

# 1

## *Stories from the Classroom Lessons on Learning Literature*

In this chapter and the one that follows I want to address a pedagogical problem that college teachers of literature share with most of their secondary school colleagues: the inclination of our students to behave like consumers of literary interpretations rather than the producers of them. That is, given a poem or short story as a reading assignment, our students may do the reading themselves, but return to our classes prepared to take notes from us on what constitutes the correct interpretation of the text. Of course, whenever we cooperate in this well-established system, we may be encouraging many students, not to read the text at all. We are certainly encouraging all of them to read it without any particular interpretive responsibility. So we should perhaps refer to the system not as consumership but as welfare. It is, in any event, a state of affairs that many teachers lament but feel unable to abandon, because students are so convincing about their own interpretive dependence (Nystrand 1991, 1997; Hynds 1991).

### **Classroom Stories as Telling Cases**

Before I present a workshop designed to change the relationship of students to such work as interpretation entails, let me tell some stories to dramatize the culture of schooling and possibly explain how a culture of interpretive dependence has been and continues to be inadvertently nourished by schools. I do not tell these stories of problematic teaching practices to suggest that our profession is filled with bad teachers. On the contrary, the teachers I describe (with the exception of one who is very young) are quite masterful. My stories are about the dilemmas and challenges of teaching for every teacher. The first two stories I want to tell are about classes I observed in sec-

ondary schools; the third one is about many classes I have observed in colleges and universities.

**Story #1: Julius Caesar—"This Play Sucks"**

My first story reports on a visit I made some years ago to a ninth-grade English class in a suburban high school, where the students were reading *Julius Caesar*. While I was observing instruction in this fairly typical class, I noticed a student in the back of the room behaving as many students in the back rows of classrooms in ninth grade are inclined to. As the students were ostensibly reading some assigned portion of the play, this particular student, his hand cupped over his mouth to hide the source of his disruptive noises, called aloud into the room such phrases of complaint as "This play sucks," "This play is dumb," and "This is a stupid play."

The teacher, a young man himself and new to teaching, eventually located the source of the complaints and asked the student directly what was wrong. Why was he saying that this play is stupid? The student replied that the play was stupid "because if Brutus loved Caesar so much, how come he killed him?" The teacher replied that this was not a stupid play, that it most assuredly did not suck—that it was, on the contrary, one of the monuments of Western culture and one of the greatest works in the English literary tradition. It included memorable speeches and taught us important lessons in history and so on. The complaining student was properly chastened by this little speech; the other students were confirmed in their view of the disruptive student as one whose observations deserved ridicule; Shakespeare's play was restored to its rightful place as a masterpiece; and the central ethical and moral problem of the play was comfortably avoided.

The question I would raise about this incident is—who can be said to understand the play better—the student who found it confusing and called it stupid or the students who laughed at that confusion, presumably because they did not experience it, which is to say, saw no grounds for confusion? From this incident I also derive the following principle or proposition for literature classrooms: *confusion often represents an advanced state of understanding*. That is to say, the student who is confused is frequently the one who understands enough to see a problem, a problem that less perceptive students have not yet noticed or arrived at. From this perspective we might argue that one of the chief functions of a literature class is not to present literature to students (as conventional teaching guides are likely to advise) in ways that will anticipate and prevent their confusion, but to welcome and even foster among readers the experience of confusion.

Every veteran teacher of literature has had the experience of having some student in class ask a question or offer an alternative reading that throws into doubt the teacher's own long-held interpretation of a cherished poem. Teachers who are experienced enough and confident enough to endure the confusion that such interpretive doubt now engenders, and who will with their students embrace rather than avoid the problems raised by the interpretive challenge, will invariably advance their own understanding of the poem and secure for themselves and their students a more insightful and comprehensive

interpretation, and one better able to sustain further interrogation. In fact, to take the alternative route and retreat from the challenge of confusion is to endure from that point forward a kind of constant fear of future exposure and a sense of fraudulence about one's own authority as a teacher.

