

Beyond the Model of a Teacher

Motto:

Don't become an English teacher, unless you have to
[Booth 1988, 266]

Abstract

The post-structuralist theory of literature brings a new concept of reading. A reader is not only a receiver who should decipher a linguistic code, but s/he becomes the subject of plural operations of reading: understanding, associations, evaluation, feelings and emotions. And the most important thing: reading can transform a reader's mind and his/her sensibilities.

This broad concept of reading gives the teacher of literature fantastic possibilities. The territory of literature is the esthetic and moral space, where a pupil can compare his/her experience with other better or worse subject. In the first chapter I try to show that the compulsion of reading books at school is arbitrary and makes the system of the policy of education invisible.

I claim that a teacher (not the reading list) is the model of value of literature. S/He has no choice - texts in the classroom have my face and my voice and I have to personally confirm their advantage to life. In the next chapters ("Situations of Readings", "Awakenings", "Jealousy and Reading", "Inducing to Infidelity") I show how the teacher can produce "the event of reading", using emotions of intimate reading. Every strategy that I describe - strategy of situational teaching - has the same question: whether a given narrative will work for good or ill in the life of other readers, after the last page has been turned. Will this fiction help form a character who is hypersensitive, properly sensitive, or insensitive; intellectually pretentious, thoughtful, or shallow; rash, bold, or timid; bigoted or tolerant?

The answering to the questions means to win the battle of myself.

Key words: *teacher, reading community, institutions of literature, freedom of reading, ethics of teaching.*

Who am I, or who do I become the moment I am in the classroom and I ask the students to note down, memorize, and think about some words. The words like those written about four hundred years ago by the father whose three-year-old daughter had passed away:

*If only, Orszula, my delight,
You had not died, or had not been!*

[Jan Kochanowski, *Tren XIII*, translated by Adam Czerniawski]

Then, who am I? I am a literature teacher. And now what do the words (the words which never carry the same meaning in the class) “teacher” and “literature” mean?

To be a Polish teacher combines the passion for the subject and discord originating from the low social position of a teacher in Poland: a poor salary and big stress. Self-affirmation often becomes a method of self-defense. When I come to school, I put on the shield of the role I play. I can influence others. I am aware of various speech techniques and I know how to apply them. Though I am still young, I have already learned so much. I stand in front of a group of people looking at me, and thinking of me. I touch their feelings. At times, I help them make life-decision. I am invincible. I can see it in the mute faces of my students and in the texts. The situation changes once I let the students and the texts speak.

I do not recall the moment when, as a literature teacher, I got frightened of the subject I teach. It may have been the moment I was reading Job's Complaint: “Curse the day that I was born, the night that said “A man-child is begot” [3.3]

Yet each literature teacher must stick to the designated reading list containing serious stories which are testimonies to extremely painful, evil and traumatic experiences. We demand that students be familiar with those stories. Their knowledge of the stories is marked and certified. I am the person who decides because I may (or may not) acknowledge the importance of those works of literature with the power of my voice. Besides, the students will associate the works they read at school with our commentary, and will usually joke about it rather than praise it.

Nonetheless, can one teach fear, alienation, if the awareness of each human existence has to pass over?

What are we left with? At least let us keep our eyes open. Mouths shut and eyes open – the emblems of mute sensation. However, one cannot be silent as teaching is about the exchange of words.

To be a teacher who teaches and interprets requires discipline as well as freedom. Freedom of speech and the rules of conversation must be guarded by a “discourse guardian”, someone who acts like an Internet Moderator who has the right and power to kick the rule-breakers out of the chat room. Today school is the only territory where we can practice and simulate conflicts and symbolic violence, which, although, simulated can scale dignity, respect, knowledge, shame, fear and success of the participants of discourse.

My very first teaching day at school made me realize how much the literature methodology taught at university differs from reality of literature classes at school. Why read it at all? Twenty five pairs of eyes and one mouth keep asking me that. Even before I got to think about it, the individuality of the text was destroyed, and the literature put face on, and we became suspect’s outcasts, or in the best case – a scenario, accepted with a distance. What is more, literature – the subject matter of our commentary – is not our ally. I am not only appealing to the readers’ rationality itself. I try to appeal to their emotions like anger, joy, and laughter.

The non-defined function of emotions in teaching literature seemed to be finally defined thanks to adapting structural reading methods to reading at school. The leading test theories at Polish philology faculties in the 70s and 80s which formalized reading procedures (formalism, structuralism), were unbelievably effective for scientification and objectification of educational procedures in literature at school.

