my head constitute the finest classroom experience I have ever had. I discovered afterward that the answer I came up with was ancient and respectable, the sort of chestnut you expect to yawn over in a college-outline series. [. . .] No matter: at the moment of talking I was discovering something worth discovering, and I was doing this because of the people I was talking to, for them and for myself at once. (83-84)

Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori describes what’s missing from the instance of literary education Elliott relates: “The students, the people to whom the teacher was presumably talking, are nowhere to be seen or heard. And theirs is not the only noticeable absence: an articulation of teaching as a transaction of knowledge between teacher, students, text, the cultures that shape them, is absent as well from this way of talking about teaching” (299). Unlike the type of teaching in Elliott’s anecdote, some of the more recent trends in literary education recognize teaching as transaction, and make room in the classroom for the reader, the author, and other students, transforming them from “It” to “Thou,” and inviting them, together with the teacher and the text, into mutual, reciprocal relationship.

Relationship Between Text and Reader: Reader Response Theory and Its Limitations

This shift toward relationship begins with Reader Response Theory, originating in the work of Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s but not widely recognized until decades later. Rather than locating meaning within the text, Rosenblatt claims that it resides in the transaction between the reader and the text. Reading, according to Rosenblatt, “activates certain elements in [the reader’s] past experience—external reference, internal response—that have become linked

with the verbal symbols. Meaning will emerge from a network of relationships among the things symbolized as *[the reader] senses them*" (11). Meaning does not exist within a text independent of a reader, but rather in relationship with a reader whose memories and perspectives shape that meaning. The reader is no longer "It" in the literary experience, having no effect on meaning, but is "Thou," and the work between text and reader becomes a reciprocal relationship, each influencing the other.

Yet the adequacy of this formulation of the transaction between individual reader and text has been called into question. It appears to assume that responses to a text are automatic or natural, to leave unexamined the sources of these "personal" interpretations, and to allow for little discrimination among different interpretations. Bronwyn Mellor and Annette Patterson summarize these concerns:

Students had been taught to feel that they were finding a meaning 'in' the text while bringing to the reading their own personal experience, an approach [. . .] that appeared to make the reading *process* curiously invisible. Approaches that emphasized the personal, the individual, the empathic response [. . .] produced readers who were unaware of the ways in which they operated to construct meanings and who were unable to 'read' not only the terms of their own interpretations but those of others as well. Such practices, far from being inclusive [. . .] disenfranchised those students whose experiences and values were not the 'dominant' ones. What was unlikely to occur in [these] practices [. . .] was an analysis of the construction of divergent readings, the values they supported or affirmed and the grounds on which any particular reading might be defended or challenged. (n. pag.)

As Mellor and Patterson observe, the focus in Reader Response Theory on the interaction between the individual reader and a text leaves hidden much that is involved in producing an interpretation of that text. The role of culture in shaping what is available to be written and to be read remains invisible.

Cultural Criticism or Critical Literacy as a Missed Opportunity for Relationship

These concerns of "cultural critics," like Mellor and Patterson, bring into consideration another once overlooked component of the literary transaction: readers of marginal cultures who do not share the hidden assumptions of texts and readers representing dominant cultures. These readers can become another potential focus for a shift from Buber's "I-It" to "I-Thou" relations. Yet Critical Literacy, the pedagogical approach offered to remedy the limitations of the personal response model of literary education moves all readers away from relationship and treats the text as an object for examination rather than extending the relationship between the reader and the text to include multiple and diverse readers.

For Critical Literacy, the study of literature becomes an opportunity to focus primarily on alternative interpretations. The text is examined as an ideological construction, shaped and limited by the culture in which it was composed, and resulting in a multitude of possible readings that will differ from culture to culture.

In such an approach, according to Bronwyn Mellor, Marnie O’Neil, and Annette Patterson:

The purpose of a reading is not to find and accept the position the text is assumed to offer as the correct reading, but rather to consider what the possible readings of a text might be; to be, in a sense, always a resistant reader aware of the plurality of a text’s meanings and the partiality of all texts and readings. (44)

These critics make the questioning of the text, the search for its cultural assumptions and alternative readings, the primary task of the reader. The persistence of the reader’s attitude of resistance, even suspicion, means that the text remains an object for examination, an “It,” preventing the mutuality of an “I-Thou” relationship. The reader also becomes “It” rather than “Thou.” Because he is asked to question the text from the outset, he is given no opportunity to have his own response to the text, a response nonetheless shaped by that reader’s own cultural perspective. By rejecting whatever an individual reader may have to offer in response to the text, the reader also is treated as “It.” Because his particular identity plays no role in the literary encounter, no relationship is possible between readers and texts.