Notice the difference between a typical student and a professionally active English professor who both have an experience of confusion in understanding a text that they had previously assumed they understood or in reading a segment of text that suddenly contradicts for them what they know the text is conventionally thought to mean. The student is likely to think of himself as a poor reader or of the text as one too difficult for him to talk about or write about. The English professor will celebrate because he has found a problem to examine in an essay or paper that he will publish for colleagues.

Even more to the point, when we consider the value of confusion, is John Dewey's observation that confusion is the generative force or motive for the intellectual work that constitutes interpretation. In *How We Think* (1910), his classic study of the mental operations that define intellectual work in all academic and artistic disciplines, Dewey notes that the process of thinking that he identifies with authentic reflection and interpretation begins with the recognition of a problem or question that for the thinker constitutes a state of intellectual disequilibrium or confusion (11–13). We might want to add to our unconventional proposition about the virtue of confusion, then, an additional and possibly more practical observation, which is that confusion represents a necessary starting point for any act of interpretation and therefore is an essential part of the experience of literary study for any student who is to achieve interpretive autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Story #2: Macbeth—Why the Footnotes You Get Are Not the Ones You Need**

Before further examining the pedagogical consequences of such instruction as I have just described, let me tell about another class I witnessed in another high school, this time a twelfth-grade college prep English class, again studying Shakespeare, but in this case *Macbeth*. When I arrived at the classroom door a few minutes early, the teacher handed me an extra text and indicated the scene or segment of the play that he would be working on for this particular class period. It was a short scene of perhaps sixty lines, which I read over quickly before the class began. As I previewed the scene, I found that there were eight or ten lines in it that I couldn't construe comfortably or couldn't make sense of at all. I looked forward, therefore, to seeing how these lines in particular would be handled in class.

The class I saw that day was in many ways an exemplary one. The teacher went over the scene carefully, asking students to act out particularly important lines, urging them to discuss various passages in small and large groups, and making sure that students understood the scene in the context of the whole play. He also attended carefully to the language of individual lines, interpreting and glossing virtually every line in the scene—every line, that is, except the eight to ten lines that I didn't understand and had been looking forward to working on.

After class, I congratulated the teacher on his stimulating lesson and remarked on the coincidence of his attending to every line in the scene except the few that I had most hoped to find elucidated. It was no coincidence, he confessed; he didn't understand those lines either. I then asked what he supposed the students in the class thought about the unglossed lines that neither of us understood. I'm sorry to say we never checked with the students themselves, but my guess was that each of the students in the class thought that he or she must be the only person in the room who didn't understand the few lines that never got discussed. If they weren't the easiest lines in the scene, each student must have thought, the teacher would surely have attended to them.

This, by the way, is exactly what students are often encouraged to think by the parallel treatment of problematic lines in poems and prose works printed in textbooks and even scholarly editions. The editors will frequently provide glosses for all the lines a strong reader can figure out for himself in a poem, but no glosses for the lines that no reader has ever figured out. I have made it a point to examine the treatment of problematic lines in college textbooks and scholarly editions, so I can attest with some authority that this is true for many textbooks and for some of the most respected scholarly editions of major poets.

But why did the teacher—himself a strong reader and generally confident teacher—avoid the lines he didn't understand in the lesson I observed? The answer is self-evident, I suppose, given conventional assumptions about what it means to teach literature. How can one teach what one doesn't know? As if the teaching of literature were essentially a matter of a teacher teaching to students the teacher's own finished reading of a text and not what it means to engage in a reading of a text, including how a competent reader proceeds with a text that is frustratingly difficult to understand.