Holding the emotionality of a text down as well as rationalizing its impact on the reader originate not only from the methodology of literature studies, but also from the utilitarian and rational concept of education, which was to create a citizen who would consciously and responsibly fulfill their democratic duties and exercise their democratic rights. According to Martha Nussbaum, emotions are discounted from public life.

This has a long tradition and is based on rejection for the sake of irrationalism.

The emotions picture human life as something needy and incomplete, something that has hostages to fortune. Ties to children, parents, loved ones, fellow citizens, country, one’s body and health – these are the material on which emotions work; and these ties, given the power of chance to disrupt them, make human life a vulnerable business, in which complete control is neither possible nor, given the value of these attachments for the person who has them, even desirable. But according to the ant emotion philosophers, that picture of the world is in fact false (Nussbaum 1995, 57).

On the contrary, I can see that common reading is something more than a simple ingredient in a recipe to provide educational survival at school.

Literature is not purely an object of analysis. It is about reading experience based on the fact that readers are living creatures capable of combining the act of reading with their extra literary lives. Nevertheless, the experience of reading or the accident of interpretation, even not defined by teaching methodology, takes place on the school or university premises. This follows its own pragmatic schedule where such phenomena are redundant. Then the paradox of the institution noticed by Jacques Derrida appears:

The paradox in the instituting moment of an institution is that it continues something, is true to the memory of a past, to a heritage, to something we receive from the path of the assessors of the culture and so on, but if an institution is to be an institution it must break with the past and at the same time keep the memory of the past and inaugurate something absolutely new. [...]

I was fighting, I was opposing the rigid definition of programs, disciplines, the borders between disciplines, the fact that in my country philosophy was taught only at the university or in the last grade of the high school, so we founded another institution in 1975, a movement called the Group for the Research of the Teaching of Philosophy [GREPH, Groupe de recherche sur l'enseignement philosophique] which opposed the dominant institution, which tried to convince our colleagues and our presidents that philosophy should be taught earlier than in this last grade of the high school, that is, earlier than at [a student's] sixteen or seventeen years, that there should be philosophy across the borders - not only in philosophy proper, but in all fields such as law, medicine, so on and so forth. To some extent this struggle was a failure but I am still convinced that it was right, 'a good war', so to speak. But at the same time I was emphasizing the necessity of a discipline, that is, of something specifically philosophical that shouldn't dissolve philosophy in order to... that we need at the same time the interdisciplinary, crossing the borders, establishing new themes, new problems, new ways or new approaches to new problems but while teaching the history of philosophy, the techniques, the rigor of the profession, what one calls discipline. I think we shouldn't choose between the two (Derrida 1994).

Being a teacher means being constantly torn apart by individual ethics and applying coercive measures. Can you combine the two without being called a hypocrite? Derrida claims that the "either... or" way of thinking is false. There is no school without duty, compulsion, or marks. We can only speak of the basic hierarchy, which to our understanding would express the need to teach literature in the first place as an ethical duty, and the second place - fulfilling our professional duties.

A teacher is a hostage of a promise made (not necessarily openly) by an educational institution that the student will be provided with the amount of information necessary to achieve success in exams. But if just for a moment we forget about the

assurance and even make someone question it, and then allow them to read for pleasure in private, it seems that we are running into chaos in our interpretation. Only to a certain extent though, till we realize that our freedom of reading is always measured by the freedom of the text. The meeting of the two kinds of freedom does not generate chaos, but may teach us to take the responsibility for the text, for its “otherness”.

Such a phenomenon occurs within the confines of literature and school. We are part of the two powers and discourses which we are governed by, but we are somehow responsible for them, especially when they attempt to dominate one another.

The opposition of the “bad” (compulsory reading at school) and the “good” (reading because you want to), is naïve. To eliminate this contradiction I manifest my involvement in the text and I try to avoid sticking to the teaching procedures and commentaries. A teacher should not hide away from what the text “does” to students in class. This would not generate a conflict between the language of the text itself and the language of the explanation, but something that can be called “a fusion of languages”. Both languages would not fight with each other but they would be united. This is how a commentary becomes tied to a text through passion, not through compulsory reading and teaching.