Peter Elbow calls this problem the “distancing mode” characteristic of a “cultural studies” approach to teaching literature. He writes, “The goal in cultural studies tends to be to help students read with more critical detachment—to separate themselves from felt involvement in these texts” (538). It is this “felt involvement” that enables the reader to engage fully in reading a text and that carries much of literature’s effect. The “cultural studies” approach to literary education, like that of New Criticism, Elbow claims, “work[s] against students’ impulses to involve themselves personally with literature and [to] feel they are making personal connections with characters and authors—to feel a genuine relationship with Chaucer or Iago” (538). It is this possibility for an “I-Thou” relationship between reader and text, characters, and authors that may be lost in making, as cultural critics do, the multiplicity of readings the central focus of literary study. Might there be a way to acknowledge and examine the multiplicity and partiality of readings without alienating the reader and the text?

Relationship and Difference Among a Community of Readers

In “Interpreting the Variorum,” Stanley Fish, a prominent Reader Response theorist, questions his own assumptions about the practices of the individual reader and proposes the concept of “interpretive communities” to account for the use of strategies for interpretation that he observes. Interpretive communities might also exist in classrooms, not only for the establishment and reinforcement of norms and practices as Fish describes. Such communities also prove useful as a means of addressing the concerns of cultural critics by making visible culture-bound norms, practices, and assumptions through the existence and observation of differences.

Some experienced educators utilize this potential available in a community of readers in relationship with one another. For Alan Purves, who recognizes the role of other readers in moving beyond a purely individual interpretation of a text, “meaning resides in the negotiation among readers in an interpretive

community" (352). Likewise, Judith Langer explores the possibilities for negotiated meaning among students in a classroom setting; when "the social structure of the class calls for (and expects) the thoughtful participation of all students, the teacher assumes that there will be multiple interpretations to be discussed and argued, and the students learn that horizons of possibilities that are pondered and defended characterize the ways of thinking that are sought" (210). For Langer and Purves, divergent interpretations are expected from the diverse students present in a classroom, and the interaction among them becomes the source of learning. Transcripts of student interaction which Ruth Vinz includes in *Becoming (Other)wise* demonstrate the learning that can come through students' relationships with one another, particularly how interaction among a diverse group of students fosters cultural awareness (56). Rather than asking readers to question intentionally and persistently their readings of texts in order to expose the partiality of the texts and the readings, these three educators allow the cultural differences among students in their classrooms to make evident this partiality. Students have an opportunity to see how differently their classmates "read" the text. In this approach, readers become Thou to one another, in mutual, reciprocal relationship, and their unique perspectives and contributions shape the meaning that is constructed among them with the text.

Relationship and Difference Between Readers and Author

Another presence available for relationship and to share in the meaning made in a literary encounter is the text's author. Robert Scholes is one who contributes to what Michael W. Smith calls the "project of rehabilitating authors as essential participants in literary conversations" (47). Scholes suggests that semiotics offers a means to more deeply understand a text by identifying the author's presence within it. Semiotics distinguishes between a text and the events it relates, and then further distinguishes the diegesis or the story as understood by the reader based on the text. This distinction between the text, the network of particular words, and the diegesis, the story as it stays in one's memory and can be retold in different words, serves to make visible and meaningful the choices the author made in composing a text that tells a story. New Criticism deliberately avoided giving attention to authors and their intentions, but Scholes's semiotic reading of "A Very Short Story" by Hemingway demonstrates the contribution of an alternative approach. Scholes writes:

Seen as a text that presents a diegesis, this story is far from complete. There are gaps in the diegesis, reticences in the text, and a highly manipulative use of covert first-person narrative. There are signs of anger and vengefulness in the text, too, that suggest not an omniscient impersonal author but a partial, flawed human being—like the rest of us—behind the words on the page. (121)

Through careful attention to the way the story is told, including what's unsaid, Scholes draws forth a very human author once hidden in the text.

Another literary theorist attentive to the author's presence is feminist critic Patrocínio Schweickart. Schweickart makes explicit the I-Thou relationship between reader and author. She claims that a feature of feminist readings of women writers is "the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the

manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author—the ‘voice’ of another woman” (203). She says, “To read Dickinson, then, is to try to visit with her, to hear her voice, to make her live in oneself, and to feel her impressive personal dimensions” (203). This relationship, through the inanimate object of the text, meets a need that Schweickart says motivates feminist readings of women writers, the need to connect (210). While Scholes draws forth the presence of a human writer from a literary text, Schweickart describes the relationship possible between the writer and the reader, and so both shift the author from *It* to *Thou* in the literary encounter.