Just how productive an alternative teaching strategy might have been was revealed to both the teacher and myself when together we worked on the lines that had puzzled us and that had been avoided in class. I regret that I don't remember what scene we worked on or what lines, but I do remember that as we constructed plausible interpretations of the lines that had puzzled us, we felt we were gaining important insights that deepened and refined our sense of the scene and of the play as a whole. In fact, we both felt that the lines that had puzzled us were the most interesting and informative lines in the whole scene—lines that had more to teach us conceptually or about the play than any of the lines that we had managed more easily to grasp. Why should this be so? The answer, I think, is that the puzzling lines puzzled us precisely because they had so much to teach us. That is to say, their difficulty derived from the fact that they told us things we didn't already know. That is why we found ourselves unable to understand them readily.

From this experience and a lifetime of similar ones, I have derived a principle for teaching and learning that in its strongly stated and most memorable form will probably not survive the strictest scrutiny, but that I nevertheless am willing to advance heuristically as a proposition worth entertaining for its potential pedagogical

value: *The only texts worth reading are texts you don't understand. Because if you understand a text as soon as you read it, you must have understood it before you read it, so you didn't have to bother reading it in the first place.* Or to rephrase it in less contentious and less memorable terms, we can say that if you can't understand what you read when you first read a text, it may be evidence that this is a text especially worth reading, because it is telling you something you don't already understand conceptually and the process of figuring it out will constitute a process of advancing or deepening your vision.<sup>2</sup>

Consider, for example, the most tantalizing and generally most confusing line of Wordsworth's brief and frequently anthologized lyric "My Heart Leaps Up":

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky  
So was it when my life began  
So is it now I am a man  
So be it when I shall grow old  
Or let me die.  
The Child is father of the Man.  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Most readers who aren't already well-versed in Wordsworth will be at least momentarily puzzled by the semantic confusion invited by the paradoxical idea of the child as parent of the adult (see the introduction). But after some reflection on the concept, particularly in its context, most readers will be able to construct a meaning that feels like an insight or at least an interesting perspective (which goes beyond but might be said to include a Freudian one) on our relationship to our own personal history and experience as children and on how what we know as adults depends quite literally as well as spiritually on what we learned as children, making our childhood our tutor and in that sense our progenitor or parent. And the fact that it takes more than thirty words on my part to provide what is finally only a partial and meager explanation of an idea that is evoked more comprehensively and inclusively in the poet's seven is one measure of the power of the poetic trope.

Difficulties of this kind are offered to us by many of the texts we find most difficult yet satisfying to read. Those are the very texts and the points of confusion in those texts, moreover, that most deserve and are most richly illuminated by reflection and discussion. That is, these are the texts that can be most productively taught in a context like a classroom, where readers can most conveniently engage in such activities as discussion, reflection through writing, and collaboration in the process of interpretation. In such contexts with such texts, our most enriching opportunities arise, when we encounter the very lines and sections of text that our fear of failure will most forcefully urge us to avoid. Our task, then, is to remember the virtue of confusion and the value of what Tom Newkirk (1984) has called "looking for trouble."

**Story #3: Confessing and Forgiving**

The third story I want to tell begins not in an actual but a prototypical college literature course, say, a typical survey course in English literature or a more specialized class in a particular literary period like the Renaissance. Imagine that the instructor plans to spend some time introducing students to the metaphysical poets and has decided to focus on Donne and Herbert. Such an instructor might typically assign four, five, or more poems each by Donne and Herbert, say on Friday, and expect the students to have read them—perhaps eight to ten pages of difficult reading—by Monday morning's class.

Imagine now how a typical college student might approach such a reading assignment. Sunday night about 10 P.M. he might begin reading and actually read the words of several poems once or twice before stopping to note that he can hardly understand what they are about. He might then "read" a few more pages before falling asleep or giving up. A conscientious student might plan to get up early Monday morning and finish studying then. In the hour or so available before class, such a conscientious student might then have time to complete a reading of each of the assigned poems once or twice, but not time enough to feel competent as a reader of any of them. Moreover, the student would know that it's not necessary to understand these poems before getting to class, because the professor can be counted on to explain them in class.