To enhance this bond, I must, at least for a moment, stop being superior to the text and wake the students up. My behaviour is not usually noticed, not related to educational goals. It is incidental, but not accidental, and it may turn out to be the only significant value in teaching. I try to avoid making the educational system an object of contestation. Weakening the ties of teaching, making them more friendly, comes about thanks to undisturbed contemplation of text forms, reading and chatting which becomes the most important event. What is happening in this particular case goes beyond the basic duties of school as an institution. Such “letting the lesson take its path” or “let-go” enhances opinions from single students, usually those lacking confidence and full of fear, purely concerned about the effectiveness of the statements they make. A strange (if we consider the lesson schedule and the exams ahead) statement is welcome to the conversation in the name of curiosity and open discussion. The statement is not in danger, but it is not guarded either. Its significance and careful listening are in the hands of those who are participating in the “let-go”. Now only a free ethical obligation can serve such a guarantee, I accept it, caring for the meaningfulness of the text and every comment made, but I am left disarmed only to be taken care of by others, those who let me take part in the discussion. The “other” (text, reader, student, and teacher) may be revealed only when the ties have weakened. This is when we may discover that our object to be educated appears as an individual subject.

Due to the fact that great literary works are so suggestive and seductive, I have to reach beyond my opinions and habits and take part in a simulation, literary fiction. The fiction and illusion protect me from the cruelty of the events described, but make me think about them, confront them with my emotions and thoughts. I cannot imagine reading “Crime and Punishment”, “Heart of Darkness” or watching “Natural Born Killers” without conscious or unconscious evaluating of the actions and opinions expressed. These works are meant to trigger such evaluation; one cannot avoid it.

Let us make it clear, reading literature does not create a homogenic unity of the literature tradition of a given culture. The national reading list was the way to help preserve national identity. In the free democratic world of cultural and ethnic diversity, the reading community has a different function. The fact that we read the same books does not make us similar, or model us within the limits of the same tradition. The role of school, which is to develop educational standards, must give way to making people think, create, and opening their imagination for alternatives.

The definition of a teacher is at the same time the definition of a student. There is no such thing as a responsible teacher if we do not take for granted that a student is not simply an object of education. Through a conversation with me and the text, students become members of the reading community. Certainly, they are not fully competent, but still they are not “empty container for knowledge” or *tabula rasa*. Having a conversation that follows some reading may, I guess, serve as a tool for discovering what is hidden inside. We are waiting for something that no one else may discover in the future. Our task is to put our students on “standby” and enable them to see themselves in the scope of texts. Finally, we – teachers – need students not only to pay our bills, but first and foremost, to have someone to tell our stories to. Mark Edmundson remembering his philosophy teacher brilliantly remarked:

Good teachers have motivations, but I suspect that loneliness is often one of them. You need a small group, a circle, to talk to; unable to find it in the larger world, you try to create it in the smaller sphere of a classroom. Lears, who seemed at times a little lost in his life, a brilliant orphan, did something like that with us.[...] The only crime was standing pat, not thinking, refusing to ask and answer the questions, refusing to put one’s own beliefs up on the rack and twist and tear them a little (Edmundson 2003, 266).

I do believe that the subject we teach: literature with its richness, variety, depth, and emotions, influences our personality and the world around us. Despite all doubts, there is one thing extremely important for the process of teaching young people: they have to be able to understand the symbolic language of literature. If I

were to indicate the etching model closest to me, I would point to Wayne Booth and his humorous *The English Teacher's Decalogue*. This is what he says:

Commandment one: I am the Lord, thy Logos. I dwell with you whenever there is among you a true meeting of minds through symbolic expression.

2. Thou shalt not construct abstract tables of commandments about how to bring about the meeting of minds through language.
3. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven concepts, thinking that it is the power of man to utter any of my truths once and for all, or that it is comely in my sight for any of my servants to try.
4. Yet neither shalt thou worship the golden calf of thine own notion of what kinds of symbolic exchange are performed in my name.
5. Honor thy mental father and mothers, that thy thoughts may belong in the rhetorical community which the Lord thy God grivet thee and through which he create thee and will create thy posterity – if any.
6. Thou shalt not kill other minds by turning them into straw men, in order to gain easy victories. Because between head-pieces full of straw, there can be no meeting of minds.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery!
8. Thou shalt not steal ideas either by plagiary or by taking what thou mistakenly callest thine ideas and turning them into thy property.
9. Thou shalt not lie, whether to thy colleagues or thy students.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's mental achievements, because thy mind is his mind and his composings can, without coveting, become thy composings.

Go forth and labor in love, which are the meetings of minds... (Booth 1988, 94–100).

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