RE-OPENING CLOSE READING:
LITERATURE EDUCATION AND LITERARY EXPERIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Re-opening Close Reading:
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This dissertation is a performance of, meditation on, and inquiry into the practice of close reading as it relates to the teaching, learning, and interpretation of literature. The objects of close reading include literature, the history of literary pedagogy and its relationship to critical theory, and a narrative that recounts my experience as an instructor of a teacher education course centered on literature and literary pedagogy. The seven chapters form a series of interlocking interpretive essays or “readings” that together raise questions about the relationship between aesthetic experiences with literary texts, the practice of literary interpretation, and pedagogical approaches in the literature classroom.

The study is framed by an exploration of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, both of which, I argue, dramatize interpretive acts in ways that tacitly cue reading practices that would become familiar in twentieth-century literary and pedagogical theory. These two texts, the latter of which can be viewed as a “reading” of the former, provide a useful framework for conceptualizing literary knowledge as a kind of experiential knowledge, dramatizing Baconian empiricism and Coleridgean imagination in anticipation of twentieth-century theories of participatory aesthetics associated with I.A. Richards, John Dewey, and Louise Rosenblatt. *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* also provide a testing ground for my own practice of close reading.
At the heart of this study is a re-reading of the work of Rosenblatt and some of the New Critics: I argue that Rosenblatt and the New Critics, particularly Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, were pioneers of parallel, rather than opposing, pedagogical traditions, informed by the shared influence of Richards and Dewey. I decouple a vision for an authentic practice of close reading—grounded in aesthetic experience and supported by meaningful interpretive discourse—from the narrower version of close reading promoted by the Common Core State Standards in literacy, which have been widely critiqued in ways that invite reductive accounts of literary history.

Through a return to Rosenblatt and the New Critics, alongside a discussion of contemporary debates about the place of close reading in the literature classroom, I articulate principles of practice that could unite secondary and college teachers of literature and inform the teaching and learning of close reading in the twenty-first century. I conclude with a narrative in which I attempt to enact some of these principles in a literature course for teachers, offering a close reading of the tensions and discoveries that emerge in my own teaching.
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

In my first days of college, I walked through the iron gates of the courtyard Robert Frost called the most beautiful in America, the melodious bells of a gothic clock tower ringing in the background as I muttered what some might have misheard as an incantation in a foreign tongue: “Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth...”

A longstanding tradition of the Yale English department, the assignment to memorize and recite in the original Middle English the first eighteen lines of *The Canterbury Tales* was a rite of passage for all aspiring English majors and a requirement of “Major English Poets,” the very first class I took when I arrived at Yale as an undergraduate in the fall of 2006. For decades, Major English Poets, also known as English 125, had been the prerequisite to the Yale English major. A lower-level literature course, English 115, once used Cleanth Brooks’s and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* as a core text, but the apotheosis of close reading came in English 125 (Scholes 29). One former Yale faculty member described it as “the archetypal New Critical course at Yale” (Liu 79).¹

¹ In this introductory chapter, I situate the central questions and preoccupations of this study in the context of my personal history as a student and teacher of literature. In *The Rise and Fall of English*, Robert Scholes explains that he focuses on Yale both because of the Yale English Department’s historically dominant role in literary studies and
Under the tutelage of a Yale professor, I—like generations of English majors before me—wrote eight interpretive papers that offered a close reading of each of the so-called “major” English poets: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot or, in my section of the course, W.B. Yeats. Yale’s material as well as intellectual commitment to Major English Poets was evident in the fact that the course was run as a seminar, divided up into six to eight separate sections, each capped at 18 students, all or nearly all of which were taught by a tenured or tenure-track professor.

At some point in that first semester of college, I remember copying down in my notebook a line my professor had written on the blackboard: “Poetry is a well-wrought urn.” That small allusion to the title of Brooks’s opus was my first exposure to the New Critics. As a college freshman, I never would have described myself as a disciple of New Criticism, but when I look back on a paper I wrote on the John Donne poem “Woman’s Constancy,” I can see the New Critics’ quiet influence:

While one might view the poem’s unpredictable formal qualities as a reflection of the woman’s inconstancy, they more clearly demonstrate the speaker’s own lack of commitment to the relationship; after all, he is the one who utters the lines. Form so closely mirrors content in the poem that such a comparison seems possible: the inconstancies that surface in the speaker’s oral argument are sometimes inseparable from those which emerge in Donne’s verse. As the woman initially seems to be inconstant, so too does “Woman’s Constancy” seem capricious and impermanent as an art form. But a closer analysis reveals that both the poem and the woman are stable entities. Like the speaker of “Triple Fool,” Donne might wish an outmoded poem would abandon him, but it never does. Instead, the poet is the one who deserts his art object and departs to new obsessions and verse forms. The poem is not so fortunate as to be able to find a new partner; she is tied inextricably and permanently to he who crafted her, and he is the one with whom she remains—for better or worse—constantly.

Although “Woman’s Constancy” initially appears to criticize the speaker’s lover as inconstant, I argue that the inconsistencies present in the formal features of the poem help reveal that the
speaker is ultimately the source of inconstancy, which he projects onto his lover. In the essay, I discuss the ironic distance between the poet and the speaker of the poem, I comment on the mirroring of form and content, I linger over verb tense, meter and rhyme scheme, and, in a sense, I resolve the poem’s tensions to illustrate its unity. Looking back at that paper after later reading *The Well-Wrought Urn*, I can hear an echo of Brooks’s voice in my own. My instructor nominated the essay for a departmental award, and that spring I won first place in the J. Edward Meeker prize for freshman writing, beginning my run as a perennial prize-winner of the Yale English department and providing ample extrinsic reinforcement for a way of reading to which I already gravitated intrinsically.

In my first years of college, I was sometimes prone to imaginative excesses as a reader, mobilizing the tools of close reading to prove far-fetched ideas I hoped were original, and one of my mentors at Yale, Leslie Brisman, educated me in the ethical dimension of close reading—the responsibility a reader has to do justice to a text. A magisterial close reader himself, Brisman arrived at Yale as an assistant professor in 1969, several years before Brooks retired, and in at least one class he recalled faculty gatherings Brooks hosted at his home in rural Connecticut. Such anecdotes humanized the New Critics in my eyes and linked them to my own professors, who, I knew firsthand, approached the teaching of literature with the utmost sensitivity.

Later, when I took a modern poetry seminar with Harold Bloom, one of my classmates was Robert Penn Warren’s grandson. From time to time, Bloom would look up at him and say, “My dear child, every time I look at your face, I see the ghost of my dear departed friend, Red Warren.” So, in a variety of ways, the ghosts of the New Critics, less than one generation removed from my own teachers, were present in my literary education. When I open my copy of
The Anxiety of Influence, two pages past Bloom’s personal inscription to me, I see the original dedication to another New Critic—William K. Wimsatt. An anxiety of influence indeed.

The Yale English department, perhaps partly because of the influence of New Criticism, does not demand that students take a course in literary theory, and I never took one. If I had majored in “Literature” rather than English, I would have been required to take a literary theory lecture course, at the time taught by Paul Fry, who famously applied each theory he discussed to the children’s book Tony the Tow Truck.

If I’d taken that course, I would have heard Fry comment on his own personal connection to the New Critics: Wimsatt was still teaching at Yale when he joined the faculty and Brooks was still hosting the annual department softball game. “I can understand at first hand,” Fry writes, “the degree to which the style of ‘close reading’ that evolved within the New Criticism left an important mark on much subsequent criticism and theory, typically hostile to it, that hasn’t always acknowledged its debt” (56). Fry’s framing of the New Critics’ pedagogy as revolutionary—opening up “complex fields of unfolding meaning to which students soon felt they could contribute their own insights” (57)—captures a prevailing Yale insider view of the New Critics’ legacy, which helped form, if indirectly, my orientation as a reader and teacher of literature.

In 2016, in the aftermath of a widely publicized student petition to “decolonize the English major,” the Yale English Department announced that it would allow students to substitute other options for one of the two required semesters of English 125. The feminist literary critic Margaret Homans, with whom I took two memorable classes, wrote an opinion piece in the Yale Daily News supporting the change, arguing that a text like Toni Morrison’s Beloved could be just as successful as the work of white male poets in facilitating discussions of
interpretive ambiguity.\textsuperscript{2} But what strikes me most about Homans’s argument—and what reveals the mark of her own Yale education (she received her B.A. from Yale in 1974, her Ph.D. in 1978 and has taught at Yale ever since)—is her assumption that, even if the canon is challenged, the close reading of literature should remain the foundation of a degree in English. “The skill of close reading taught in ‘Major English Poets,’ Homans writes in the op-ed, “should be basic equipment for life.”

Lauded for my close reading throughout my time at Yale, I won eight English awards in four years, and at graduation, I had so many prize certificates under my diploma cover that some of them spilled out onto the manicured courtyard lawns. I found myself entranced not only by the fruits of interpretation but also, perhaps because I was seen as so successful at it, the interpretive process.\textsuperscript{3}

A few years later, when I was taking graduate courses at Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf School of English, one of my professors told me he was not surprised to learn I was a Yale graduate. He had been a Yale undergrad himself some three decades earlier, and my close reading, he said, bore the stamp of the Yale English Department. I later learned that we shared one of the same undergraduate mentors, Leslie Brisman. “From hearing the way you speak in class,” he told me, “I thought you must have listened very carefully to the greatest minds talking about literature.”\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{2} I return to the story of Yale’s shifting requirements in chapter 5. And in my final chapter, I revisit the idea of using Toni Morrison’s work to teach—or redefine—close reading.

\textsuperscript{3} My academic identity as a close reader was so strongly cemented that, in my later years of college, I was already taking this interest a step further, specializing in performing close readings of scenes in literary texts that dramatized acts of reading. I loved reading about reading and theorized that such moments could provide a guidepost or counterpoint for the activities of a text’s external reader. My readings of \textit{Paradise Lost} in chapter 3 and of \textit{Frankenstein} in chapter 6 show that I have not given up this habit.

\textsuperscript{4} Lectures in literature classes often transmit informational content, leading to what Louise Rosenblatt calls efferent reading—in contrast with aesthetic experience—or what Sheridan Blau, in Miltonic terms, characterizes as false knowledge (see my discussion of interpretive acts in \textit{Paradise Lost} in chapter 3). Yet my professor’s idealized view
And yet, to say that I came to read and write as I do because of the Yale tradition of close reading would be a plausible, but incomplete, narrative of my literary awakening. I honed my methods of reading at Yale, where my tendencies were extravagantly praised. But I arrived in New Haven with much of my identity as a reader already formed. I remember my English 125 professor marvelling at my very first paper. “Someone,” he said, “taught you how to do explication.” He could not himself, he implied, take any credit.

So who had taught me? My high school English classes provided, if not explicit instruction in close reading, an encouraging and fairly flexible arena in which I could practice my skills. In my senior year of high school, in my AP Literature class, I had written a twenty-five page paper on a single poem (the assignment, I think, was a ten-pager). In retrospect, some of my analysis of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” sounds like it could have been written by a Yale student:

Although Prufrock’s language is hindered by the superficiality and rigidity of his society, his very act of speaking illuminates society’s imperfections through language. When Prufrock’s words are littered with punctuation marks, his language reveals societal adherence to a rigid routine and the tentativeness that results from an obsession with one’s public image. When Prufrock uses the incorrect pronoun because it sounds more elegant or employs otherwise inflated jargon, his stilted language conveys the pitfalls of social conformity. When Prufrock endlessly revises and repeats himself in an effort to be recognized as right by those around him, his language only causes him to become more lost. When Prufrock struggles to find the right words for his thoughts, his frustrated pauses and exclamations reveal that a society in which people are perpetually concerned with conforming to the insipid norm cripples individual expression. But Prufrock himself is not crippled—not really.

In the inconclusiveness is conclusion; in the irresoluteness is resolution. Even in his verbal imperfections, art is to be found. Perhaps Prufrock is so concerned with whether his hair, clothes and language will be seen as ordinary because he knows that he

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5 In chapter 4, I discuss the relationship between New Criticism and the College Board’s AP English Literature exam.
is not ordinary at all. His capacity to capture eloquently an inevitability, as he does in the magic lantern simile and the description of the singing mermaids, is exceptional…At its core, “The Love Song” is about how society can repress the artist—how it can contort his grammar, force his thoughts into patterned rhythms of punctuation that reflect pointless routines, inhibit his unique creativity as it instills in him a desire to conform to others and an utter lack of confidence in himself. However, when an artist like Prufrock treats us to such an extraordinary soliloquy that delves into the repression of his creativity and his hopeless quest for meaning in life, then his creativity has not truly been repressed and the significance of his existence—the existence of the artist—has not truly been lost. The mermaids may not sing to Prufrock, but he has sung to us.

Throughout the essay, I attend closely to grammatical structures, to the relation of content and form, and to the possibility of meaning that contradicts surface appearances, all of which became signature features of my literary criticism. As I emptied my seventeen-year-old mind, pouring over individual words and phrases, I was also yearning, in some sense, to sing my own song. That same year, I did an independent study in creative writing, emulating the craft of famed short story writers by studying what I called their “internal stylistic machines.” Perhaps I felt myself a repressed artist, as I had interpreted Prufrock to be, struggling to create a beautiful, meaningful piece of writing within the constraints of a school assignment.

My emergence as a close reader, though, likely extends back even earlier in my education. My sixth and eighth grade English teachers were both grammar mavens, seemingly united in a quest to resolve pronominal disagreements and to untangle all the world’s misplaced modifiers. At the beginning of each class, they would place a “writing error” on the board and ask the students to propose ways of rewriting the sentence. I remember taking delight in the invitation to manipulate the inner workings of sentences; what stayed with me was not so much the need for correctness but a sensitivity to language’s structure and dynamism. I became more attuned to pronoun choices, verb tenses, and punctuation, developing a rhetorical toolbox that would become indispensable later on, when I studied the inflections and innuendos of difficult poetry—hence my attentiveness to Prufrock’s pronouns.
But even those middle school lessons were not the beginning of my education as a close reader. I grew up in a home filled with books, with bookcases eventually extending into the dining room to accommodate my mom’s unquenchable literary appetite; in my early childhood, my parents read to me constantly. I learned about style as a fourth-grader, when I printed out my hunt-and-peck typed book reports for proofreading by both of my parents, and I had to reconcile the corrections and insertions of my dad, whose blue, rolling ball pen added the inflated, impersonal verbiage of legal writing (“verbiage”) is just the kind of word he would have inserted into my book report) with edits from my mom, who preferred direct, expressive language and crossed out many of my dad’s changes in black ballpoint ink.

I’m not sure that anyone “taught” me how to “do” close reading, despite my freshman English professor’s assumption that “someone taught me explication” or my grad school professor’s fantasy that I had learned by absorbing the techniques of Yale’s greatest minds. Many different experiences with language contributed to my disposition as a reader, and many different spaces empowered me to experience imagination, revelation and power in dissecting sentences and playing with words. I associate the close reading of literature not with pedagogical authority but with intellectual autonomy, with the calm of tuning in deeply to my own thoughts, counterpoised rhymically by the elation of discovery. “Close reading,” to me, suggests not only microscopic analytic attention but also an intimate connection to a text—what I describe in my fourth chapter, borrowing language from Sheridan Blau, as an “experienced understanding.”

Although I didn’t walk through the crucible of English 125 and emerge a master of an entirely new way of reading, I arrived at Yale well-suited to meet the English department’s criteria for outstanding reading, and I was well-poised to benefit from its teaching—and to develop an academic identity that was shaped, in part, by the intellectual lineage of New
Criticism. The language of Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics, whether I knew it implicitly or explicitly, validated many aspects of my orientation as a reader of literature.

When I arrived at Teachers College, Columbia University as an M.A. student in the summer of 2010 with the goal of preparing for a career as an English teacher, a new branch was added to my intellectual genealogy: some of my English education professors at TC had studied with, known or been influenced by the John Dewey-inspired Louise Rosenblatt, whose relationship to the New Critics was complex and, in many accounts, adversarial. On my way to classes, I walked by a bust of Dewey and a plaque with his words; Rosenblatt wasn’t memorialized in bronze on the campus, but her writings and teachings loomed large in my master’s degree coursework. Rosenblatt, I was thrilled to learn, believed deeply in the art of close reading as a step in the dance toward the uniquely meaningful aesthetic experiences that literature made possible. And the freedom that Rosenblatt granted the reader, in balance with her commitment to attending carefully and respectfully to the text, appealed to me.