And of course, the student would be right. For a typical English professor will come to class prepared to lecture on the texts assigned for that class meeting or to "discuss" the texts in class in a way that is sometimes called Socratic. In practice this means that the professor asks questions that prompt responses that eventually allow the professor to say or collaborate with his students in saying the very things that he would otherwise have said in a single uninterrupted turn, if he had been inclined to lecture. In any event, what the students do mainly is take notes, which they write in notebooks and in the margins of their books to record what, according to the instructor, the poems are presumably about and what a literate reader should know about them.

This scenario has to raise questions for us about how we can characterize the student's relationship to the texts he has been assigned. Has the student performed as a reader of those texts? Or is the professor the reader, with the student functioning largely as the recorder of someone else's reading? Louise Rosenblatt says that taking someone else's interpretation as your own is like having someone else eat your dinner for you. I would add that a steady diet of that kind will lead not only to literary starvation but to a conviction that you can never eat for yourself—at least not the gourmet food served up in literature courses. And that seems to be the conviction under which many students of literature labor, not because they haven't taken courses in literature, but because they have.

Given such a literary education, it perhaps shouldn't surprise us to encounter graduating English majors about to embark on student-teaching assignments who say (as some have admitted to me over the years) that they don't feel adequately prepared

to teach literature in a secondary school because they haven't had courses covering all the texts they might have to teach. They assume, in other words, that if they haven't been taught a literary work, they won't know how to teach it.

At first glance that may appear to be the expression of a perfectly rational and natural concern. We wouldn't expect a science teacher to teach botany without having had a course in it, nor an art teacher to teach pottery without some expertise in working with clay. But when a prospective high school English teacher feels it is necessary to have been taught a text before teaching it, he or she reveals a conception of the teaching of literature as the passing on of notes, or a matter of passing on to students the correct body of information that may be said to constitute knowledge of a literary text. College teachers give it to college students, and college students who become high school teachers pass it on to their students. How else can a student know what a serious literary text means if his teacher hasn't told him?

The concern of some teachers about teaching texts that they haven't been taught also reflects an assumption about what one ought to be doing in a classroom that a great many teachers, beginners and veterans—even those quite sophisticated in literary study—may still labor under and surely labored under a generation ago. It is the assumption that literary instruction mostly entails discourse by the teacher on the text being taught (Marshall 1989; Hynds 1991; Nystrand 1991, 1997). The assumption, in other words, is that if I am going to teach a literary work, I am going to do so largely by telling students about it. As if what they need to learn is what I have to say about it. Or, more responsibly, I need to know what they need to learn, so I can teach it, which is to say, tell it to them.

I remember in my last year of graduate school sitting with a colleague in a campus coffee shop, wondering how we would teach poetry to undergraduates when we entered the new teaching jobs we expected to hold the following fall. We saw one of our professors at another table and approached him for advice. "What do you say about a poem when you're teaching a class of freshmen or sophomores?" we asked. "Don't worry about it," he said, "you'll find out when you get there." His answer, like our question, I later came to realize, shows that we all thought of the teaching of literature as a problem of finding things to tell students about the literary texts we had assigned. The essential question for a teacher, as we saw it, was how to find things to say for fifty minutes a class, three times a week, that would be interesting and useful to students.

One unfortunate pedagogical consequence of such a tradition of teaching, as a number of studies of instruction have shown us (Marshall 1989; Zancanella 1991; Hynds 1991), is that teachers who know what texts are about by virtue of having had a course that taught them are often unwilling to entertain alternative readings of those texts by students who may be reading from a different cultural or ideological perspective, no matter how plausible and even insightful the alternative reading might appear to a more flexible reader. We can conjecture about why this is so. Teachers who have been recorders of their professors' readings are likely to believe that their own intellectual authority as teachers of literature rests on the body of literary knowledge

about texts that they possess, as it were, secondhand. Since they haven't constructed such knowledge for themselves, they have no confidence in their capacity to reconstruct or revise it. Thus, any challenge to their secondhand literary knowledge must be experienced by them as a challenge to their authority as teachers of literature.