Yet perhaps, in these days since the author has been declared dead, it seems naïve to suggest that the presence of an individual author exists within a text. In an essay on teaching Shakespeare, one of the most highly suspect of all authors, Robert Watson claims that effectively engaging students’ interest in a text requires positing the existence of an author. Watson writes:

The postulated author, the sentimental idea of a Shakespeare, allows us to focus on the particular emotional experience represented, and evoked in us, by the drama. To accept the increasingly popular notion that the cultural ideology rather than the individual author creates the literary work is to doom any such response before it begins, to forbid the impression that the play constitutes a communication from one person to others about something they share as sentient individuals. (142)

No matter how contested the identity of Shakespeare, students, according to Watson, need a sense of that author in order to respond to the plays because literature is ultimately a communication between people, an *I-Thou* relationship.

Along with the author comes “the world that shaped the author” (Watson 142), and a literary encounter with the author’s world becomes another opportunity to develop a broader cultural awareness. Some approaches to literary education overlook this opportunity, as Purves explains: “When one considers only the text or the reader as many contemporary pedagogies do, one is tacitly assuming a monocultural view, a view that denies the roots of a literary work and the intellectual and cultural struggle that has produced it” (358). An awareness of the context in which the text arose becomes not only a tool for multicultural education, but also an essential means of making meaning of the text. According to anthropologist and cultural theorist Clifford Geertz, attempting to understand how “the constructions of other peoples’ imaginations connect to those of our own” requires attention to “the practical contexts that gave [those constructions] life” (48). That a text does not exist in a vacuum but was authored by someone who is part of a culture means that a text becomes an occasion for a reader from one culture to enter into relationship with an author from another culture. To exploit this relationship, Purves advocates literature programs that teach students that they “are not simply reading texts, they are reading writers” (359). Purves continues:

They also need to acknowledge themselves as readers with prejudices, ignorances, and beliefs that impinge on their readings and interpretations. They need to see that as they are engaged in the hermeneutic task, they are learning to interpret themselves as read-

ers as well as to interpret the authors as writers. They are members of a culture with the habits of that culture engaged in reading the work of inhabitants of other cultures. (359)

So by attending to the presence of the author, reading literature becomes, for Purves, a vital means of multicultural education.

An I-Thou relationship between reader and author, as well as among a community of readers, has the capacity to build in students the awareness of the situatedness of all texts and readers and of the multiplicity and partiality of all readings that is the objective of the cultural critics' approach to literary education. And this relational approach to the teaching of literature can accomplish this objective without alienating the reader, but rather inviting her to connect with and interact with a human author, a community of readers, and a text. It is this that a pedagogy of relationship has to offer. As a new teacher of literature, it is this pedagogy of relationship that I seek to work out in my classroom.

The Benefits of a Relational Approach to Literary Education

The primary benefit of a literary pedagogy based on relationship stems from the difference between a theoretical understanding of what the identity of the reader is and how that reader experiences herself. Regarding the identity of the reader, Critical Literacy or the cultural studies approach to literary education raises valid concerns about the unwarranted assumptions behind a pedagogy that emphasizes personal response to literature. Rather than entirely independent individuals with truly original thoughts, personal motives, and natural responses, we are shaped by countless cultural and ideological influences. Actions and reactions that seem automatic or natural have in fact been learned.

Yet that is not how we experience ourselves. On a conscious level we experience ourselves as individuals with particular and personal experiences, motivations, values, and reactions. We are unaware of most of the influences upon us. Our students likewise are unaware of how they have come to acquire what seem to them to be natural responses to the texts we ask them to read, and yet those learned and often narrow responses are all they have to contribute. If their contributions are not welcome in our classrooms but are suspect because of their unexamined assumptions, then our students as persons are not welcome and will learn to question their own capability to contribute. As teachers, we must start where they are, inviting them to be present and to contribute whatever it is they have to offer. Through the multiplicity of those contributions—their interaction with one another, with the text, and with the author through the text—they will begin to question their assumptions, to see unexpected alternatives, and to grow in their awareness. The primary benefit of a relational literary pedagogy is that it begins with the student's lived experience of himself and his encounter with a text, and it uses that experience in relationship with others' to foster growth in his understanding of himself and of others different from him.

Welcoming the student as a being in the classroom can also result in a change in the classroom environment by avoiding an unfortunate phenomenon common from middle school through college and described by teacher Christine Cziko:

You see this with so many kids. In the hall, in the cafeteria, in their communities, in all these places there are these active, engaged,

bright, funny kids. They come into the classroom and they turn into a ghost of themselves, like a shroud just drops over them. Their academic identities are these fragile, ghostly things, not robust in the way their whole person identities are because of so many things – repeated failures, being told what they can and cannot do, being mystified by what is asked of them in school. (Greenleaf, et al. 9)

Students become “ghosts of themselves” when repeatedly viewed as static and replaceable objects with limited capabilities. But the recognition of the contribution and the impact of the student in a learning encounter can bring change, making the educational environment a safe place for those “active, engaged, bright, funny kids.”