In some courses at TC—though typically not in classes taught by those who had known Rosenblatt personally—I heard various versions of the following: “The New Critics are actually the old critics, and they’re responsible for all the symbol-hunting exercises that used to make English classes very boring for students. But luckily, Louise Rosenblatt came along and discredited New Criticism with the idea that reading is a transaction, and now you can use her theory to teach in a way that empowers your students to make meaning of what they’re reading.”

Whenever I heard that narrative, I felt a sense of dis-ease: two powerful forces in my own education were being pitted against each other and represented in ways that didn’t match my own experience. In fact, when I read Rosenblatt’s books as a master’s student, I felt that
Rosenblatt’s view of reading was in many ways not so different from the close reading practiced by the New Critics.

In my early years as a teacher, I was constantly searching for ways to share with my students the kind of literary experience that, to me, seemed connected to the vision of the New Critics as well as Rosenblatt. My efforts, certainly, were not always successful. “You’re always using the word ‘experience’ with the students,” my cooperating teacher pointed out to me in one of our debriefing sessions during my student-teaching. “You ask the students how they experienced the reading, but they don’t know what you’re talking about. They read through the pages you asked them to on the subway on their way to school in the morning, and that’s it. Reading isn’t an experience to them.”

Later, in my first teaching job, one of my colleagues and mentors, who had done doctoral work at NYU and loved Rosenblatt’s work, would commiserate with me about the challenge of inviting students to approach their reading as an aesthetic experience. In the photocopy room at school, I would find discarded run-offs of multiple choice questions based on plot or identifications of literary devices, and finding a sympathetic ear among a few like-minded colleagues, I would bemoan the prevalence of anti-intellectual, anti-aesthetic literary pedagogy, powered by the authority of the teacher rather than an experience of a text. Such reductive exercises and quizzes, however, bore no resemblance in my mind to New Criticism or the close reading I valued deeply.

In the summer of 2015, as I prepared to return to TC as a PhD student, Sheridan Blau showed me a draft reading list for his new doctoral seminar, Seminal Texts in English Education. He had incorporated at least twice as many texts as would be practical to retain in the course; among the works that he listed were some samplings of New Criticism. I told him that I was
pleased that he had included the New Critics, and he replied that he was ambivalent about leaving them on the final list. I argued that they did belong and commenced a research project to explore why. (That project catapulted me into the writing of what has become chapter four.)

Influenced by the Yale tradition of close reading in which the rise of New Criticism played a part, I have wanted to recast the New Critics as more than as the villains Rosenblatt vanquished; at the same time, I have sought to honor Rosenblatt’s important legacy. While I would like to believe that I am disposed to offer a closer and more accurate reading of New Criticism than some others, I suppose I am also disposed to romanticize some aspects of New Criticism. And maybe one could say that my desire to reconcile Rosenblatt and the New Critics is, ultimately, an attempt to reconcile two influential—but perhaps not wholly compatible—branches in my personal intellectual history, a Brooksian move to resolve tensions and find unity, even where it might not be present, in my own well-wrought education. Rosenblatt and the New Critics are, in some sense, my intellectual grandparents!

My study of Rosenblatt and the New Critics emerges as a focal point in my exploration of some of the most persistent and perplexing questions that have animated my life as a student and teacher of literature. What is meant by a literary “experience”? Where does the “meaning” of a literary text reside? To what extent must literature instruction, with its almost inherent imposition of pedagogical authority, interfere with aesthetic experience, and what theoretical and practical frameworks might allow us imagine the teaching of literature otherwise? How should we define “close reading,” and why have different versions of the practice been so highly valued in secondary schools and in colleges? What is the relationship between close reading and aesthetic experience—and between interpretive practice and interpretive discourse—and what considerations and political implications might underlie a revitalization of close reading in the
twenty-first century? How have New Criticism and Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response, two towering movements in the history of English education, influenced our conceptions of close reading, literary experience, and literature instruction? And how might a re-reading of Rosenblatt and some of the New Critics correct various misconceptions in the field and frame a much-needed conversation about the future of literary learning?

To situate, re-cast and extend the story of Rosenblatt and the New Critics, I have followed these questions to a variety of sites—my own critical interpretations of literature, my study of the history of literature education and its relationship to critical theory and, finally, a reflection on my own teaching. The interweaving of these different approaches reflects the strands of my professional identity: my personal history as a devoted student of literature and creator of the closest readings; my commitments as a scholar of English education; and my work as a teacher vexed by uncertainties about how to position my own authority in the classroom in a way that empowers students to sustain responsive and responsible discourse, delving deep into the possibilities of meaning that literature invites. My engagement with multiple domains and genres—literature, critical theory, disciplinary history, and personal pedagogical narrative—also reflects a modest attempt to initiate dialogue between the needlessly siloed worlds of English education and English literature.

In my second chapter, following this introduction, I examine Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a drama of interpretation, education, and the acquisition of knowledge through experience. Drawing on Baconian empiricism and seventeenth-century devotional reading practices, Milton’s hermeneutics of experience provides a model not only for interpreting the world but also for reading and interpreting a text, making the poem a fruitful allegory for the possibilities of true learning—and the temptation of false knowledge—in the study of literature.
With Milton’s concept of experimental or experiential knowledge as a frame, I present a brief history, in the following chapter, of the fallen world of literature education, showing how issues of pedagogical and textual authority have shaped the teaching of literature since the late 1800s. Attempts to defend, reform and re-imagine literature education, I suggest, must foreground and seek ways to resolve the tension between pedagogical authority and literary experience.

Further investigating the fraught language of “experience” in literary pedagogy, my fourth chapter attempts to correct and complicate an oversimplified account of critical theory’s influence on the teaching of literature. Within the field of English education, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reader response has been widely accepted as a means of resisting the hegemony of New Criticism. I argue, however, that Rosenblatt and the New Critics were pioneers of parallel, rather than opposing, pedagogical traditions, informed by the shared influence of I. A. Richards and John Dewey. At a time when misinformed caricatures of both Reader Response and New Criticism figure prominently in professional and political discourse about the teaching of literature, a careful reimagining of Rosenblatt’s relationship with the New Critics may allow for more nuanced conversation about the place of close reading in the teaching and learning of literature.

In my fifth chapter, I extend that conversation, turning to discrepancies in the way that pedagogies of close reading are defined and defended among college literature teachers and in secondary schools. I question the argument that the Common Core State Standards in literacy represent a toxic revival of New Criticism, showing that the Common Core’s anti-aesthetic stance clashes sharply with the kind of close reading valued by Brooks and Warren and might be more closely aligned with the anti-New Critical formulations of Gerald Graff. Re-examining the
precepts of the New Critics and Rosenblatt and placing them in dialogue with more
contemporary voices, I seek to re-define “close reading” as an ethical and aesthetic practice that
could be embraced in K-12 and postsecondary education.

My sixth chapter, moving toward a conclusion, provides a companion to my opening
frame: I examine Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a novel that in many ways reflects Shelley’s
reading and re-interpreting of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In one crucial scene of the novel, Victor
Frankenstein’s Creature encounters a copy of *Paradise Lost*, reads the poem, and connects the
characters in the text to his own life. Accordingly, I reflect on the implicit model for reading
literature Shelley’s novel provides and offer the Creature’s disposition of aesthetic, humane,
experiential reading as an alternative to the monstrously mechanized pedagogy that too has often
characterized literature instruction. The Creature’s fate—and the havoc he ultimately wreaks in
the novel—is the direct consequence of Victor’s sloppy and self-absorbed misreadings. Despite
an ability to read text and world ethically and aesthetically, the Creature suffers because he is
denied the opportunity to participate in any community of discourse. As a reader, the Creature
seems to embody some of Rosenblatt’s precepts, and I trace this resonance to an intersection in
the intellectual lineage of Rosenblatt and Shelley: Rosenblatt’s understanding of reading is
indebted to the work of I.A. Richards, who was strongly influenced by Samuel Taylor
Coleridge’s conception of literary imagination, which was a shaping force in Shelley’s thinking
and writing. Like earlier chapters, this one both theorizes about and enacts an attempt at
exemplary close reading.

In my final chapter, I pivot toward practical pedagogy as I recount the tensions and
discoveries that emerged in a literature course I taught for pre-service and in-service English
teachers, using Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a testing ground to experiment with problems and
possibilities in literary interpretation and pedagogy. Along the way, I grapple with questions about how the richest traditions of aesthetic experience and interpretive practice in literary studies might coexist alongside concerns about culturally responsive teaching in diverse contexts. I conclude by applying the practice of close reading to the study of my own teaching. Re-reading and re-examining my own teaching narrative, I reflect on my struggles and successes as I attempted to negotiate the students’ perspectives and my own assumptions about literary learning.
In *The Schoolmaster*, published in 1570, Roger Ascham positions experience in direct opposition to learning: “Learning, ye wise fathers, and good bringing up, and not blind and dangerous experience, is the next and readiest way, that must lead your children, first to wisdom, and then to worthiness” (quoted in Laurie 80). Ascham’s suspicion of experience as a source of knowledge was characteristic of his time, but by the turn of the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon had emerged at the vanguard of a new empiricism. In *Novum Organum* (1620), Bacon outlined an inductive method based on observation, analysis and inference, followed by continued observation and experimentation to verify hypotheses. In the acquisition of knowledge, Bacon asserted, tradition and authority were inadequate substitutes for experience and experiment (Dundon 80).

In this chapter, I will explore how John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* dramatizes some aspects of Bacon’s new empiricism, focusing on Milton’s distinction between true and false knowledge and on the relationship between experience and learning throughout the poem. In interrogating Milton’s drama of experiential learning in *Paradise Lost*, I apply a somewhat unorthodox combination of interpretive frames: I turn chiefly to Milton’s formative encounter with
experiential metaphors in his reading of Bacon, but I also consider the language of experience as it appeared in descriptions of devotional reading in Milton’s time, clues about Milton’s pedagogical and interpretive attitudes based on his marginalia, and the twentieth-century rise of models of textual interpretation and literary pedagogy that prioritize the reader’s “experience.” Through a vision of experience, mediated by reason, as a source of knowledge, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* provides an implicit model not only for interpreting the world but also for reading and interpreting a text. While linked to Baconian empiricism and seventeenth-century devotional reading practices, Milton’s hermeneutics of experience, I will suggest, also anticipates twentieth-century transformations in the teaching and learning of literature.

**“True Wisdom” in the Prose of Bacon and Milton**

Bacon’s writings were an early influence on Milton, who, Catherine Martin writes, was “perhaps the most Baconian poet of the seventeenth century” (231). Annette Rubenstein comments that Milton “read and admired Bacon and felt completely at one with his rationalist approach to the world and his emphasis on knowledge as a guide to power” (122). And Gerald Gillespie calls attention to Milton’s poetic re-imagination of Baconian concepts, proposing that “Milton grandiloquently translated the Baconian anthropological approach into poetic terms in *Paradise Lost* and *Regained*, as well as in his treatises on education and freedom of expression” (238).

At Cambridge in the late 1620s, Milton offered a Baconian challenge to education in “An Attack on the Scholastic Philosophy.” The young Milton expressed his distaste for what he saw as the pointless pedantry of the Cambridge curriculum, which emphasized Aristotelian scholasticism: “Finally, the supreme result of all this earnest labour is to make you a more
finished fool and a cleverer contriver of conceits, and to endow you with a more expert ignorance: and, no wonder, since all these problems at which you have been working in such torment and anxiety have no existence in reality at all, but like unreal ghosts and phantoms without substance obsess minds already disordered and empty of all true wisdom” (“Prolusions” 71). In The Advancement of Learning, Bacon critiques logicians who, in a vacuum of experience, “spin out unto us those laborious webs of learning” (27). The learning claimed by logicians—the laborious weavers of Bacon’s proverbial spider webs—amounts to false knowledge, or, in Milton’s words, “expert ignorance,” fanciful and phantasmal conceits with no basis in reality. Like Bacon, Milton implies that “true wisdom” begins with some form of experience, and he follows his satire of traditional schooling with an uplifting alternative:

But how much better were it, gentlemen, and how much more consonant with your dignity, now to let your eyes wander as it were over all the lands depicted on the map, and to behold the places trodden by the heroes of old, to range over the regions made famous by wars, by triumphs, and even by the tales of poets of renown, now to traverse the stormy Adriatic, now to climb unharmed the slopes of the fiery Etna, then to spy out the customs of mankind and those states which are well-ordered; next to seek out and explore all nature of living creatures, and after that to turn your attention to the secret virtues of stones and herbs. (“Prolusions” 72).

For Milton, all fields of study—geography, history, poetry, geology, botany and astronomy—are informed by sensory experience, a wandering of the eyes. Milton’s verb choice emphasizes an active journey; in contrast to the pupil circumscribed in the classroom, Milton invites his audience to “wander,” “range,” “behold,” “traverse,” “spy out,” “seek out,” and “explore.” Milton imagines that the mind may travel “beyond all confines of the world, and at the last attain the summit of all human wisdom and learn to know itself, and therewith those holy minds and intelligences whose company it must hereafter join” (“Prolusions” 247). The stimulation of the senses offers a pathway to knowledge of the world, and, ultimately, self-knowledge. The proclamations in Milton’s Cambridge exercises may sound, at times, like they are voiced by a
daydreaming schoolboy, a young Milton unencumbered by blindness, enthralled by the language of sight, and confined by the doldrums of the classroom. In the course of his poetic career, however, Milton seems to affirm rather than abandon the Baconian leanings captured in his Cambridge prolusions.

Bacon’s interest in the processes of attaining knowledge shapes his—and perhaps Milton’s—reading of the story of Adam and Eve. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Bacon resists the argument that the fall of Adam and Eve should be taken as cautionary tale about the danger of knowledge: “It was not the pure knowledge of Nature and universality…which gave the occasion to the fall; but it was the proud knowledge of good and evil, with an intent in man to give law unto himself, and to depend no more upon God’s commandments, which was the form of the temptation” (*Advancement* 6). Bacon makes a distinction between the “pure knowledge of Nature” and the corrupted knowledge of Adam and Eve’s temptation. In Bacon’s view, the noble pursuit of knowledge was not the cause of the fall but rather the necessary and, to some degree redemptive, consequence of it: “For man, by the fall, lost at once his state of innocence, and his empire over creation, both of which can be partially recovered even in this life, the first by religion and faith, the second by the arts and sciences” (*Novum Organum* 292). Milton echoes Bacon in his Cambridge prologue “in defense of learning and oration,” in which he mentions the importance of “a thorough knowledge of all the arts and sciences,” and in the pamphlet *Of Education*, in which he declares that “the end then of Learning is to repair the ruins of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright” (“Prolusions” 104-105, “Of Education”). Part of Milton’s project in *Paradise Lost* is to assist the reader in regaining knowledge of God and nature in a fallen world.
Milton’s Eve and the Distinction Between True and False “Experience”

Although some have suggested that *Paradise Lost* reflects Milton’s resistance to empiricism, a close reading of the scene of Eve’s seduction demonstrates that *true* experiential knowledge is the opposite of—not the manifestation of—deception or corruption. Thus, Milton seems to follow Bacon’s argument that “pure knowledge of nature,” gleaned through empirical observation, is not responsible for Adam and Eve’s fall.

After Eve has succumbed to Satan’s temptation and consumed the forbidden fruit, she first praises the Tree of Knowledge and then offers an encomium to Experience: “Experience next, to thee I owe,/Best guide. Not foll’wing thee, I had remained/In ignorance. Thou open’st wisdom’s way/And giv’st access though secret she retire” (9.807-811). John Major argues that the tragic results of Eve’s “experience” convey Milton’s commentary on the limitations of experiential knowledge: “Milton seems to be commenting ironically on one of the established tenets of Renaissance educational doctrine, namely, that knowledge or learning, to be solid and useful, must be ratified by experience” (39). Gordon Teskey likewise suggests that Eve’s paean to Experience must be read ironically. In his gloss on the text, Teskey writes, “Milton takes a dim view of empiricism” (218). But Eve’s appeal to experience may not so much represent Milton’s suspicion of empiricism as it reveals Eve’s misunderstanding of genuine experiential learning.