Before I abandon my description of university-level teaching practices that foster the development of insecure readers and a kind of pseudoliteracy, I need to repeat my claim that such practices as I have been describing are not those of pedagogically insensitive teachers or literary oafs. They may even represent the practices that are favored by faculty evaluation systems and curricular requirements. I would at least like to be able to invoke some such constraints when I admit that not long ago, in the middle of a talk I was giving to teachers on the same topic I am dealing with here, I suddenly realized and felt compelled to confess that just the week before, in my own introductory course in Renaissance literature, I had assigned my students some ten poems by George Herbert to be read by the next class meeting. Then, at the next class meeting, feeling pressed by the promise of my syllabus and the approaching end of the academic term, I gave myself a very good lecture on those poems, filled with fascinating information about the sociology of seventeenth-century literature (Herbert's mother was a friend of John Donne's and so on) and showing students what these particular poems were about and what they achieved aesthetically, theologically, and psychologically.

What else was I to do? The academic term was rushing to its close and I wanted to be sure that my students would not leave my course without some reliable knowledge of Herbert and some understanding of his accomplishment in what I regard as some of the most intellectually satisfying, emotionally powerful, and aesthetically sophisticated poems in the English literary tradition. So I gave my students my reading and they took notes. But I would have served them better (and my syllabus worse) had I shown them how to read one poem of Herbert's so that they might read others by themselves.

For what did they learn from my syllabus-serving lesson? They learned that I love and revere Herbert's poems. And, if they trusted me, as I trust they did, that might one day encourage some of them—the few who might one day find themselves in a graduate English program, perhaps—to reread Herbert, remembering my enthusiasm for him. But they also learned that they can't read Herbert just now and that to do so surely takes specialized advanced training of a kind they haven't had. They had tried to read Herbert for an hour or so as homework and found that they weren't able to. And then I showed them how well I read Herbert. But not that they could do it themselves, as they, in fact, could, with sufficient attention and some teacherly support, in spite of the difficulties the poems might present.

I tell this story about an instance of my own participation in a mode of teaching that I am challenging not merely to demonstrate that none of us is immune to temptations to teach badly, but as a way of forgiving myself (and urging all my colleagues to forgive themselves) for such teaching. More importantly, I want to acknowledge that we often engage in questionable teaching practices for good and honorable



reasons and might do so again. In this instance, it was the end of the term. It was a course in Renaissance literature and I hadn't gotten to Herbert. I didn't want my students moving ahead as English majors not having been exposed to a number of poems of George Herbert's. So I did what I could do in an hour to cover what my syllabus promised and what my sense of responsibility to the curriculum demanded. And I confess that I have made similar compromises since then. But not without realizing what I was trading off.

### What Have Students Learned? A Short Reading Experiment

What is it, then, that students learn about reading literature from such typical classroom teaching practices as I have described? The answer, I think, may be found in another story that can begin here with an experiment. In the interest of this experiment, I would have readers of this chapter immediately cover up the text below where they are now reading so they can't see more than a couple of lines ahead as they read on.

The experiment requires that you time yourself with a chronometer (any timepiece with a second hand will do) as you read and interpret a short passage from Thoreau, printed below. So don't look at the passage until you are ready to start your timer. Also, if possible, as you process the passage, think about what your students would do if presented with the same passage and assignment and how it might resemble or differ from what you do.

If you are now prepared to time yourself, begin reading, observing your reading process and comparing it with what your students would do, and noting with a stopwatch or clock how much time elapses between the time you start to read the passage and the time when you feel you have arrived at a satisfactory interpretation of the following sentence:

Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half-witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit.