Another benefit of relational literary education is that it addresses a strong felt need of many students. As our society becomes more and more characterized by isolation and alienation, many desperately seek community or connection with others. Literature, taught in this way, offers the possibility of connection both in the encounter with a text and an author, and in the community of readers created in the classroom.

The Challenges of a Relational Approach to Literary Education

Like most benefits, these come with some challenges. Encountering a multiplicity of readings of a text among a community of readers requires that some diversity exists within that community. In most classrooms diversity is a given, but not in all. Yet differences which may not be obvious can still yield noticeable divergence. My own beginning attempts to work out this approach in the predominantly upper-middle class, suburban classroom in which I teach bear evidence of this possibility. After I asked my students what they had learned from the stories we had read, the overwhelming majority replied that they had learned how differently people respond to a story. Also, an additional source of diversity can come through the choice of texts, including some that might challenge widely held and largely invisible assumptions.

A more difficult challenge is how to ensure that divergent perspectives are spoken and heard, how to prevent dominant views from squelching others. Inviting the broad range of responses into the classroom conversation requires a shift in the role of the teacher and the objective of the class. Working toward the correct understanding of a text based on the teacher’s authority means that “wrong” responses detract from the course objective and are therefore to be avoided by all. If instead the course objective is to learn how readers arrive at meaning in encounters with texts, where the teacher is an inquirer along with the students, then all responses become profitable to further understanding. Even the student who declares that the story was so boring he didn’t read past the first page spurs more inquiry. Why did this reader find this text so uninteresting? What does this tell us about readers and texts? When every response contributes to learning, including the teacher’s learning, then the classroom becomes hospitable to radically divergent views (within, of course, the boundary of respect for the members of the community, including the text and the author).

While essential for a relational approach to literary education, this kind of shift in practice introduces some additional challenges. Students present, as Cziko observes, “fragile, ghostly” academic identities in class as a response learned

over years of school experience. To invite students to participate in a different way in a classroom requires them to refigure their own academic identities. Like any redefinition of oneself, the shift from a passive recipient of information to an active contributor to the making of knowledge occurs in students neither immediately nor automatically but requires careful prompting by the teacher. Means to invite such a change in students include time for individual reflection (often through writing), open-ended questions, opportunities to interact in pairs or small groups which are less threatening than a whole-class discussion, expressed appreciation for all responses, and even the option to remain silent which frees students from a potentially stifling pressure to participate. Only over time will students come to trust that their contributions are not only welcome but essential to the learning event.

While students can be reluctant to risk a new role in the classroom, the shift required in the teacher's position proves a greater threat to established identities. It means the teacher relinquishes her position as the sole source of authority in the classroom. Nancie Atwell offers an explanation of her own resistance as a teacher of writing to this kind of shift:

Eventually I saw through my defenses to the truth. I didn't know how to share responsibility with my students, and I wasn't too sure I wanted to. I liked the vantage of my big desk. I liked setting topic and pace and mode, orchestrating THE process, being in charge. Wasn't that my job? If responsibility for their writing shifted to my students, what would I do? (11)

For Atwell, and for teachers at every level, the shift toward relationship is ultimately a shift in power. That kind of relinquishing or sharing of power is initially terrifying, reason enough for anyone to avoid it. Here a return to Buber's work offers some insight as his description of the I-Thou world suggests additional reason for such fear:

The world that appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it appears always new to you, and you cannot take it by its word. It lacks density, for everything in it permeates everything else. It lacks duration, for it comes even when it is not called and vanishes even when you cling to it. It cannot be surveyed: if you try to make it surveyable, you lose it. It comes—comes to fetch you—and if it does not reach you or encounter you it vanishes, but it comes again, transformed. (83)

In a mutual relationship, the other is not fixed, stable, nor predictable but is beyond the self's control and expectation. The other also affects the self, and the self the other. So in the I-Thou classroom, outcomes are difficult to predict, content difficult to plan, and everything impossible to control completely because there is a room full of free beings whose interaction—with one another and with those present through texts they have authored—means the possibilities for meaning and learning are limitless, and the outcomes unknown. It seems appropriate then that Parker Palmer's book on education as relationship is entitled *The Courage to Teach*. Besides courage, what's required to take such a risk? Trust. Elizabeth Close mentions the necessary quality as she describes her experience with a relational classroom:

Allowing students the opportunity to develop and discuss their own questions and to dominate the discussion can be very frightening for the teacher. I worried about losing control and about not covering the ‘important’ areas of the curriculum. What I discovered was that the students could be trusted to ask important questions, to address the important issues seriously in the literature, and to listen and learn from one another. (71)

Great good can come from trust—trust in the students, trust in the texts, trust in the authors, trust in the process, and trust that in relationship, along with conflict, misunderstanding, and many surprises. ☺

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