When the serpent claims that he has attained the power of speech by consuming the fruit (a lie), Eve accepts this testimony without any empirical evidence. Recognizing that the serpent’s use of excessive flattery casts doubt on his reliability, Eve briefly re-evaluates her assumptions: “Serpent, thy overpraising leaves in doubt/The virtue of that fruit in thee first proved” (9.615-616). Her reasonable skepticism—the doubt that nearly causes Eve to overturn her initial
conclusion about the “virtue” of the fruit—suggests her adoption of a more respectable scientific method, but “credulous” Eve all too quickly sets aside her skepticism and accepts as “proved” what has never been proven at all (9.644).

After making a variety of arguments about the wisdom of ignoring God’s commands, Satan urges Eve to consider “these, these and many more causes import your need of this fair fruit” (9.729-730). The fact that Satan persuades Eve to act on the basis of “causes” not only unobserved but also unmentioned suggests that Eve has abandoned any pretense of empiricism. Baconian new philosophers emphasized the value of inductive reasoning, using experiences as evidence to be applied toward a conclusion. Satan, as Karen Edwards observes, offers “what looks like an inductive argument” but ultimately proves to be merely “a rhetorical ploy of great cleverness” (19).

Stanley Fish contends that Satan’s argument for Eve to eat the fruit amounts to an initiation into “the mysteries of empirical science” (Surprised 250). According to Fish, Eve falls because she trusts empirical knowledge over God’s word: “By making Satan an empiricist, Milton dramatizes for seventeenth-century projectors the traditional warning against intellectual pride” (Surprised 251). But Edwards counters that Satan is merely a pseudo-empiricist: “The true objection to Satan’s method is fraudulence. Satan is guilty of falsifying experimental data, for he has not of course eaten any fruit...Milton shows that Satan has abused the potential of the new experimentalist philosophy for instilling wisdom—not that it has no such potential” (18). Edwards argues that the Eve’s willingness to set aside her “skeptical and open-minded sense of inquiry” is what leads to her downfall (37).

While Teskey indicates that Eve believes she “knows the fruit is good because she has experienced its goodness in herself,” Milton calls into question whether Eve’s tasting of the fruit
qualifies as a true “experience” (218). What Eve imagines to be her “experience” of the fruit—and the knowledge it supposedly contains—may be a flight of fancy: “Eve/Intent now wholly on her taste naught else/Regarded, such delight till then as seemed/In fruit she never tasted whether true/Or fancied so, through expectation high/Of knowledge” (9.785-789). The phrase “as seemed” places a veil of uncertainty over the effects of the fruit; the exceptional sensation it produces may be mere illusion, “fancied so, through expectation high/Of knowledge.” Eve is later described in state of being “heightened as with wine,” but Milton hints that her high comes primarily from her high expectations of knowledge, not from any real knowledge or nourishment imparted by the fruit (9.793). Moreover, the fact that Eve “naught else/regarded” suggests that her receptivity to sensory input is numbed; as she “engorged without restraint,” she is aware only of her own appetite (9.791). She is singularly focused not on the taste of the fruit but on “her taste,” so that Eve’s encounter with the fruit becomes a solipsistic counterpart to the earlier scene when she gazes at her own reflection, except this time Eve’s self-reflection is displaced by the imprint of Satan’s false experience. With the phase “whether true/Or fancied so,” Milton uses the possibility of truth to tempt the reader to join Eve in accepting the fruit as a true experience of knowledge before the enjambed sentence turns to point out the falseness of Eve’s vision.

Edwards adroitly suggests that Eve substitutes Satan’s false claims, a corrupt secondary source, for her experienced understanding, thereby short-circuiting a true empirical approach to the acquisition of knowledge: “Had she properly valued her own experience of the natural world, she would not have been led astray by the marvelous talking serpent. But she accepts his interpretation of God’s other book for her own, a form of intellectual laziness with the most serious consequences” (Edwards 39). Rather than trusting her own knowledge, Eve relies on Satan’s account of his experience and, as a result, misreads God’s “other book,” the book of
nature. Thus, Eve’s encounter with the fruit of knowledge emerges as a hermeneutic problem with implications for our reading of the world, the Bible and Milton’s poem.

The language that Eve uses to celebrate “experience” signals in several ways that she is primarily (if unwittingly) celebrating Satan. Eve’s elevation of “experience” as “best guide” recalls the earlier description of Satan as the “guide” who literally leads her to the fruit: “He leading swiftly rolled/In tangles and made intricate seem straight/To mischief swift” (9.654, 9.631-633). Moreover, Eve praises “experience” in sexualized language that hints at Satan’s seduction and metaphorical penetration of Eden and Eve: “Thou open’st wisdom’s way/And giv’st access though secret she retire” (9.809-810). Wisdom, personified with a female pronoun, is opened and accessed by Experience, which is figured as a phallic action. When Satan first arrives in the garden, the description of Eden is suggestive of female anatomy: “As with a rural mound the champaign head/Of a steep wilderness whose hairy sides/With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,/Access denied” (4.134-137). Satan, not Experience, is the one who has been seeking “access” and who attains it in Eve’s consumption of the fruit.

Eve claims that her experience of the fruit corresponds to that of the serpent, but one might more accurately say that she has accepted the serpent’s assertions in place of her own experience: “I/Have also tasted and have also found/Th’ effects to correspond: opener mine eyes,/Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart/And growing up to godhead which for thee/Chiefly I sought” (9.877-878). Eve’s narrative of what happens to her when she eats the fruit is at least partially and possibly entirely dishonest: her “chief” motivation in tasting the fruit is not to benefit Adam, and the feelings she experiences after her fall—when she contemplates keeping the fruit for herself to amplify her power and becomes jealous at the thought of Adam replacing her—hardly evidence an “ampler heart,” unless the phrase refers simply to a quickened
heartbeat. Therefore, the claim that Eve’s eyes have been opened, which may sound like
evidence of a sensory experience, can be dismissed as either a deliberate deception directed at
Adam, as Eve’s own self-delusion, or as another physiological by-product of the high that comes
from Eve’s high expectations. For the blind Milton, a true opening of the eyes evidently depends
on a combination of sight (or other sensory input) and insight, a mental optics that Eve’s self-
delusion stymies.

When Eve convinces Adam to join her in consuming the fruit, she adopts Satan’s role as
the purveyor of false experience: “On my experience, Adam, freely taste/And fear of death
deliver to the winds” (9.989-90). Adam is urged to substitute for his own knowledge a secondary
source (Eve’s “experience,” which is merely the blind acceptance of Satan’s illusory claims). In
yielding to Eve’s argument against his “better knowledge,” Adam is not valuing dogma over
empirical truth (9.998). Rather, he is turning to borrowed knowledge and dubious evidence
instead of the embodied knowledge that has been confirmed by his own reason and experience.
Adam’s fall, like Eve’s, is precipitated not by an overreliance on experience but instead by the
failure to commit to a rigorous Baconian method of observation and analysis.

**Milton’s Baconian (and Deweyan) Model of Experiential Learning**

The fall of Adam and Eve works in conversation with other scenes in *Paradise Lost* to
interrogate the possibilities and perils of learning from “experience.” Challenging Satan’s
rebellion against God, Abdiel turns to *experience* for proof of God’s goodness: “Yet, by
experience taught, we know how good,/And of our good and of our dignity/How provident He is,
how far from thought/To make us less, bent rather to exalt/Our happy state under one head more
near/United” (5.826-831). Abdiel, the reformed fallen angel who becomes a moral authority in
the poem, attacks Satan’s logic as twisted, fallacious and anti-empirical: Abdiel implies that Satan rebels not only against God but also against truth learned through experience.

In his “haughty” reply, Satan seems to parody Abdiel’s empiricism, seeking to discredit Abdiel’s claims that God, through the Son, created the angels: “Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who saw/When this Creation was? Remember’st thou/Thy making while the Maker gave thee being? We know no time when we were not as now,/Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised/By our own quick’ning power” (5.856-861). Milton’s wordplay ties “know” to “now,” highlighting the absurd extremism of Satan’s argument that only what exists “now,” in the immediate purview of the senses, is known to be true; “know” is also echoed in “no,” suggesting that what Satan claims as knowledge is more truthfully the negation of knowledge, the negative space of hell that Satan embodies. Satan’s dismissal of Abdiel ultimately hinges not on empiricism but on solipsism, on the assumption that the angels are “self-begot” and “self-raised,” a characteristic example of Satan’s circular and circuitous logic that cannot be verified by evidence or reason.

The notion of experience as a teacher, articulated by Abdiel in Book V, is echoed by Adam in Book VIII: “But apt the mind or fancy is to rove/Unchecked and of her roving is no end/Till warned or by experience taught she learn/That not to know at large of things remote/From use, obscure and subtle, but to know/That which before us lies in daily life/Is the prime wisdom. What is more is fume/Or emptiness or fond impertinence/And renders us in things that most concern/Unpracticed, unprepared and still to seek” (8.187-197). Although Adam’s speech initially may seem anti-intellectual in its warning against unchecked curiosity, Adam in fact takes a principled position in favor of experiential learning. The condemnation of knowledge “remote/From use” does not necessarily represent resignation to the tedium of
practical chores; rather, the emphasis on the “practiced” knowledge of “use” might be understood as a version of what Arthur Applebee would call “knowledge-in-action” (*Curriculum*). Learning “not to know at large of things remote” means resisting the temptation of false knowledge—“fume or emptiness or fond impertinence”—and relying on a combination of empirical observation and reason to learn about the world.

Raphael’s explanation of angelic appetites in Book V provides a further excursus on Baconian empiricism. Joining Adam for a banquet in Eden, Raphael explains to a curious Adam that, yes, angels can eat earthly food:

> And food alike those pure  
> Intelligent substances require  
> As doth your rational, and both contain  
> Within them every lower faculty  
> Of sense whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,  
> Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,  
> And corporeal to incorporeal turn.  
> For know whatever was created needs  
> To be sustained and fed. Of elements  
> The grosser feeds the purer. (5.407-416).

The repetition of “taste/Tasting” may foreshadow Adam and Eve’s sin, but it also establishes the act of tasting as a synecdoche for all five senses previously mentioned. The input of the “lower faculty/Of sense” is concocted, digested and assimilated from corporeal matter to the “intelligent” substance of angels. Milton not only provides a wonderfully imaginative explanation of the angelic digestive system but also offers a metaphor for a Baconian process of acquiring knowledge. The intellectual spirit of angels, Raphael intimates, depends on the “food” of the senses as much as human rationality.

With language that parallels Raphael’s speech, Bacon advocates for a middle way between those who would accept unmediated sensory experience as pure knowledge and those who rely purely on abstraction:
Those who have treated of the sciences have been either empirics or dogmatical. The former like ants only heap up and use their store, the latter like spiders spin out their own webs. The bee, a mean between both, extracts matter from the flowers of the garden and the field, but works and fashions it by its own efforts. The true labor of philosophy resembles hers, for it neither relies entirely or principally on the powers of the mind, nor yet lays up in the memory the matter afforded by the experiments of natural history and mechanics in its raw state, but changes and works it in the understanding. We have good reason, therefore, to derive hope from a closer and purer alliance of these faculties (the experimental and rational) than has yet been attempted. (Novum Organum 76-77)

“Empiric” here does not correspond to the new empiricism of which Bacon would later be called a founder but instead describes an unreflective acceptance of the sensory world, in opposition to the “dogmatic” view derived from “pure” logic. (Bacon, notably, parted ways with the extreme version of empiricism that focused exclusively on raw data.) The metaphor of the bee, for Bacon, captures an “alliance” between the ant’s fixation on storing up sensory matter and the spider’s seeming ability to construct out of thin air. The bee “extracts matter from the flowers of the garden and the field” (observation) but then “works and fashions it by its own efforts” (cogitation or reflection) in order to yield “understanding.” This rational process of fashioning sensory knowledge is mirrored in Raphael’s description of “concocting, digesting, assimilating” the input of the senses. For Bacon, inquiry into truth “ascends continually and gradually” from “the sense and particulars” to “the most general axioms.” The formation of true knowledge comes, as in Paradise Lost, by degree.

In the early twentieth century, John Dewey presented a radical vision of education that in some ways recalls Milton’s and Bacon’s formulations of experience. Dewey pays homage to Bacon in Philosophy and Civilization and Reconstruction in Philosophy, in which he calls Bacon “the great forerunner of the spirit of modern life” (The Philosophy of John Dewey). In addition to citing the influence of Bacon, whose new empiricism contributed to Dewey’s views of experimentation and inductive reasoning, Dewey was apparently a reader of Milton. Lewis
Feuer’s archival study of Dewey’s library records at the University of Vermont shows that Dewey checked out an edition of Milton’s prose works (Feuer 419). And Jo Ann Boydston’s cataloguing of Dewey’s personal library indicates that Dewey owned the Temple Classics editions of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, as well as *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, with introduction by David Masson (Boydston 70).

In *How We Think*, Dewey’s discussion of experience is reminiscent of Milton’s and Bacon’s classification of the particular kind of sensory experience that profitably can be considered a source of learning:

> The term *experience* may thus be interpreted with reference either to the *empirical* or the *experimental* attitude of mind. Experience is not a rigid and closed thing; it is vital, and hence growing. When dominated by the past, by custom and routine, it is often opposed to the reasonable, the thoughtful. But experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite and tradition. Experience may assimilate all that the most exact and penetrating thought discovers. Indeed, the business of education might be thought of as the emancipation and enlargement of experience. (*How We Think* 201-202).

For Dewey, the broader and more useful definition of experience incorporates a layer of reflection. True experience, for Dewey, is internalized, seated in the body and the mind. By cultivating a process of reflection—and treating sense impressions as the starting point, not the ending point, of a thoughtful, reasonable inquiry—education “emancipates” and “enlarges” experience from the tyranny of unquestioning allegiance to sense, appetite and tradition. The defining feature of experience, for Dewey, is that it is subject to change, growth and re-vision. The antithesis of learning is stasis, exemplified in Milton’s Satan, whose mind, which is also the landscape of hell, is essentially impervious to experience.
Milton’s Experimental Hermeneutics

According to Dayton Haskin, seventeenth-century readers sometimes described their encounters with the Bible in language that implies an aesthetic experience: “Readers were accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a source not only of knowledge but of experience. For many people, reading the Word seems to have been like going to the theatre, witnessing a spectacle, or hearing a lecture” (Haskin 15). The words “experience” and “experiment” were, in Milton’s time, virtually interchangeable, and the knowledge derived from reading the Bible was sometimes called “experimental” (Edwards 21). Haskin notes that the phrases “experimental religion” and “experimental divinity” came into popular usage before the term “experimental science”: “People used the word ‘experimental’ to characterize their sincerity and intensity of their devotion. They spoke of the emotional impact of the ‘experimental’ knowledge they got from the Bible and opposed this to a knowledge (sometimes called ‘historical’ knowledge) derived from ‘mere testimony or conjecture’” (15-16). For example, in a sermon preached in 1623, John Preston urged Bible readers to listen for a divine voice addressing them directly: “Those that heare the voyce of the Sonne of God, have experimentall knowledge, the other is but speculative...Have ye experimentall knowledge...are your hearts opened at the hearing of the word?” (quoted in Haskin 16).

In 1649, Francis Roberts, in a guide to reading scripture, described an “experimental” reading of the Bible as one that is personalized, spatialized, and embodied: “The gracious person understands the Scriptures, experimentally, feelingly, as a Traveller knows remote countries in which he hath been” (quoted in Haskin 16). Roberts likens experimental reading to a traveller’s physical and emotional journey.

Extending Haskin’s argument, Karen Edwards suggests that Milton’s “experimental”
reading of the Bible “is parallel to and cognizant of the scientifically experimental rendering of
the natural world evident in the style of Browne, Boyle and other new philosophers” (47). To
Edwards’s acknowledgement of Browne and Boyle, one might add Bacon, who articulates the
importance of interpreting “the book of nature” in a wholly experimental way: “We must entreat
men again and again to discard, or at least set apart for a while, these volatile and preposterous
philosophies, which have preferred theses to hypotheses, led experience captive, and triumphed
over the works of God; and to approach with humility and veneration to unroll the volume of
Creation, to linger and meditate therein, and with minds washed clean from opinions to study it
in purity and integrity” (quoted in Matthews 66). Bacon’s preference for provisional conclusions
(hypotheses over theses), deep and meditative study, and unfettered “experience” all coincide
with an experimental and experiential approach to reading text and world.