—Henry David Thoreau

In workshops at professional conferences I operate a stopwatch and ask teachers to raise their hands as soon as they feel they have interpreted the sentence satisfactorily, and I call out the time every fifteen seconds or so. With a typical mixed group of, say, one hundred secondary and college teachers, five or six hands will be raised to indicate completion of the task within the first ten or fifteen seconds, then another twenty-five or thirty hands will go up by the time thirty seconds have passed. Hands will then continue to rise steadily for another thirty seconds. Most readers will complete the task with varying degrees of confidence within fifty seconds, but clearly some (including some well-known scholars who have participated in my workshops) need more time, and many finish the task still feeling uncertain about their reading.

Typically I give teachers (or students) about one full minute to read the passage before I ask them to turn to a neighbor and share their reading experience and current understanding of the sentence. I also ask them to take a minute to discuss how their students might respond to the same passage.

The point of the experiment, in case it is not apparent, is to enable teachers in my workshops (or readers of this chapter) to observe the difference between the way they engage in transactions with difficult literary texts and the way typical students do in most school settings. I therefore want to begin processing the experiment here by describing what I saw (and what most teachers have confirmed they would probably see in their classes) when I introduced this passage to a class of high school students in a suburban high school.

Some years ago I taught (as an experiment and opportunity for classroom-based research) a high school class in composition at a high school not far from my university campus. The class was a mixed group of college-bound tenth- to twelfth-grade students, most of whom were either in the eleventh or twelfth grade. Most did, as I later learned, go to college, many of them to universities and state colleges and some to community colleges.

I came to use the Thoreau passage in this class because we had been talking in the first week of the course about the differences between strong and weak or good and bad writing. The students all appeared to agree with the proposition introduced by some of their classmates that writing is good when it is easy to understand. That seemed to me a reasonable and not unprecedented definition of good writing (cf. E. D. Hirsch, *The Philosophy of Composition* 1977), but a limited and surely unsustainable one. So I decided to challenge it by bringing to them some samples of writing that I thought were very good but hard to understand. And the first place I looked for such a sample was in Thoreau's *Walden*, where I found my experimental sentence in the conclusion.

When I introduced the Thoreau passage to my class of about twenty-five high school students by writing it on the chalkboard, they looked at it for no more than the few seconds it took them to scan it from beginning to end and began complaining that it was too hard to understand. "That doesn't make any sense," they said. "You shouldn't ask us to read that . . . We're just high school kids . . . We're not English majors in college . . . You're used to college students . . . You can't give us stuff like that . . . it's above our reading level." Nobody in the class, as far as I could tell, read the passage more than once or took any time to try to figure it out. When they saw that they couldn't immediately apprehend it, they declared it too difficult for them and above their reading level.

Their response surprised me since I had brought the passage in specifically to show them a piece of prose that I thought would be difficult to read—one that I knew would require attention and concentrated effort on the part of almost any reader to make it intelligible. I hadn't warned them that this was something I expected them to struggle with, however, so when they saw it, they responded as I assume they often did to most texts that posed difficulties for them in school. They retreated, insisting on their own

insufficiency as readers, which is to say, on the insufficiency of their training or of their background knowledge.

In a workshop with teachers and for readers of this chapter I would now ask, What happened to you when you first looked at the passage? Most teachers, I assume, find the passage just as difficult to read as students do, and for the same reasons: a complicated (but not inaccessible) proposition is framed in witty language that uses a logically constructed neologism (once-and-a-half-witted) and mathematical ratios to state within the structure of a single sentence an interesting and nonobvious truism. Nothing about the sentence or our prior knowledge of Thoreau or American literature makes the statement any easier for us to understand than it would be for most of our English-speaking students.

But what did you do, I ask teachers, when it didn't make sense? Read it again, they invariably answer in chorus. How many of you read it more than once? I ask. All hands go up. How many more than two or three times? Most hands go up. How many read it more than five or six times? Many hands, again.

What's the difference, then, between what we do when we can't understand a difficult text and what many of our students do? The answer suggested by this experiment is that we assume that the text must be very difficult and therefore one requiring our concentrated effort and long attention. Our students, however, assume that the same difficulty, when they encounter it, is evidence of their insufficiency as readers. Which leads me to a third proposition about literary instruction: *when it comes to the reading of difficult literary texts, the difference between us and our students is that we have a much higher tolerance for failure.*

But, of course, an intolerance for difficulty and an assumption that difficulty is a sign of one's own insufficiency are precisely what a good deal of conventional instruction in reading and literature conspires to teach our students. It is surely what the stories I have told of high school and college English classes might suggest, and it is now more than ever what is being emphatically taught through some of the most widely adopted and politically touted reading programs (for secondary as well as elementary children) that tend to move literary texts to the margins and place a premium on speed and fluency over the dysfluencies that might be required by a more thoughtful attention to meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The result, in any event, is that students learn something very like what Mina Shaughnessy (1977) found about the state of student knowledge of writing among many open-admission students at the City University of New York a quarter-century ago. Shaughnessy noted that many students entering the university under the new open-admissions program had little previous experience in writing and were inclined to look at evidence of revision in a manuscript-in-progress as evidence of authorial incompetence. Having no experience with the role of revision in writing, these students would look at a copy of Jefferson's manuscript of the Declaration of Independence, for example, with words crossed out and replaced, with phrases inserted between lines or in margins, with numerous emendations made on the page in the interest of felicity or consensus, and conclude that Jefferson simply didn't know

how to write. If he knew how to write, they would ask, why had he made all those mistakes?

For students who have never learned that composing entails drafting and that drafting often means producing early sloppy copy to be revised and corrected, the view of writing as a one-draft process for competent writers would seem entirely consistent with experience. Their own writing they know to be filled with errors and in need of much correction. But all the writing they see in books—writing from professional writers—is perfect. Why shouldn't an inexperienced writer, not having seen anything except final drafts, assume that writing takes place only in final drafts with competent writers producing perfect copy immediately and incompetent writers making mistakes? To have a problem, therefore, or to not know how to say what you want to say with perfect fluency, becomes evidence of your insufficiency as a writer.

Similarly, readers who have never seen anything but finished readings from their teachers and whose teachers either avoid or stigmatize textual difficulties are likely to conceive of reading much the way inexperienced writers think of writing: as something that competent students or adults do in a single pass, in one effortless draft, without struggle and without frustration; struggle and frustration, they believe, are the signs of incompetence, lack of knowledge, or insufficiency in skill. And what have most students seen of the reading process of expert readers that might suggest any other view of competent reading? When do students see their teachers struggling to make sense of a difficult text or producing a reading that proceeds gradually, moving from mere confusion, to a sense of a gist, to a reading that is tentatively complete but that will still give way to a more perceptive and adequate interpretation?

In fact, given what they have experienced in literature classes, most students have never had the opportunity to learn that reading, like writing, is a process of making meaning or text construction that is frequently accompanied by false starts and faulty visions, requiring frequent and messy reconstruction and revision. And with such a limited conception of reading and such a limited view of what competent readers go through to produce literary meanings, it is hardly surprising that most student readers function largely as welfare recipients in the economy of literary interpretation and instruction. What is needed, of course, is the fishing pole and fisherman's lore that the wise benefactor gives to the poor man, instead of a handout of day-old fish.

One teaching strategy that would help to correct student misperceptions about the reading process would be for a teacher to bring a difficult and unfamiliar text to class and work through an interpretation of it (either as an individual performance or collaboratively with students), thereby providing a model of how a competent reader proceeds in moving haltingly and recursively toward a satisfactory reading and interpretation of a difficult text. Many teachers of writing at all levels do engage in such modeling of the writing process in front of, in collaboration with, and alongside their students. But most literature teachers are hesitant to take the risks that such a method would entail in the teaching of literature, and students do not always regard a teacher's virtuoso performance as a viable model for themselves (see, however, Schoenbach et al. 1999).<sup>4</sup>