Edwards goes on to suggest that Adam and Eve’s interpretive activities within Paradise
Lost embody seventeenth-century “experimental reading”:

Traditional exhortations to read the book of the world mean by read something akin to
‘repeat the lessons learned by rote.’ The new experimental reading, which Milton makes
central to Adam and Eve’s lives in paradise, demands a creative and ongoing engagement
with the text. Thus Raphael does not interpret the minims’ script for Adam and Eve; they
must interpret it for themselves—and continue to review and perhaps revise their
interpretation. Construing meaning is a labor that is coterminous with life. (Edwards 69)

In the terms of the twentieth-century reading theorist Louise Rosenblatt, “experimental” reading
stands in contrast to efferent reading—the pulling out of facts or lessons that could be acquired
outside the context of a textual experience—and instead corresponds to an aesthetic engagement
with a text. Adam and Eve’s experience of reading the world—a world that is, in a sense,
composed of biblical text—becomes a model for reading the Bible and for reading Milton’s
Paradise Lost.
The prophecy of human history that the angel Michael presents Adam at the conclusion of *Paradise Lost* brings to the forefront hermeneutic questions that are present throughout the poem. Michael characterizes as wolves the clergymen who lead their unsuspecting followers to manipulative misreadings of the Bible: “Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves/Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav’n/To their own vile advantages shall turn/Of lucre and ambition and the truth/With only superstitions and traditions taint/Left only in those written records pure/Though not but by the Spirit understood” (12.508-514). Much as Satan compels Eve to accept his false knowledge in place of the truth, the “grievous wolves” intervene in an experienced understanding of the Bible, available only through “those written records pure.” *Paradise Lost* seems to position itself as a conduit to a purer experience of God’s word, which the clergy may mediate problematically. Michael distinguishes the false laws of the clergy from “what the Spirit within/Shall on the heart engrave,” and Milton’s poem might be thought of as an experimental reading—an inscription on the heart—that is internalized psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

Citing Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, Edwards suggests Milton believed in a personal and rigorous biblical hermeneutics: “Speaking of our individual responsibility to work out the meaning of God’s Word for ourselves, Milton declares in *De Doctrina Christiana*: ‘God offers all his rewards not to those who are thoughtless and credulous, but to those who labor constantly and tirelessly after truth’” (quoted in Edwards 39). Eve’s credulous acceptance of Satanic false knowledge provides a counterpoint to the experimental reading that *Paradise Lost* teaches and demands.

Thomas Festa argues that Milton’s reading practices, represented in his annotations of Euripides, may provide insight into Milton’s vision of education (23). Milton’s margin notes
frequently begin with *puto ego* ("I think" or "I consider")—first person interjections that distinguish his voice from other commentators and the text itself. The biography by Milton’s nephew, Edward Phillips, implies that Milton used his annotated texts when he tutored students in his home: “Phillips depicts a pedagogical environment in which students, seated together in Milton’s home, take turns reading from his annotated books, sharing their translations aloud, and participating in a conversation with and about the text that involves Milton’s written memoranda and, certainly, his oral instruction” (Festa 26). Festa suggests that Milton’s annotations, which include translations, corrections and commentary, do not constitute authoritative pronouncements but rather serve as records of a personal transaction with the texts and as contributions to an ongoing conversation: “By scripting their own transmuting exchanges with and within books, readers participate in an ongoing textual conversation. Milton presents an excellent example of...that educational metamorphosis, provisionally repairing the ruins of our imperfect and fallen knowledge” (Festa 44). The ruins of fallen knowledge are repaired through intellectual labor, and to the extent that Milton’s marginalia can be imagined as a pedagogical space—part of a conversations with his pupils—Festa proposes that the annotations do not impart fixed knowledge but instead model an intellectual process:

Milton’s marginalia offer exemplary intellectual positions and thus demonstrate the processes at work in reflecting on a text. Placing readers of his volumes at one remove from the text itself, Milton’s comments and corrections attune readers to a debate about the text in order to prompt imitation. If the annotations reconfigure the margin of the book as a pedagogical space, they do so by defamiliarizing the intuitive recognition of meaning and thus making explicit the intellectual processes involved in the act of interpretation. In this way, Milton’s marginalia provided a model for what he calls a “well continu’d and judicious conversation among pure authors.” (Festa 28)

Unlike Milton’s angels, who can access knowledge intuitively, humans typically rely on discursive reasoning—moving from empirical observations to inferences—the intellectual labor
that Milton models in his marginalia. While Milton’s comments and corrections may place his students at “remove” from the text itself, such annotations ultimately serve not to evade the text but rather to facilitate a deeper engagement with it. Unlike Satan’s false interpretation that displaces Eve’s experience, Milton’s readings illustrate the process—and not merely the product—of intellectual activity. Thus, Milton’s reading of Euripides (and his teaching of Euripides through his annotations) might be called experiential or, in Haskin’s terms, experimental.

Sheridan Blau uses the false knowledge of *Paradise Lost* as a metaphor for literary knowledge that has not been attained experientially:

Indeed, one of the reasons that a borrowed interpretation often deserves to be classified with what Milton calls “false” knowledge (*Paradise Lost*, XI, 412-14) is that it becomes an obstruction to learning in the sense that it is what a student holds onto and insists on dogmatically and uncritically as constituting knowledge (even against contradictory evidence), precisely because it was borrowed and therefore not arrived at experientially through a process of evidentiary reasoning. That is, insofar as the borrowed knowledge takes the place of what might have been accrued for the student through his own intellectual work and experience of a text, the recitational knowledge itself often becomes what the student takes to be a source of intellectual power and efficacy and thereby becomes a possession that the student (or, unfortunately, sometimes the teacher) must protect in order to preserve his own power and efficacy. (*Literature Workshop* 198)

The way Milton means for his reader to navigate the book of nature, the Bible, and *Paradise Lost* itself would seem to be starkly opposed to the fraudulent interpretive practice that Blau laments, in which the seduction of instantaneous power prevails over a reader’s own “intellectual work and experience.” And Blau’s Miltonic paradigm of arriving at knowledge “experientially through a process of evidentiary reasoning” is distinctly Baconian.

The history of literature education is the story of a fallen world. Since the emergence of English literature as a discipline in secondary schools and colleges in the mid-1800s, the authority of teacher and textbook frequently have acted as substitutes for a reader’s worked-
through interpretation of a text. Before gaining acceptance as an academic subject, literature
thrived in the college “extracurriculum,” but literary experience has had a sometimes tenuous
relationship with the literature curriculum (Applebee, *Tradition* 12). The classroom and the
lecture hall have been parodies of real discursive spaces, and the “readings” typically produced
in student papers and exams have been parodies of real literary knowledge. Beginning in the
1930s, the New Critics, including Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and the Dewey-
influenced Louise Rosenblatt launched influential and parallel attempts to recuperate the role of
real experience in the teaching and learning of literature (Rejan, “Reconciling”). More recent
efforts to revitalize literature instruction, even those that challenge some of Rosenblatt’s or the
much-ridiculed New Critics’ theoretical underpinnings, inevitably bear some debt to the New
Critics’ and Rosenblatt’s revolutionary ambitions. (I return to the discussion of Rosenblatt and
the New Critics in chapter four.)

Rosenblatt’s name remains largely unknown in English and literature departments,
though Wayne Booth sought to remediate her reputation as an important literary theorist in his
introduction to the 1995 reissuing of *Literature as Exploration*. The fact that a recent article in
*PMLA* which cites Rosenblatt’s distinction between *efferent* and *aesthetic* reading repeatedly
misnames her as “Louise Richardson” may be emblematic of her continuing neglect in English
departments (Steiner). Anne Gere’s 2019 MLA Presidential address, however, sets the record
straight in spotlighting Rosenblatt’s contributions to the field. In particular, Gere turns to
Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading and writing as a means of bridging the gap between
literature and composition studies. Rosenblatt’s Deweyan conceptualization of the transaction—
which Gere defines as “an unfractured process that incorporates the knower, the knowing, and
the known”—applies to both the reading and writing of texts.
A return to Rosenblatt’s underappreciated work provides a useful way forward for the teaching of language and literature, but some of the most formidable guides in how to read and how to teach literature may come from literature itself. The concern with how readers might achieve an experienced understanding of literature actually might be traced back as far as seventeenth-century experimentalist hermeneutics, perhaps most prominently exemplified in Milton’s Baconian and proto-Deweyan account of interpretation and knowledge in *Paradise Lost*. With the allure of Satanic borrowed knowledge ever-present in the classroom, students and teachers of literature in the twenty-first century continue to face a Baconian and Miltonic problem—how to bring real experiences and experiments to the center of the interpretive project. As we re-visit the ever-vexing challenge of creating pedagogical spaces hospitable to authentic literary experience, *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s masterwork about education, interpretation, and the creation of knowledge, can provide a useful opening frame.
In the wake of the Common Core State Standards, which emphasize the reading of non-fiction as essential to college and career readiness, many secondary school teachers have been inclined or obliged to replace some of the literature previously taught with what the Common Core calls “informational texts.” In debating the merits of these curriculum changes, some teachers have defended the study of the classics as a vital contribution to an education in Western and U.S. culture. Others have argued that the traditional literature curriculum represents sexist, racist and Eurocentric views, and some administrators have taken the position that literary study is essentially pointless for the vast majority of students who will not become English majors and may not even attend college.

These twenty-first-century debates animate tensions, questions and assumptions that have been present in various forms throughout the roughly 150 year history of literature as a subject in U.S. secondary schools. In this chapter, I will review and discuss some of this history, with the goal of supporting more informed conversations about the role literature might play in grades 6-12 curricula today and in the future. In particular, I will show how issues of authority—the authority wielded by the teacher as well as the authority attributed to reader, author and text—
have undergirded (or perhaps undermined) literature education since the late 1800s. And I will argue that questions of pedagogical and textual authority, largely absent from recent discussions about implementing the Common Core, must be foregrounded in attempts to revitalize and reform the teaching of literature.

Pedagogical Authority and the Authorization of Literature as an Academic Subject

Before 1860, the study of English in most colleges consisted of rhetoric, oratory, and philology. Influenced by classics instruction, the teaching of English emphasized rote memorization and “Gradgrindian recitations” (Graff, Professing 33). Although literature was not part of required college coursework (and no elective courses were available), it flourished in the “extracurriculum” (Applebee, Tradition and Reform 12). Harvard library records from the mid-1800s suggest that students read widely in classic and contemporary literature, and college literary societies were also popular. Teachers who have undergraduate or graduate degrees in literature may be appalled by the notion that, as recently as 150 years ago, literature was excluded from the college curriculum. But restricting literature to the “extracurriculum,” I would suggest, is not entirely insensible and might actually be seen as a way of protecting literature from the authoritarian pedagogical traditions that were incompatible with literature’s educative potential.

Prior to the mid-to-late 1800s, the secondary school English curriculum typically included instruction in reading, grammar, rhetoric and oratory, but little or no literature (Applebee, Tradition and Reform 11). Horace Mann was representative in promoting literacy drills as a means of inculcating a polite and morally sound disposition in pupils (Myers 49). This concept of literacy would also shape the early teaching of literature, first in the form of literary
excerpts presented in the service of grammatical or rhetorical instruction, and later as a separate subject. Thomas Shaw’s *Outlines of English Literature* (1848), which gained popularity in the 1850s and 60s, was the first literature textbook used in many U.S. secondary schools. But what was called “literature” would be more accurately described as literary history; classes that used Shaw’s book tended to emphasize authorial biographies and often did not include the actual reading of literary texts. Sometimes with the aid of corporal punishment, teachers instructed and questioned students on biographical facts about major authors and on the titles, subjects and publication history of the author’s works. Secondary school instruction in literature, like the pedagogical traditions of rhetoric, oratory and grammar that preceded it, was initially justified largely on the grounds of its “disciplinary value” (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 38).

“Discipline” here refers not, as in contemporary usage, to an academic subject or area of study but rather to order, obedience, and mental submission to difficult tasks of memorization.

Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1867) provided a different justification for the teaching of literature, conceiving of literary study as a vehicle for the transmission of culture (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform*). For Arnold, literature was the secular scripture of civilization (Scholes, *Rise and Fall* 77). Billy Phelps, Yale professor and sometime Baptist preacher, was perhaps the pinnacle of the Arnoldian paradigm. One of the first literature courses (and the first elective offering) at Yale was taught by Phelps in the 1892-1893 academic year (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 30). Phelps’s impassioned lectures presented literature as a “conversion experience” that could endow the student-reader with “transcendental virtues” (Scholes, *Rise and Fall* 21). Phelps’s teaching, in Robert Scholes’s words, reflected a belief that “literature offered quasi-sacred texts that could be expounded by a licensed teacher/preacher to reveal the entrance to the kingdom of light” (*Rise and Fall* 15). While Phelps might seem the opposite of the
Dickensian schoolmasters who demanded that students recite trivia from a textbook, his vision of teaching represented a different version of—more than a departure from—authoritarian pedagogy. In Phelps’s model, brutal discipline was not the teacher’s claim to power; rather, the sacred authority of the text was embodied in the interpretive authority of the teacher. Students would leave class in a worshipful relationship to literature and to the teacher who enabled them to access it.

While some have questioned the Common Core’s implicit claim that marginalizing literature (and emphasizing complex informational texts) will promote college readiness, participants in this debate rarely have acknowledged that the widespread inclusion of literature in the high school curriculum was also the result of standardized expectations for college preparation. Since 1873, literature had been included as a subject for composition in the entrance examinations that determined college admissions. The Harvard catalog for 1873-74, imitated by other colleges, stipulated that “each candidate will be required to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar and expression, the subject to be taken from such works of standard authors as shall be announced from time to time” (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 30). In 1894, the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements formed a common list of required literary readings to prepare for the entrance examinations, which in turn influenced high school syllabi (Myers 83). In the same year, the separate reading list for the Yale entrance examination explained that texts were selected “as well for their probable attractiveness to the preparatory student as well as for their intrinsic importance” (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 32), a justification that differed considerably from the stated purpose of the earlier Harvard exam, to use literature as the subject for a composition that would be assessed on its grammatical correctness.
The idea of the “intrinsic importance” of literature, soon incorporated into the Uniform Entrance Requirements, paralleled the recommendations of the Conference on English convened at Vassar College in 1892, which identified the objectives of the teaching of English as two-fold: first, to further students’ communication skills, and, second “to cultivate a taste for reading, to give the pupil some acquaintance with good literature, and to furnish him with the means of extending that acquaintance” (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 33). The desire for high schools and colleges to acquaint students with “good literature” suggests the increasing influence of the Arnoldian point-of-view. But at least in secondary schools, the interpretive authority of the literature teacher, conveying the authority of the text, was mostly overshadowed by the authority of disciplinary pedagogy.

A major challenge to both forms of authority arrived in the early 1900s, with the educational and aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey. In *How We Think* (1910), Dewey presented a vision of education as a form of inquiry—an extension of both the scientific method and the child’s innate capacity for wonder. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey suggested that experiencing a work of art or literature is a creative act, dependent on the past experiences and perspective of the perceiver. He writes, “A new poem is created by everyone who reads poetically…every individual brings with him, when he exercises his individuality, a way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old material creates something new, something previously not existing in experience” (113). Implicit in Dewey’s theories was the view that authoritarian teaching practices, as well as the expectation that students internalize a teacher’s authoritative interpretation, diminished the meaningfulness of an aesthetic experience.

Across the Atlantic, I.A. Richards published *Practical Criticism* (1929), a pioneering work of literary theory that also might be called the first major “teacher research” study in
English education. Interested in the activity of the reader, Richards gave his Cambridge undergraduates sets of poems—removing the titles, authors, publication dates, and other contextual information—and directed them to respond in writing. He used the students’ responses (or “protocols”) as the basis for his lectures. Richards lamented the students’ tendency to provide formulaic “stock responses” to the poems rather than completing multiple close readings of the text. Like Dewey, Richards acknowledged that any reader’s interpretation would be influenced by personal experience: “The personal situation of the reader inevitably (and within limits rightly) affects his reading” (*Practical Criticism* 227). But Richards also cautioned against “mnemonic irrelevances,” personal associations that could lead to misreading. His lectures were essentially designed to correct errors in the students’ initial readings and to model a more attentive engagement with poetry.

Influenced by Dewey and Richards, Louise Rosenblatt further examined the significance of the reader’s response and the role of the reader in the teaching and learning of literature. The “poem,” for Rosenblatt, was produced through the unique “transaction” of reader and text. (While the term “transaction,” borrowed from Dewey, appeared in Rosenblatt’s later writings, the concept was implicit in her early work.) Whereas Richards imagined “an ideally susceptible reader” (*Practical Criticism* 195), Rosenblatt avoided the implication that readers should strive for a single ideal or normative reading. Nonetheless, Rosenblatt conceded that the initial responses of the reader were not always relevant and that some personal associations would be set aside through a careful process of re-reading.

In *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Rosenblatt offered a powerful refutation of conventional pedagogy: “No one, however, can read a poem for us. If there is indeed to be a poem and not simply a literal statement, the reader must have an ‘experience,’ must ‘live
through’ what is being created during the reading” (33). Rosenblatt warned that the adult perspective and the “accepted critical attitudes” represented by the teacher could act as a “screen” that impeded students from engaging with a literary text (59). And Rosenblatt explicitly challenged methods that reinforced the teacher’s authority but denied students the freedom and responsibility to make meaning of their reading. Of every assignment and assessment in a literature class, Rosenblatt advised, a teacher must ask, “Does it get in the way of the live sense of literature? Does it make literature something to be regurgitated, analyzed, categorized, or is it a means toward making literature a more personally meaningful and self-disciplined activity?” (273). The idea of reading literature as a “self-disciplined activity,” cultivated through participation in a class, presented a decisive challenge to literature education’s disciplinary roots.

In the 1930s, at roughly the same time Rosenblatt was writing Literature as Exploration, the National Council of Teachers of English (formed in 1911) launched a curriculum commission to develop an “experience curriculum” inspired by Deweyan ideals. But the curriculum lacked nuance and was widely criticized for a lack of rigor (Applebee, Tradition and Reform). Meanwhile, models for literacy education based on industrial efficiency—seemingly the antithesis of the experience curriculum—gained a foothold in public schools (Myers 85). Rosenblatt’s work did not immediately have a transformative impact on teacher practice.

In the same year that Rosenblatt published Literature as Exploration, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren released Understanding Poetry (1938), a literature textbook that was widely adopted in colleges and that would eventually exert a strong influence on high school pedagogy as well. Like Louise Rosenblatt, Brooks and Warren were influenced by the work of I.A. Richards, and like Rosenblatt they were critical of educational practices that separated students from the actual “experience” of literature (Rejan, “Reconciling”). In fact, the preface to
Understanding Poetry notes that the textbook was almost titled Experiencing Poetry. Brooks and Warren were dissatisfied with the way literature students were trained to rely on superficial history and biography instead of investigating the complex relationship between form and content (Rejan, “Reconciling”). Their antidote was a method of close reading that returned students to the text. Along with John Crowe Ransom, their teacher, and William K. Wimsatt, who would later become their colleague at Yale, Brooks and Warren were known as the “New Critics.” Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “Affective Fallacy” (1946) extended Richards’s concerns with mnemonic irrelevances and limited the reader’s latitude in incorporating personal response into an interpretation of the text. But other writings by the New Critics acknowledged the importance of the reader’s role, though they elevated the text—rather than the author or reader—as the primary site of study (Rejan, “Reconciling”). I will discuss the relationship between Rosenblatt and the New Critics in greater depth in the next chapter.

For a summer institute in textual explication at Kenyon College, Ransom recruited graduate students and junior faculty who were “not content with the recital of facts which are important but largely subliterary, and which are not consistently being employed with intelligent purpose” (quoted in Graff, Professing 158). Ransom sought to demonstrate that “critics have a deeper and more enlightened interest in the creative process as human adventure” (quoted in Graff, Professing 158). Thus, in many ways, New Critics advocated for moving away from what Rosenblatt later termed efferent reading and toward what she called aesthetic reading (Reader). That is, Rosenblatt and the New Critics both aimed to move students away from drawing out the informational content of a poem and toward taking part in a richer experience.

John Guillory argues that the New Critics essentially represented a new version of Arnold’s attempt to replace religious dogma with literary dogma. The New Critics, Guillory
contends, replaced dogma (*doxa*) with paradox. Rather than extracting truth from canonical texts, they instead demonstrated that great literature could not be distilled into *doxa* (quoted in Graff, *Professing* 158). Reducing the complexity of a poem to a simple summary or message was, for Brooks, “the heresy of paraphrase” (*Well-Wrought*). In Guillory’s view, however, the New Critical teacher retained a position of authority comparable to Billy Phelps: the teacher became the master exegete who illuminated the path to paradox rather than *doxa*, a path students wouldn’t likely uncover on their own.

At the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, educators debated the relative merits of a skills-based or functional model of literacy, the cultural heritage (Arnoldian) model, and a personal growth model (using expressive language to explore and discover). Although the personal growth model was largely embraced by the British delegates at the conference, the model was not widely integrated into U.S. classroom practice. Insofar as the personal growth model eventually became influential, its rise was due more to the work of James Moffett and, later, the National Writing Project, than the Dartmouth conference itself (Blau, “Theory for Practice”). In the late 1960s, however, in the backdrop of the Vietnam protest movement, some teachers gradually migrated away from a discipline-driven and knowledge-oriented approach in favor of greater concern for the dignity of the individual and the processes of making meaning (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 236). This shift coincided with the rise of critical theory in colleges and universities and the continuing presence of a severely debased form of New Criticism in secondary schools.

Also in the late 1960s, the literary theorists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault penned their treatises challenging the hegemony of the author in the study of literature.6 While the New

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6 The novelist Zadie Smith juxtaposes the theories of Barthes, who famously declared the “death of the author” with the views of Vladimir Nabokov, who sought to protect the primacy of the author’s power. If Barthes champions the
Critics’ intentional fallacy minimized the importance of an author’s intention, Barthes and Foucault went further in destabilizing the authority of the text. The notion that a work of literature represents an indeterminate field of “discursivity” directly defied the assumptions of the conservative E.D. Hirsch, whose *Validity and Interpretation* (1967) claimed that authorial intention is the most reliable source of authority. But for many teachers and authors, in the context of the Vietnam War, the questioning of authority and authors became a political imperative.

Amidst this suspicion of authority, a progressive pendulum swing led some teachers to rediscover the ideals of Dewey and Rosenblatt. More than traditional literature pedagogy, Rosenblatt’s vision of the transaction between reader and text, which she elaborated on in her publications of the 1970s (including *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*), was more compatible with the forward-thinking approaches to the teaching of writing represented in the work of James Moffett, Janet Emig, James Britton and Peter Elbow. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, the reader-centered theories of Wolfgang Iser gained a prominence in academia that Rosenblatt’s work never received. Drawing upon Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, Iser proposed that the text leaves gaps that are filled in through the work of the reader. While English teachers in the 1970s, 80s and 90s were increasingly likely to invite their students to inhabit the “gaps” in literature—

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Hirsch diverges from both Rosenblatt and the New Critics by separating the “experience” of a text from its “meaning.” He writes, “The psychologistic identification of textual meaning with meaning experience is inadmissible. Meaning experiences are private, but they are not meaning” (16). Although readers’ personal relationships to the meaning of a text may be widely divergent, Hirsch will not allow that all readers may have their own meanings for a given text: “It is true that the significance of a text for one person is not altogether the same as for another, because the men themselves and therefore their personal relationships to a particular verbal meaning are different. But this undoubted fact cannot be legitimately extended to verbal meaning as well as personal significance” (39).
allowing space for student expression—students and teachers continued to be constrained by an authoritarian pedagogy based on a corrupted version of New Criticism.

In the late twentieth century, Scholes presented one of the most forceful proposals for shifting the balance of power in the teaching of literature. Scholes calls for returning to the nineteenth-century roots of English as an academic subject and reviving rhetoric (rather than literature) as the center of the discipline (Rise and Fall 120). This new/old “discipline of textuality” would subvert the authority of the teacher and the authority of the text by teaching students “textual power,” which includes “the ability to talk back, to write back, to analyze, extend, to take one’s own textual position in relation to…any kind of text” (Rise and Fall 131). For Scholes, literature is not so important as literariness, which can be found in bumper stickers, jokes, films, dreams and conversations. Scholes’s notion of textual power represents one version of what Myers describes as “critical/translation literacy,” which includes the ability to translate words into a variety of media and the ability to translate words into action.

What Questions Can a Literature Teacher Ask?

Informational questions of the type that appeared in Shaw’s 1848 literature textbook continue to be a staple of some English classes. But for the past century, innovators in literature education have proposed alternative forms of questioning that reposition the authority of the teacher, reader and text. While the New Critics are sometimes caricatured as narrow-minded purveyors of multiple-choice questions about literary elements, Brooks and Warren actively rebelled against the tradition of textbooks that presented literature as informational content. Asking questions about the meaning of a literary text, they wanted to encourage the reader’s

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8 See also Scholes’s Textual Power (1985).
active engagement with the words on the page. Despite Brooks’s and Warren’s democratic aspirations, the College Board’s AP English Literature Exam delivered New Criticism to secondary schools in a highly diminished form, adapting in a multiple choice format the narrowest types of questions in *Understanding Poetry* (Rejan, “Reconciling”). Such questions, which often focused on literary devices and had a correct answer that could be furnished in a teacher’s key, were further debased by literature textbooks and workbooks marketed for secondary schools.

Robert Probst, whose books helped popularize Rosenblatt-inspired literature pedagogy, avoids questions that imply a text has a singular meaning. Instead, he recommends that teachers ask, “What does the poem make you feel?...Does it remind you of anyone you know, anyone you have ever seen, any experience you have had? Does it call to mind thoughts, ideas or attitudes, even if they seem tangential” (*Response and Analysis* 45).

Peter Rabinowitz and Michael Smith argue that the New Critical question “What does this mean?” and the reader response question “What does this mean to me?” are both inadequate. Instead, they propose asking “What would this mean for the audience the author was writing for, and how do I feel about that?” (*Authorizing* 38). The Rabinowitz-Smith approach is based on narrative theory, particularly on the formulations of Wayne Booth, who describes the act of reading fiction as building a relationship with an *implied author* (*Company*). The implied author refers to the understanding of the author that the reader can infer or construct based on the text. In theory, Rabinowitz-Smith “authorial reading” positions the reader to *resist* the text (and the author’s underlying assumptions) rather than uncritically searching for “the meaning” of the text or formulating, as in Probst’s questioning style, a response so personal and subjective that it may not interrogate the text at all. Rabinowitz and Smith explain, “Authorial reading, then, confounds
hierarchies that have long existed in classrooms. Authorial reading challenges the privileged position of teachers both by promoting political discussions in which the unequal distribution of literary knowledge in the classroom has little impact and by allowing (but not forcing) students to use the authority of the author to resist the authority of the teacher” (38). In practice, though, the authorial questions may be unwieldy, and students may end up relying on the teacher to form the conditions for understanding “what this means for the audience the author was writing for.”

Smith’s emphasis on teaching “interpretive strategies” (e.g., discerning unreliable narrators) reflects an attempt to empower students as authorial readers. But such instruction can become teacher-centered, since interpretive strategies are more authentically acquired through the practice of reading, in tandem with metacognitive processes, rather than teacher-led lessons.

Rabinowitz and Bancroft offer another version of authorial reading with the question “What experiences did Shakespeare intend us to have as we watch Macbeth?” (14). Despite its emphasis on the experiential dimension of reading, this question, if not carefully assimilated into a thoughtful classroom culture, may alienate students from articulating their own experienced understanding of the text.

As another alternative for the question “What does this sentence mean?” Stanley Fish asks, “What does this sentence do?” (Is There a Text 25). In a linguistic-influenced approach, Fish describes the omnipresent “illocutionary forces” that operate as a “rhetoric of social conventions and intentions” (Is There a Text 89). Fish further explains, “A sentence is never not in context…a set of interpretive assumptions is always in force” (Is There a Text 284). What a sentence does to a particular reader in a particular context depends on the assumptions of the interpretive community in which that reader participates. But minimizing the authority of the text
does not in this case translate directly into reducing the authority of the teacher since the teacher is often the one who controls the interpretive assumptions that apply to a particular class.

In an approach increasingly popular among progressive teachers, Deborah Appleman advocates for the use of multiple “critical lenses,” based on different schools of literary theory (e.g., feminism, Marxism, New Historicism) to interrogate texts. Rather than asking about the meaning of a text, Appleman would ask, “What does this text mean when viewed with this particular lens?” Or she would pose a series of questions representative of a particular theoretical orientation in order to stimulate the students’ thinking. Appleman views theory as subversive—an intellectual apparatus that fosters a critical engagement with the world. She writes, “Literary theory can help secondary literature classrooms become sites of constructive and transactive activity, where students approach texts with curiosity, authority, and initiative” (Critical Encounters 8). Yet the particular activities and classroom procedures Appleman presents (e.g., “theory cards,” “theory relays,” and theory worksheets) often exist in the context of a task-oriented classroom that features frequent directions from the teacher, and these exercises may not in themselves create the conditions for students to assume more intellectual autonomy. Moreover, a reliance on basic summaries of complex theories may make students the mouthpieces of theories in which they lack an authentic intellectual investment.

Taking a different route than Appleman (but pursuing a similar ideal of a constructive, transactional, inquiry-driven class), Sheridan Blau uses the question “What do you make of the poem and what problems does it present for you?” (Literature Workshop 12). Citing Dewey’s observation that confusion often serves as the impetus for meaningful intellectual work, Blau explains, “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” (22).
An “authentic” question, then, is not one posed by the teacher that the student answers mainly to attain the teacher’s approval. Susan Hynds comments on the fundamental difference between a class that focuses on “puzzles to solve,” where the teacher holds the answer key, and a class based on “problems to grapple with,” where the teacher engages students (and students engage each other) in a community of inquiry (124). In practice, though, some students may struggle to grasp what constitutes an interpretive “problem,” or may present questions that simulate the artificial questions of a teacher, or may lack the confidence to acknowledge uncertainty. As in the other examples, the question itself may be insufficient to displace the teacher’s authority.

No matter how thoughtfully constructed and progressive in its intent, any teacher-instigated question in the literature class can have the effect of bolstering the teacher’s authority. Martin Nystrand’s research into classroom discourse showed that class discussion occupied less than 50 seconds per class in eighth grade and less than 15 seconds in ninth grade (Nystrand and Gamoran 42). Classes were dominated by question-and-answer recitation, lecture, and seatwork. James Marshall observed that, in typical classroom discourse, teacher “turns” lasted 2–5 times longer than students: students typically answered the teacher’s questions in just a few words (sometimes just one word), and the teacher took responsibility for weaving these answers into a coherent “text,” often leading to a predetermined interpretation (Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith 53). This behavior contrasts starkly with the discourse of adult book clubs, where speaker “turns” are roughly evenly shared and participants frequently interrupt one another (Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith). Smith concludes, “Ceding some authority to the students…is essential if the kind of discourse that characterizes the book-club discussions is to occur in the classroom” (Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith 118).
In more dynamic classrooms, Nystrand found, teachers were more likely to ask “authentic questions” (questions without predetermined answers) and were more likely to demonstrate “uptake,” meaning they asked questions that acknowledged the content of students’ previous responses (Nystrand and Gamoran). But Robert Kachur and Catherine Prendergast’s telling comparison of two teachers, Ms. Jansen and Mr. Kramer, highlights the fact that the types of questions used by a teacher, taken out of context, do little to reveal how the teacher positions his or her authority. Ms. Jansen began class with what appeared to be “authentic,” open-ended questions, but she showed limited intellectual curiosity in the material or the students’ responses, and she made clear that the purpose of the class was to prepare students for a test. In contrast, Mr. Kramer began class with what appeared to be a series of narrow, text-based, “inauthentic” questions, but he used these questions to set up a dialogue that showed his genuine interest in the students’ interpretations. Kachur and Prendergast explain, “In contrast to Mr. Kramer, who assumed the role of the text, Ms. Jansen assumed the role of a test, asking the kinds of questions a test would ask” (82). By frequently injecting the text into his questions and comments, Mr. Kramer invited students to have an aesthetic experience with the text rather than a question-and-answer recitation with an authoritative teacher.