Nor is it entirely satisfactory for literature teachers to take a sink-or-swim approach to liberating their students from the cycle of interpretive dependency. It is not enough, that is, for teachers to place difficult texts in front of students and then simply tell them that reading is a process and that they have the capacity to engage in that process and solve for themselves all the interpretive problems they might encounter. The same confusion that provokes a disciplined process of inquiry and reflection on the part of an experienced interpreter of texts may leave many students feeling lost not merely because they feel confused, but because they have no idea of what steps to take in order to enter into the interpretive process and make their confusion an occasion for learning (see Dewey 1910, 12). The approach I want to present in the following chapter is a workshop for students (and for teachers) that enables them to experience how reading is a process and how much interpretive work they can do largely on their own (and with classmates), without the assistance of an expert teacher as the authoritative reader or model interpreter or coach, except insofar as the teacher sets the conditions for having students conduct what is framed as an experiment in reading poetry. The experiment is designed to move students through a disciplined process of inquiry and reflection that will serve as a kind of initiatory and prototypical experience for them to refer to when confronted with future textual problems. It is also designed as a paradigmatic lesson for teachers who want to help students become more autonomous readers through similar experiences. Finally and just as importantly, it is designed to foster in students a set of self-management skills and dispositions such as concentration, persistence, and courage in the face of intellectual difficulties, whose disabling absence in student readers is also the legacy of the culture of instruction I have described above and whose role in the literary competence of students I will discuss at length in the final chapter of this book.

## Notes

1. Robert Scholes (1985, 22), in distinguishing between the act of reading and the act of interpretation, describes the cognitive occasion for interpretation much as Dewey does, claiming that interpretation "depends upon the failures of reading," and is activated by a feeling of incompleteness on the reader's part.
2. My colleagues who specialize in helping struggling and reluctant readers become fluent and more engaged readers would urge me to qualify this proposition by noting that the weakest readers often need extensive experience with easy reading in order to become fluent enough to find pleasure in reading and to acquire sufficient confidence to believe that some struggles can be worthwhile (see Beers 2000, 2002).
3. The eminent reading researcher P. David Pearson, in a communication (Oct. 30, 2002) on the listserv of the National Reading Conference, notes that reading speed and fluency are highly correlated with reading comprehension because it is very difficult for any reader to read fluently or rapidly with proper stress patterns without comprehending what is being read. Increased speed and fluency, he says, will therefore be a "natural consequence of a solid instructional program . . . that allows students to orchestrate all the code and meaning aspects of skilled reading." This fact does not suggest, however, that it is appropriate to teach for increased speed as

an outcome. "The minute we begin explicit attempts to increase speed," he insists, "we have lost the battle. Teaching to timed tests would be like treating abnormal temperature by prescribing aspirin. Prescribing aspirin might make you look healthy in the short run, but if that is all the doctor does, you are in deep trouble. Similarly, if all a program does for slow readers is to focus on increasing their speed, they are in deep trouble."

4. The idea of modeling reading practices, however, has been successfully refined and perfected in high school classrooms by a group of classroom teachers and researchers in the San Francisco area (Christine Cziko, Cynthia Greenleaf, Lori Hurwitz, and Ruth Schoenbach) into a highly sophisticated but very practical program that they refer to as a "reading apprenticeship" program. They have implemented this program with remarkable results through their Strategic Literacy Network in urban high schools, where test scores and academic performance could have been invitations to despair. The book that emerged out of their research and practice, *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Schoenbach et al. 1999), provides detailed guidance (as well as a rich background in theory) for classroom teachers who want to adopt such a program or incorporate some of its strategies into their own teaching repertoire. While their emphasis is on academic literacy in general rather than on the teaching of literature, many of their strategies and principles apply to the teaching of literature and have been adopted by a rapidly growing army of middle school and high school English language arts teachers all over California and, more recently, throughout the country.