Arguments for the Educational Value of Literature

Different questions and approaches to questioning reflect different assumptions about the value of literature education. Probst’s emphasis on the reader’s feelings, associations and personal responses highlights the potential for literature to provide a source of self-knowledge. Probst writes, “[Students] will read because they are interested in themselves, and because in reading they may themselves become the focus of attention” (Response and Analysis 30). The
well-intentioned aim to put the student-reader in the spotlight, however, risks a solipsistic stance toward literature. Rosenblatt makes clear that literature provides a forum for learning about the other as well as oneself: “The ability to understand and sympathize with others reflects the multiple nature of the human being, his potentialities for many more selves and kinds of experience than any one being could express. This may be one of the things that enables us to seek through literature an enlargement of our experience” (*Literature as Exploration* 40). In order for literature to enlarge experience, readers need to do more than use literary study as an occasion to make connections or as a mirror in which they can see only themselves reflected.

Rosenblatt’s argument for the value of literature has a strong ethical dimension, with the implication that literary experience (which must be distinguished from school activities that make use of literature) illuminates multiple perspectives and fosters empathy. In *The Company We Keep*, a work of “ethical criticism,” Wayne Booth compares a reader’s relationship to a text to a relationship with a human being. Rather than looking to a particular character as a moral model, Booth regards the implied author of a text as a “friend” who introduces the reader to conflicting values and complex choices: “But our best narrative friends introduce us to the practice of subtle, sensitive moral inference, the kind that most moral choices in daily life require of us. The reader—at least this reader—comes away from reading Henry James, or Jane Austen, or Shakespeare, emulating *that kind of* moral sensitivity” (*Company* 287). Literature, for Booth, can heighten the reader’s sensitivity to how human beings interact.

Lisa Zunshine has turned to the vocabulary of cognitive science to describe the empathy-building capacity of literature. More than informational texts, Zunshine argues, fiction provides practice in “mind reading.” Literature that includes many layers of “nested” perspectives stretches the reader’s “theory of mind” and exhibits a high level of “sociocognitive complexity”
The ability to manage “sociocognitive complexity” (in texts and in the world) is one form of the broader mind-expanding power that Judith Langer attributes to literature. Whereas the reader of an informational text typically makes sense of the text with a purpose or focus defined early in the reading, readers of a literary text are often compelled to shift their vantage point, moving from one “envisionment” to another. Literature, Langer writes, “opens possibilities for meaning, leaving room for alternative interpretations and changing points of view” (815).

Blau suggests that literary study is uniquely beneficial in building tolerance for ambiguity, complexity and difficulty. Literary reading, Blau writes, teaches students an “intellectual discipline that defines critical thinking in every field and fosters academic success in every subject of study” (Literature Workshop 57). Blau argues that the skill of reading difficult literature not only prepares students to engage in rigorous thinking across the disciplines but also to engage sensitively and critically with the texts, people, experiences and perspectives that shape their lives outside of the classroom. The world, he postulates, is itself a “difficult text” (Literature Workshop 205).

While teachers have sometimes abused literature by questioning and testing students on it as if it were a body of information, Nystrand observes that literature is ideal for stimulating dialogue: “The nature of literature makes it particularly suitable for dialogic instruction. A literary text is fundamentally different from a news report, involving more than information of the sort that is covered adequately through recitation and short answer questions” (105). Literary reading provokes and stimulates dialogue—including genuine questions, wonderings and responses from students—more readily than texts whose content is treated as informational.

We might pause over the fact that many of the thoughtful and persuasive rationales for teaching literature idealize the literary experience outside the context of literature’s usual
manifestations in the classroom. For example, Booth, in discussing the ethics of reading fiction, writes, “‘We must rule out, in all of this, the reading we do under what course descriptions depressingly call Required Reading’” (Company 201). But the label “required reading,” for better or worse, summarizes the conditions under which most students read literature in school. Any claim that literature belongs not just in students’ lives—in the equivalent of the nineteenth century “extracurriculum”—but also in the classroom must be accompanied by a value assessment of the kind of academic discourse or participation literature makes possible.

**Possibilities for Reform in the Teaching and Learning of Literature**

Some of the most promising possibilities for reform in the teaching of literature have been anticipated by research, theory and practice in the teaching of writing. Since the 1970s, many teachers have adopted learner-centered and process-oriented approaches to writing instruction, leading to what Langer has called a “schizophrenic” split between literature and composition in schools. James Moffett emphasized that an education in discrete tasks (e.g., writing sentences and paragraphs out of context) effectively bars students from participating in the “whole, authentic discourse” that would advance their learning (31). James Britton further critiqued “teacher-as-examiner” writing scenarios, noting that the failure to “include the fostering of writing that reflects independent thinking” was the major shortcoming of most writing curricula (197). And Janet Emig demonstrated that the composing processes of high school students were hampered and constrained by the need to satisfy the teacher’s expectations. Emig concluded that resisting or reimagining the teacher’s authority was necessary in order to make the writing process more authentic, generative and satisfying for students: “American high schools and colleges must seriously and immediately consider that the teacher-centered
presentation of composition, like the teacher-centered presentation of almost every other segment of a curriculum, is pedagogically, developmentally, and politically an anachronism” (100).

The persistence of this anachronism in the teaching of literature has left students circumscribed in a narrow activity system in which they are “doing school most of the time, not disciplinary work” (Russell 534). Whereas the academic genres practiced by literature professors have real audiences and real consequences, literature students typically write papers and exams that are read only by the teacher and serve only to fulfill a course requirement. In the terms of activity theory, the major challenge for teaching literature is to enable students to “become actively involved in [a discipline] through deeper participation—to throw themselves into it through the reading and writing of its genres, to make a difference as well as a grade” (Russell 534).

Applebee has proposed that curriculum be reconceived as “domains for conversational action” through which students are taught how to enter into and participate in disciplinary traditions (Curriculum 43). Debates over what texts students should read, Applebee argues, typically reflect a “fundamental misconception about the nature of knowing” by “stripping knowledge of the contexts that give it meaning and vitality, and leading to an education that stresses knowledge-out-of-context rather than knowledge in action” (Curriculum 3). What texts students “know,” in other words, will be meaningless unless teachers reevaluate what literary knowledge is and what literary knowledge does. In Applebee’s account, to know literature is not to memorize the names and dates recorded in Shaw’s 1848 textbook; rather, knowing literature means being able to participate in discourse about literature. Through deep immersion in a field—and not through rote instruction in procedure—students can develop the “tacit” knowledge of how to participate in academic traditions (105). In a literature class, this tacit
knowledge consists partly of what Fish would describe as the “interpretive strategies” practiced and accepted by a particular “interpretive community.”

Blau usefully distinguishes between authentic knowledge derived from one’s own experience and “false knowledge,” which includes interpretations gleaned from a teacher’s lecture or a study guide (Literature Workshop 199). Mistakes or misreadings can count as true knowledge, if they are generated through the students’ “mindful effort,” because errors and confusion often prompt productive reflection, conversation and re-reading, which ultimately yield deeper insight.

The apprenticeship model offers a potential pathway for literature students to acquire “knowledge-in-action” or “true knowledge” through participation in an interpretive community. In apprenticeships, which Lave and Wenger analyze in contexts ranging from tailor shops to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, the teacher’s authority is fundamentally altered. Apprentices engage in a “common, structured pattern of learning experiences without being taught, examined, or reduced to mechanical copiers” (Lave and Wenger 30). Instead of acting as a “didactic caregiver” who tells the student what to do, the teacher is a “master” from whom the apprentice learns first through observation and then through increasing involvement (legitimate peripheral participation). Lave and Wenger explain, “For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 109). Pedagogical authoritarianism risks negating the learning opportunities afforded by an apprenticeship: “Gaining legitimacy is also a problem when masters prevent learning by acting in effect as pedagogical authoritarians, viewing apprentices as novices who ‘should be instructed’ rather than as peripheral participants in a community engaged in its own reproduction” (Lave and Wenger 76).
By imposing literacy standards measured through standardized tests, the Common Core has done little to renovate an authoritarian culture of instruction. The theoretical rationale accompanying the standards justifies the emphasis on reading and writing arguments on the grounds that students need better preparation to participate in the “argument culture” of the university. But the exemplars of student writing about literature included in the standards document showcase writing produced from formulaic instruction, not meaningful participation in academic discourse (Rejan, “True Meaning”). Scholes provides one model for reform in English education—in which the privileged place of literature is supplanted by an emphasis on rhetorical power. I would suggest, however, that returning to the academic roots of English in rhetoric and grammar, an emphasis that originally coincided with highly authoritarian pedagogy, is not necessarily the only way forward, if the goal is to empower students as active and creative participants in a learning community.

Ironically, the fictional texts marginalized by the Common Core provide some of the material most likely to stimulate the complex thinking the standards supposedly support, but the value of such literature is diminished unless students experience it as part of a dynamic interpretive community. Some cynics would say that “college and career readiness” amounts to submission to authority, for which the Common Core and subsequent standards may provide handsome preparation. But if we wish to help students learn to grapple with difficulty, engage with multiple perspectives and contribute to rich discourse, then thoughtful literature classes can play a crucial (and crucially subversive) role in secondary education.
Chapter Four

RECONCILING ROSENBLATT AND THE NEW CRITICS:
THE QUEST FOR AN EXPERIENCED UNDERSTANDING OF LITERATURE

For decades, the training of English teachers and teacher educators has been shaped by the story of Louise Rosenblatt’s heroic resistance to New Criticism, the reigning interpretive paradigm in literary studies through much of the twentieth century, and her advocacy for an alternative that would elevate the status of the reader. While New Criticism, which emphasized close analysis of a text’s formal features, spawned a rote and lifeless approach to literature in classrooms across the country, Rosenblatt, who was shunned in academia, gave voice and direction to a generation of progressive English teachers who empowered students to become active creators of meaning.

Robert Probst argues that Rosenblatt’s vision contradicts “some fundamental assumptions shared by the New Critics,” representing “a different conception of the literary experience, with drastically different implications for the classroom” (“Five Kinds” 54, 56). Probst, whose applications of Rosenblatt’s work have had a far-reaching impact on literature pedagogy, implies that New Criticism condemns student readers to inevitable failure, leading them to rely on study aids such as CliffsNotes to ascertain a text’s meaning. In contrast, Probst praises Rosenblatt for making correctness “a virtually useless concept,” liberating the reader from adherence to “a uniformity or homogeneity that the uniqueness of human personality does not allow” (59). In
crediting Rosenblatt with “debunking the old school of the so-called New Critics,” Harvey Daniels repeats a mantra that has become a theme in many English education courses (37).

Without diminishing the significance of Rosenblatt’s contributions, I wish to reexamine and reimagine the familiar history of Rosenblatt’s rebellion against New Criticism: I will propose that Rosenblatt and the New Critics, particularly Cleanth Brooks, might be viewed as pioneers of parallel, rather than opposing, pedagogical traditions, shaped by the shared influence of I. A. Richards.9 The intellectual lineage of Brooks and Rosenblatt also converges, if less decisively, in the work of John Dewey, whose emphasis on experience seems to be reflected in the writings of both Rosenblatt and Brooks. In the twenty-first century, professional and political discourse surrounding the teaching and learning of literature continues to be dominated and diminished by misinformed caricatures of New Criticism and Reader Response. In highlighting some of the overlapping aims, language, and intellectual heritage of Brooks and Rosenblatt, I hope to provide an opening for more nuanced conversations about close reading and the teaching of literature.

Revisiting a Problematic History

In his authoritative account of the history of English education, Arthur Applebee indicates that New Criticism gained prominence during a period of “conscious narrowing of the scope and goals of instruction,” a conservative reaction to the previous “expansion of the English curriculum around the metaphors of experience and exploration” (139). Miles Myers connects

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9 Adam Wolfsdorf’s wonderfully clever poetic rendering of the history of the field, which appeared in English Education in April 2017, avoids describing Rosenblatt’s transactional theory as a corrective response to New Criticism, though Wolfsdorf does reenact the classic narrative of opposition between Rosenblatt and the New Critics. Wolfsdorf’s couplets celebrate the 1938 publication of Rosenblatt’s Literature as Exploration: “To her the book was just the tip, Of reader-text relationship, Her triad emphasized reaction, Reader, book, in true transaction.” The New Critics enter into the picture in the next stanza, which implies an entirely separate intellectual genealogy: “Yet on another island distant, Cambridge scholar I. A. Richards, Formed a stance through analytics, Giving life to birth New Critics.”
New Criticism to the “decoding/analytic literacy” classroom, which featured “word-attack” drills, sentence analysis exercises, and “quiz show”–like questions intended to assess a student’s understanding (88). In analytic/decoding literacy, Dewey’s notions of experiential education were largely cast aside in favor of the factory-based approach to learning popularized by Ellwood P. Cubberley and influenced by the techniques of the mechanical engineer and management consultant Frederick W. Taylor (Myers 85). New Criticism, Myers implies, was complicit in the industrialization of education: “This approach to literature as form was perfectly suited for a period in which English teachers wanted to make their work more ‘scientific,’ more ‘objective,’ more removed from metaphysics and the morality of recitation literacy—indeed, more Cubberley-like, more Taylorized” (92). New Criticism frequently has been associated with classrooms in which students are stripped of agency and made to assume passive roles (Beach et al. 7).

According to Applebee, the heightened focus on understanding in literacy instruction, which was exemplified in New Critical methods, corresponded to the nation’s utilitarian needs amid the backdrop of World War II. Applebee cites an Army spokesperson who identified “understanding” as the most critical skill in English: “Army men and women must be able to communicate directly and accurately by any media; they must be able to understand the orders they give as well as the orders they receive” (140). For Applebee, the Army’s emphasis on understanding reflected, at least indirectly, New Critical priorities. Applebee writes, “The concern with language and meaning which led the high schools to emphasize communication was part of the development of a new school of literary criticism” (140). Yet the narrow concern with “language and meaning” in military rhetoric bears little resemblance to the more subtle investigation of language and meaning that characterized the “new school of literary criticism”
linked to John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and William K. Wimsatt. While Applebee correctly asserts that a version of New Criticism became popular in secondary schools at a time when the language of “experience and exploration” was losing its appeal, an appreciation for “experience and exploration,” I will argue, seems embedded in the definition of “understanding” put forward in many of the New Critics’ writings.

Although New Criticism sometimes has been understood as “an objective, analytic method” capitulating to the university’s “capitalist-military-industrial-technological complex,” Gerald Graff and others have questioned the accuracy of this view, given the New Critics’ “persistent condemnations of just this scientific, technological mentality” (Literature Against 129, 134). Many of the New Critics were influenced by the Southern Agrarian movement, which treated industrialization with deep skepticism. Edward Pickering observes that Brooks and Warren favor agricultural metaphors in their discussions of poetry, comparing poems to plants and emphasizing “organic” unity (97). The Taylorization of literature education is not, therefore, an enactment of New Critical values; in some ways, it is New Criticism’s antithesis.

Michael Smith, Deborah Appleman, and Jeff Wilhelm have cautioned against accepting Reader Response as a “new orthodoxy” but nonetheless have followed the tradition of framing Rosenblatt’s work as a “response” and a “humane corrective” to New Criticism. “Decades ago,” they write, “in response to the New Criticism when it was actually ‘new,’ Louise Rosenblatt located the meaning of a text not in the ‘autonomous’ text but within the transaction between reader and text” (29).\(^\text{10}\) The familiar narrative of Rosenblatt’s “David and Goliath”–like battle

\(^{10}\) Traditionally, New Criticism has been known as “the” New Criticism (as will remain visible in quotations throughout this chapter). In publications from more recent decades, many scholars have dropped the “the,” while others have continued to include it. The use of the “the” probably originates with John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 book, The New Criticism, which refers to “the new criticism” (all lowercase), though Ransom does not use the label in the same way it came to be popularly applied. “The new critics” discussed by Ransom include Yvor Winters, whom Ransom quarreled with and who could not be called a capital-N, capital-C New Critic. One might make the argument that “the New Criticism” refers to the actual practices derived from Ransom and his associates, while
with the New Critics has been partly encouraged by Rosenblatt’s retrospective addendum to *Literature as Exploration*, which she penned in 1990 and included in the fifth edition of the book. While Rosenblatt acknowledges that she and the New Critics “seemed to start out on the same path,” she distances herself from the New Critics in her rejection of “narrow empiricism” and her arrival at a different “understanding of the nature of art” (*Literature as Exploration, 5th edition* 289–290). Rosenblatt challenges the “hegemony of the New Criticism” and strongly critiques the New Critics’ “dogmatic” dismissal of the reader’s feelings and ideas (290). Yet a careful reading of Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration*, first published in 1938, along with the work of the New Critics who were her contemporaries, reveals a more complex relationship.

To explore more fully the interconnectedness of Rosenblatt and the New Critics, I would like to begin by separating the context in which various teaching practices have “trickled down” into secondary schools with the context in which Rosenblatt and the New Critics published their seminal texts. Not until the 1960s did a version of the New Critics’ techniques become commonplace in high school English curricula (Applebee 166). And the impact of Rosenblatt’s approaches was not widely felt until the 1970s, when, according to Thomas P. Miller, “the formalism of the 1950s had been replaced by a process-oriented approach, not only in the teaching of writing and generative linguistics, but also in transactional approaches to literature” (193). Chronologically and conceptually, however, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory might be better understood as emerging in parallel with (and not as an antidote to) New Critical methods.

Peter Rabinowitz and Corinne Bancroft make a crucial distinction between the original works of the New Critics and “Zombie New Criticism,” the distorted version of New Critical techniques that continues to infiltrate secondary schools, observing that “there is a significant

“New Criticism” without the “the” connotes the mainstream, institutionalized, sometimes misunderstood school of criticism. But I have opted to avoid the sense of inconsistency that might come with using “the” to make that distinction and also to avoid the sense of affectation that might come from using “the” throughout.
difference between New Critical dogma as it appears in many prescriptions for high school teaching and the real New Criticism that emerged after the Second World War” (7). While Rabinowitz and Bancroft offer a useful discussion of the reductive implementation of New Criticism in high schools, I would question Rabinowitz and Bancroft’s assertion that the “real” New Criticism emerged after World War II. New Criticism is commonly associated with the postwar world, when, as Tobin Siebers demonstrates, “it acquired institutional status with the help of the postwar boom in population and education” (30). Yet many of the writers and scholars who would later become known as the New Critics began developing their theories and practices prior to the war, and this chronology proves significant in understanding the parity between some of the principles expounded by Cleanth Brooks and Louise Rosenblatt.

Brooks preferred not to identify himself as a founder, spokesperson, or even adherent of “the so-called New Criticism,” though he lamented, later in his career, that he was often labeled as the “typical New Critic” or “the person chosen to flesh out the agreed-upon stereotypical diagram” (“State of Letters” 572). Perhaps the most prominent of the writers and academics associated with John Crowe Ransom, who accidentally provided the “New Critics” their name, Brooks found himself appointed the “quasi-representative” of the movement, expected “not only to answer of his own sins, but also to assume the collective sins of a vague, undefined group” (“In Search” 41). Despite Brooks’s reluctance to occupy the role, I too will treat Brooks as the exemplar New Critic, not only because he may be the critic most often ascribed this label but also because, of all the so-called New Critics, his statements about literature and literary study tend to be among the most gracefully restrained, the most eloquently qualified, and the most dynamic and fluid. Of all the New Critics, Brooks and Warren were also the most deeply
engaged in questions of pedagogy and, through their textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), had an impact on the teaching of literature equivalent to Louise Rosenblatt.

The 1930s marked both Rosenblatt’s and Brooks’s initiation as college teachers of literature: in 1931, Rosenblatt began teaching literature at Barnard, and in 1932, Brooks was appointed to the English Department of Louisiana State University; Robert Penn Warren would join Brooks at Louisiana State in 1934. As an instructor at Barnard in the 1930s, Rosenblatt observed that college literature courses failed to meet the needs of most students: “I felt that the needs of the general reader were not being thought of enough. All of the teaching was really based on what would be useful ultimately to specialists in the field. It was out of that thinking that I began observing the reading and I also developed the habit of interchange with the students” (“Louise Rosenblatt Interview”).

Like Rosenblatt, Brooks noticed a gap between the preparation of college instructors, who were trained mainly in literary history, and the needs of their students. Brooks recalls, “When in the early 1930s Robert Penn Warren and I found ourselves teaching ‘literary types and genres’ at a large state university, we discovered that our students, many of whom had good minds, some imagination, and a good deal of lived experience, had very little knowledge of how to read a story or a play, and even less knowledge of how to read a poem” (“State of Letters” 593). Brooks observed that literature instruction was not helping students channel their intelligence, imagination, and lived experience into the reading of a text. And many students, Brooks discovered, were inclined to treat literature primarily as a source of information or moral guidance, approaching a Keats poem as if it were “an editorial in the local county newspaper or an advertisement in the current Sears, Roebuck catalogue” (593).
To truly appreciate a poem, Brooks and Warren argue, the reader must take an experiential rather than an informational approach: “We like a poem, not because it gives us . . . an idea we can ‘carry away with us’ as people sometimes put it, but because the poem itself is an experience” (*Understanding Poetry* 32). Brooks and Warren compare a reader interested only in information to a football fan who learns the score and statistics of a game through a radio report and misses “the richer experience” of actually watching the event (32). Brooks and Warren’s example seems to parallel Rosenblatt’s distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading. The Latin verb *efferre*, from which Rosenblatt’s concept of efferent reading is derived, has an identical meaning to the English phrase used by Brooks and Warren, “to carry away” (“On the Aesthetic”). In veering away from “the traditional preoccupation with literary history and the ‘message’ of the work,” Rosenblatt joined the New Critics in denouncing reductive readings (*Literature as Exploration*, 5th edition 290). As young teachers in the 1930s, Brooks (in Louisiana) and Rosenblatt (in New York) wanted to instill in their students not simply biographical or historical knowledge but rather a more universally applicable means of accessing literary texts, which would lead to a fuller aesthetic experience.

Although some might have viewed Brooks and Warren, who had recently been Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, as members of the literary elite, the pair embraced the project of writing a literature textbook with pragmatic and democratic aspirations. Brooks recalls, “Our aims were limited, practical, even grubby. We had nothing hifalutin or esoteric in mind. We were not a pair of young art-for-art’s sake aesthetes, just back from Oxford and out of touch with American reality” (“State of Letters” 593). While some charge the New Critics with “cutting literature loose from any relation with reality,” Brooks proposes instead that literature “imitates experience by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience” (605). And the goal of
Brooks and Warren’s textbooks was not to teach about literature through “statements about experience” but rather to engage students in experiencing literature themselves.

According to Paul Smith, New Criticism, despite a reputation to the contrary, entered college classrooms as a fundamentally democratic movement: “When New Criticism became an educational strategy in the 1940s, it seemed an essentially democratic kind of criticism. It said that what you needed to know a poem is there in your native language and rhetoric; you don’t have to be privy to the Elizabethan World Picture in order to understand, say, the first stanza of Donne’s ‘Canonization’” (29). Brooks and Warren championed access to literature, not to a superficial account of literature paraphrased by an instructor or anthology introduction, but instead through a firsthand encounter with the words on the page.

Perhaps to an even greater degree than Brooks, Rosenblatt began her career as a teacher whose “hifalutin” scholarship (to borrow Brooks’s phrase) and studies abroad might have seemed at odds with her commitment to the reality of education in the United States. In the same years Brooks was studying at Oxford, Rosenblatt was completing her doctorate in literature at the Sorbonne. At the invitation of her former Barnard classmate Leonie Adams, a poet in France on a Guggenheim Fellowship, Rosenblatt regularly attended salons at the apartment of Ford Maddox Ford, where she became steeped in the literary culture of the time (“Louise Rosenblatt Interview”). Among the expatriate American writers Rosenblatt met in France were Warren and Allen Tate, a poet who would later become known as a New Critic and who was also a lifelong friend of Brooks (Elliott 287).

Rosenblatt’s interest in the role of the reader first took shape in her 1931 dissertation, which was composed in French and titled Art for Art’s Sake. She explains, “Some of the French writers like Flaubert, whom I admired very much, when they were criticized for the moral
realism of their work, took the stand that they were just creating art for art’s sake and they did not accept any limitations on what they had to present. I was very sympathetic to the freedom of the artist but at the same time I did believe in the social role of art” (“Louise Rosenblatt Interview”). Despite her abiding interest in aesthetics, Rosenblatt, like Brooks, felt compelled to distance herself from art purely for art’s sake and to confront the pedagogical problem of making literary experience more available to her students.

**Mapping Shared Influence: A Return to Richards**

Although New Criticism reached the peak of its influence in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a resurgence of interest in Rosenblatt’s work, Rosenblatt and Brooks were contemporaries who generated their theories of reading literature simultaneously. Many of the major texts and tenets of New Criticism can be traced back to the 1930s, when Louise Rosenblatt was formulating her transactional theory of literature, and I. A. Richards’s landmark publications from the previous decade were exerting a major critical influence. While at Oxford from 1929 to 1930, Brooks read Richards’s books and attended his lectures, and he later noted the significant impact of Richards’s *Practical Criticism* (1929) in guiding the direction of his own work. He wrote, “I. A. Richards has put us all in his debt by demonstrating what different experiences may be derived from the same poem by an apparently homogenous group of readers” (“The Formalist Critics” 75). Brooks lauds Richards as a “perceptive critic of great power” and an “educational reformer, one who rightly saw much amiss in both our secondary and higher education systems” (“I.A. Richards” 589, 595). Although Brooks resisted some of Richards’s conclusions, particularly in *Principles of Criticism*, he describes *Practical Criticism* as a “groundbreaking” book that offers “great wisdom” in its warnings about “the overwhelming importance of the
context of a poem or the damaging effects of sentimentality, the perils of message-hunting, the stultifying effect of stock responses, the wrongheadedness of insisting on a regularity of meter or demanding that a poem embody a favorite doctrine” (587, 588–589).

Like Brooks, Rosenblatt highlights Richards’s towering influence, calling *Practical Criticism* “a work that every teacher of literature should read” that has “stimulated many to clarify their own aims in teaching” (*Literature as Exploration* 113). In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt extends Richards’s observation that “ready-made” or stock responses “prevent the full impact of the literary work on the mind of the reader” and “sometimes interfere with the reader’s understanding” (113). Following Richards, Rosenblatt argues that “the very essence of literature is a rejection of such stereotyped, superficial, and unshaded reactions” (122). In an archeological study of Rosenblatt’s revisions across the five editions of *Literature as Exploration*, Mark Dressman and Joan Webster note that all five editions of the book praise Richards, suggesting “Rosenblatt’s philosophical and epistemological kinship to both Richards and the New Criticism” (137). With a pathway illuminated by Richards’s *Practical Criticism*, Rosenblatt and Brooks each sought to find a solution to the problem of students’ “stock responses” to literary texts.

Richards’s study of “mnemonic irrelevances,” extraneous personal associations that could lead to misreading, provided a conceptual foundation for Rosenblatt as well as the New Critics. The “Affective Fallacy,” one of the most famous pieces of New Critical dogma, has its roots in Richards’s observation of “mnemonic irrelevances.” As described by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, the “Affective Fallacy” refers to the confusion of a reader’s emotional response with the text itself. Compared with Wimsatt and Beardsley, Rosenblatt applied the concept of mnemonic irrelevance more flexibly. Novice readers, Rosenblatt proposed, learn to
discard personal associations that overact to or misconstrue elements in the text: “The young reader points to what in the text explains his response. He may discover, however, that he has overreacted to some elements and ignored others. Or he may learn that some word or image has triggered a fantasy or awakened some personal preoccupation quite alien to the text” (“A Performing Art” 1003). Tellingly, Rosenblatt’s observation is followed by a parenthetical citation of Richards: “I. A. Richards, long ago, reported in Practical Criticism on the many pitfalls awaiting the reader” (1003). With a nod to Richards, Rosenblatt readily admits that some aspects of the reader’s personal response are “alien” to the text and reflect an unbalanced or inaccurate reading.

Some of the pedagogies inspired by Rosenblatt’s theories dismissed Richards’s concern with mnemonic irrelevances. Appleman comments that the Rosenblatt-influenced classroom liberated students and teachers from Richards’s doctrine: “No longer could students’ individual responses to texts be considered ‘mnemonic irrelevancies,’ as I. A. Richards had claimed” (30). While some progressive teachers, rejecting a caricatured form of New Criticism, may have authorized every response to a piece of literature as pertinent to the discussion, Rosenblatt actually accepts Richards’s premise that some personal responses to a text must be considered mnemonic irrelevances.

Smith et al. suggest that the Common Core State Standards reanimate an extreme version of New Criticism by “eschewing the important connection between reader and text (what I. A. Richards rudely deemed mnemonic irrelevances)” (26). Richards’s concept of mnemonic irrelevances does not, however, presuppose that all of the reader’s impressions are irrelevant or that the connection between reader and text must be disbanded. Although Richards expresses concern that the feelings evoked by a reader’s impressionistic response may “overwhelm and
distort the poem,” he also acknowledges that “the personal situation of the reader inevitably (and within limits rightly) affects his reading” (*Practical Criticism* 227). Indeed, by coining the term “mnemonic irrelevances,” Richards also implies the possibility of mnemonic relevances. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards writes, “Thus memories, whether of emotional crises or scenes visited or incidents observed, are not to be hastily excluded as personal intrusions. That they are personal is nothing against them—all experience is personal—the only conditions are that they must be genuine and relevant, and must respect the autonomy of the poem” (*Practical Criticism* 227). While echoing Richards’s call to cast aside mnemonic irrelevances, Rosenblatt goes further in emphasizing the power of mnemonic relevances: “Richards, in his *Practical Criticism*, provided vivid evidence of the dangers of what he called ‘mnemonic irrelevance.’ No one questions that often, perhaps most often, the original response to a text will call forth from the reader’s memory, ideas, attitudes, meanings, that are not relevant. . . . Equally unquestionable, but often forgotten, is the fact that if a literary work is evoked at all from the text, the substance out of which the work is fashioned are mnemonic relevances with language, life, and literature” (“Pattern and Process” 1008).

Of the New Critics, Ransom takes the strongest stance against mnemonic irrelevances and relevances, contending that criticism “shall be objective” and “cite the nature of the object rather than its effects upon the subject” (“Criticism, Inc.”) Criticism, Ransom stipulates, must exclude “personal registrations, which are declarations of the effect of the art-work upon the critic as reader” (“Criticism, Inc.”)). With somewhat more moderate language, Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that emotional responses are not necessarily baseless but that they must be articulated carefully and traced back to specific elements of the text to function as criticism: “The more specific the account of the emotion induced by the poem, the more nearly it will be an
account of the reasons for emotion, the poem itself, and the more reliable it will be as an account of what the poem is likely to induce in other—sufficiently informed—readers” (354). Brooks’s comment that the last stanza of a Tennyson poem “evokes an intense emotional response from the reader” is, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, “not really part of Brooks’ criticism of the poem—rather a witness of his fondness for it” (353). In assessing the legacy of the “Affective Fallacy,” Brooks who seems somewhat more tolerant of readerly reactions than his colleague Wimsatt and his teacher Ransom, suggests that the fallacy can be avoided by explaining how and why a text evokes an emotional response: “Even if we value the opinion of someone we regard as a fine critic, we may prefer to know why he likes the work” (“In Search” 46). Rosenblatt resisted a narrow definition of what constituted a “sufficiently informed reader” (implicit in Richards’s and some of the New Critics’ work); she did not, however, dispute the need to explain emotional responses and associations in a way that clarified their relationship to the text.

Rosenblatt’s Literature as Exploration was—“ironically,” according to Rosenblatt—published in the same year as Brooks and Warren’s Understanding Poetry (Literature as Exploration, 5th edition 289). Yet one can hardly regard as ironic—or even coincidental—the fact that two literary scholars and educators, both hugely influenced by recent publications of I. A. Richards, would simultaneously seek to reform and transform the teaching of literature.

A Close Reading of Close Readers: Parallels Between Brooks and Rosenblatt

In an English Journal article about teaching Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Rene Matthews and Robin Chandler state that Rosenblattian methods are “in direct opposition to the New Criticism theories” (86). Matthews and Chandler go so far as to assert that “to the New Critics, there is no point to asking the reader to make meaning of the texts,” since “the meaning has
already been made, and teachers can find it in the answer key to the students’ textbooks” (86). Matthews and Chandler’s portrait of the New Critics provoked a response from Michael Santa Maria, an English teacher in Middletown, New Jersey, who criticized the authors for neglecting to cite any of the New Critics and for relying instead on “a New Critic adversary, Louise Rosenblatt, who summarizes what is wrong with the New Critics” (Maria 11). The New Critics, Maria comments, did not disallow the reader’s active involvement in a text; they simply “posited that the text was the most important aspect of the literary experience between reader and writer” (11).

In a 2012 *English Journal* article on the “vibrant debate within and about New Criticism and all criticism,” P. L. Thomas quotes part of Maria’s letter, only to continue the trend of defining and critiquing the New Critics without directly citing any of the New Critics’ actual writing. The recycling of secondhand interpretations of New Criticism (including statements attributed to Rosenblatt) would seem, ironically, to violate one of Rosenblatt’s cherished maxims: substituting someone else’s reading of a text for one’s own is akin to “having someone else eat your dinner for you” (*The Reader, The Text, The Poem* 86). While Thomas makes some attempt to separate the theoretical underpinnings of New Criticism from their implementation in secondary schools, he continues to emphasize New Criticism as “an unspoken norm of authoritative texts and interpretations” and to highlight the “challenges [to New Criticism] offered by reader response (Rosenblatt) and critical literacy” (52). Rosenblatt and New Criticism remain, in Thomas’s account, opposing forces.

One of the major goals of this chapter is to remedy a vacuum in the field of English education in which the New Critics’ principles and practices are represented by summary and paraphrase and not through a close reading of their work, which reveals some remarkable areas
of overlap with Rosenblatt. In his chapter titled “Heresy of Paraphrase,” Brooks writes, “The essential structure of a poem (as distinguished from the rational or logical structure of the ‘statement’ which we abstract from it) resembles that of architecture or painting: it is a pattern of resolved stresses” (The Well Wrought Urn 203). In other words, content and form are as interpenetrative in poetry as in other “patterned” art forms, rendering futile the attempt to convey the meaning of a poem through an abstracted statement. In Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt expresses a version of the New Critics’ admonition against reducing poetry to paraphrase: “It is equally impossible to experience content apart from some kind of form. We all know that a paraphrase of the poem does not represent the actual content of the poem” (Literature as Exploration 55). In later editions of the book, after Brooks’s warning about the “heresy of paraphrase” had become well-known, Rosenblatt revised her statement to read “it is a cliché to say that a paraphrase of a poem does not represent the actual content of the poem,” but she continued to stand by the assertion (Literature as Exploration, 5th edition 45).

While Rosenblatt sometimes takes a more sociological or psychological approach to literature than would be employed by the New Critics, she constantly returns to structure, form, and pattern (Literature as Exploration). Her comments on Othello, for example, could almost be mistaken for a New Critic’s formalist analysis:

Othello is above all a work of art. The resonant blank verse, the opulent imagery, the swiftly paced structure of the play are an integral part of this reliving of Othello and Desdemona’s tragedy. The entire experience has a structure and an inner logic, a completeness that only a great work of art can offer. . . . It is possible to do justice to this problem of form and style without being false to the psychological processes in the relationship between book and reader. (Literature as Exploration 53)

Othello is, to borrow Cleanth Brooks’s famous allusion to Donne, a “well-wrought urn”—an intricately crafted art object whose complex and ambiguous meanings often exist in the
intersection of content and form. Neither Rosenblatt nor the New Critics were interested in studying the formal features of a text in isolation; attention to form became a means of deepening the interaction with a text’s content and heightening the aesthetic experience. While Rosenblatt frames questions of form specifically in terms of the “relationship between book and reader,” the fact that the critic has some “relationship” with the text he is writing about would generally be implicit in the act of writing criticism (though not necessarily implicit in the act of completing school assignments) and is hardly incompatible with the practice of the New Critics or any publishing critic.

Sheridan Blau observes that the legacy of New Criticism on literature instruction has been an emphasis on an objective cataloging of formal elements in a text: “Students and critics of such icons would dutifully devote themselves to producing detailed, objective studies of image patterns, word frequencies, and so on in the interest of showing how every detail of a text conspired to produce a unified work of art with a determinable, if not final, meaning” (“Building Bridges” 7). But Brooks and Rosenblatt seem equally dismissive of analysis that dutifully diagrams a poem’s structure. Brooks parts ways with those who would approach close reading as a reductive and formulaic enterprise. He writes, “Poems are not made by formula and blueprint. One rightly holds suspect a critical interpretation that implies that they are” (Well Wrought 23).

Rosenblatt embraces readings that display sensitivity to the formal features of a text; she rejects formalist analyses that devolve into a lifeless labeling of literary elements: “To point to syntactic patterns of a text, to designate the presence of metaphors, or to spell out some of the various possible associations of an image is an efferent activity. It should not be confused with the process of attending to those elements of consciousness stirred up by such textual configurations in an aesthetic reading” (“On the Aesthethic” 24). In many ways, Brooks’s
approach seems to mirror Rosenblatt’s. Brooks writes, “To sum up, our examination of the poem has not resulted in our locating an idea or set of ideas which the poet has communicated with certain appropriate decorations. Rather, our examination has carried further and further into the poem itself as a process of exploration” (Well Wrought 74). For Brooks, the poem—as well as a study of the poem’s formal features—is an exploratory process.

When addressing the difficulty of modern poetry (and specifically the poem “Corinna’s going a-Maying” by John Herrick), Brooks immediately seeks to complicate the “textbook answer” that the “poem is a statement of the carpe diem theme” (Well Wrought 67). Brooks voices his distaste with this superficial reading: “Unless we are absent-mindedly dictating a stock answer to an indifferent freshman, we shall certainly feel constrained to go further in describing what the poem ‘says’” (68). Reductive thesis statements that cite several disconnected literary devices in support of a basic theme bear little resemblance to Brooks’s critical practice. Brooks writes, “We shall not neglect the maturity of attitude, the dramatic tension, the emotional and intellectual coherence in favor of some statement of theme” (166). In an almost Rosenblattian fashion, Brooks implies that an encounter with poetry necessarily will be intellectual as well as emotional.

Although Wayne Booth distinguishes Rosenblatt from the New Critics in her emphasis on the diversity of readers’ responses, he notes that both Rosenblatt and the New Critics “found a sense of liberation in the return to the close reading” modeled by I. A. Richards (“Foreword” ix). An advocate of “close reading”—where “close” implies both intimate connection and careful examination—Rosenblatt calls for a disciplined rereading process, in which one’s initial responses and impressions to a text may be cast aside as extraneous. In The Well Wrought Urn, Brooks writes, “The reader . . . is not asked to give up his own meanings or beliefs or to adopt
permanently those of the poet. . . . The point is not that when we read a poem we put to sleep all our various interests as human beings . . . . The point would be that in ‘reading well’ we are willing to allow our various interests as human beings to become subordinate to the total experience” (253). Brooks clarifies that the various “meanings” of the reader (note Brooks’s use of the plural) need not be expunged; however, those meanings that do not support the “total experience” of the poem should be set aside. While Rosenblatt would likely be more generous than Brooks in granting the relevance of particular biases and dispositions that the reader brings to the text, her formulation of the relationship between reader, text, and literary experience does not differ as radically from Brooks’s as some have claimed.

Drssman and Webster argue that Rosenblatt diverges from the New Critics most significantly in her acceptance of the reader’s subjectivity (138). But the language Brooks uses to describe the reader is more subjective than his detractors might expect. In a 1975 conversation with Warren, Brooks spoke about the essential role of the human reader: “The words of a literary work constantly point back to the human being who chose and patterned them, but they also point forward to the human beings who read them. . . . The ‘verbal artifact’ can’t be purged of human meanings” (Brooks quoted in Warren 25–26). Brooks’s statement about the dual involvement of the author and reader comes just a few years before Rosenblatt’s publication of The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978). In “understanding or misunderstanding” and “accepting or resisting” the words on the page (Brooks quoted in Warren 25–26), Brooks’s reader does not necessarily have the agency to transform the “poem”—the primary site of study—as Rosenblatt’s reader does, but the meaning articulated by Brooks’s reader is still inevitably colored by individual experience.
The rhetoric of the New Critics is often remembered as absolute doctrine, yet Brooks’s own critical writing (as well as his theorization about criticism) reflects careful qualification and restraint. Although the New Critics are frequently charged with banishing all biographical readings from the literature classroom, Brooks readily accepts that the author’s biography sometimes may provide illuminating insights into a work. He cautions, however, about the potential for biographical knowledge to become an inadequate substitute for close engagement with the text. In his chapter on Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode, Brooks writes, “At any rate, it may be interesting to see what happens when one considers the ‘Ode’ as a poem, as an independent structure, even to the point of forfeiting the light which [Wordsworth’s] letters, his notes, and his other poems throw on difficult points. (That forfeiture, one may hasten to advise the cautious reader, need not, of course, be permanent.)” (*Well Wrought* 124). Brooks’s parenthetical qualification cannot be overlooked: the setting aside of biography is not a permanent critical stance but rather a temporary experiment in heightening attention to the poet’s language.

In a 1979 essay for the *Sewanee Review*, Brooks attempts to dispel the widely held assumption that the metaphor of poem as “well-wrought urn” demands a rigid and “static” view of poetry. On the contrary, Brooks acknowledges that “a poem is fluid, dynamic, a transaction between poet and reader” (“State of Letters” 594):

If some of the New Critics have preferred to stress the writing rather than the writer, so have they given less stress to the reader—to the reader’s response to the work. Yet no one in his right mind could forget the reader. He is essential for “realizing” any poem or novel. Moreover readers obviously vary extremely in their sensitivity, intelligence, and experience. They vary also from one cultural period to another. . . . Reader response is certainly worth studying. This direction is being taken by many of the more advanced critics today. Yet to put the meaning and valuation of a literary work at the mercy of any and every individual would reduce the study of literature to reader psychology and to the history of taste. On the other hand to argue that there is no convincing proof that one
reader’s reaction is any more correct than another’s is indeed a counsel of despair. ("State of Letters" 594)

As compared with Rosenblatt’s writings, Brooks’s description of a literary transaction places more weight on the text than on the reader. Nevertheless, although Brooks may not be using transaction in exactly the same philosophic sense as Rosenblatt, he clearly points to the variability of different readers’ responses and the vital importance of the reader’s role. And while Rosenblatt was more tolerant than Brooks in allowing for a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, she would certainly agree that not all readers’ reactions are equally correct and that a fully realized transaction with a text requires the self-correcting of one’s initial misreadings.

Ellen Carillo contends that similarities between Rosenblatt and the New Critics emerge only in the New Critics’ revisions of their pedagogy, specifically in changes made in the second edition of Understanding Poetry. As an example, Carillo cites Brooks and Warren’s exercise following William Cullen Bryant’s “The Waterfowl,” which was expanded in the 1950 edition of the textbook. In the first edition, the authors invite a comparison with another poem and ask, “Is the application made too directly in this poem? How much of the force of the poem depends on the success of description in the last six stanzas?” (quoted in Carillo 30). In the second edition, the authors elaborate, “Is the ‘lesson’ that the bird impresses on the man’s heart presented to the reader, so that the reader, participating imaginatively in the man’s experience, also participates in the meaning of the experience? Or is the lesson ‘preached’ to the reader?” (quoted in Carillo 30). Carillo highlights the way the second edition “foregrounds the reader” by responding to the student-reader’s tendency to “message-hunt” (30). This awareness of how the reader might engage with the poem, Carillo suggests, “was clearly uncharacteristic of the New Critics’ text-centric understandings of reading and far more along the lines of how their contemporary, scholar Louise Rosenblatt, described what happens when one reads” (30). In describing the
concern for the reader as “uncharacteristic of the New Critics,” Carillo seems to overlook the extent to which the early influence of I. A. Richards predisposes both Brooks and Rosenblatt to consider the activity of the reader throughout their careers, including in the first edition of *Understanding Poetry*.

The language of the second edition would seem not to revise the theory or pedagogy of New Criticism but rather to make more explicit an assumption already present in the original exercise. The earlier question “Is the application made too directly?” also seeks, with less elaboration, to complicate the reader’s possible habit of message-hunting. Moreover, the reference to the “force of the poem” in the first edition further suggests a type of transactional reading: meaning is not extracted from the text; rather, the poem’s force reverberates in the reader as part of an aesthetic experience. While Carillo frames as Rosenblattian the move to point out and then complicate the students’ likely misreadings (a practice that accepts the reader’s agency only tenuously), the commonalities between Rosenblatt and the New Critics actually run much deeper—reflected in a shared vision of reading as experiential.

**Reclaiming Education as Experience: A Look at Deweyan Language**

Many of the New Critics participated, early in their careers, in the Southern Agrarian movement, and their emphasis on the self-contained text is sometimes regarded as a withdrawal from politics prompted by the impossibility of returning to a romanticized old South. New Criticism, Terry Eagleton argues, was a “recipe for political inertia and thus for submission to the political status quo” (43), an attitude that seems strongly opposed to the social progressivism of the Dewey-influenced Rosenblatt.
Examining nearly a century’s worth of articles about the teaching of poetry published in *English Journal*, Faust and Dressman describe two conflicting categories of pedagogical approaches: formalist and populist. The formalist approach is shaped by the “seemingly relentless legacy of the New Criticism” (126), while the populist alternative, legitimized by Rosenblatt’s focus on the reader’s “lived-through” experience, can be traced to the Deweyan belief that “poetry should not be divorced from everyday life” (119). The New Critics would have chafed at the populist preference to “select poems that are accessible and, in addition, focus on subject matter relevant to the social issues of the day” (128). Yet Mark Jancovich seeks to complicate the assumption that the New Critics wished to remove literature from the context of “specific human interests”: “It was not that Brooks and Warren see social issues as irrelevant to literature. On the contrary, they stress that literature should deal with important social issues. They merely state that the importance of the issue was not itself a measure of a text’s literary value” (83). And the interest in the “linguistic process through which the issues were examined” was not in itself an anti-Deweyan stance (Jancovich 83).

The title of Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* would seem to support the narrative outlined by Applebee and Myers: the New Critics abandoned (or ignored) Dewey’s notion of art as experience in favor of a more narrowly constructed exercise in extracting meaning from a literary text. But the revised preface of *Understanding Poetry*, in which Brooks and Warren recount their deliberations over the book’s title, tells a different story: “The title of this book is *Understanding Poetry*. It might, however, with equal reason have been called *Experiencing Poetry*, for what this book hopes to do is to enlarge the reader’s capacity to experience poetry” (15). The authors explain that the decision to emphasize “understanding” in the title did not reflect a lack of interest in the experiential dimension of reading; on the contrary,
Brooks and Warren wanted to guide the reader through an engagement with the text that would ultimately enrich the reader’s experience: “What is at stake in the choice between the two titles is a matter of emphasis. The title *Experiencing Poetry* would emphasize the end to be hoped for—a richer appreciation of poetry, a fuller enjoyment. Our chosen title emphasizes the process by which such an end may be achieved” (15).

This process of interpreting a text might be called metacognitive in that Brooks and Warren intended to make readers more aware of the natural and unconscious activities of skilled readers:

> And here is where “understanding” may come in. The more or less unconscious process of making discriminations, comparisons, and judgments can be lifted into consciousness, and, to a degree, systematized; and that is one of the things this book undertakes to do. By trying to understand the nature and structure of poetry, how that nature and structure are expressive, and how we respond to them, readers may accelerate and deepen the natural and more or less unconscious process by which they enlarge their experience of poetry. (16).

The value placed on “enlarging” the “experience” of poetry, the attention to the reader’s response to structure and form, and the desire to “lift into consciousness” a natural process of discrimination and evaluation—all of these aims would suggest that the New Critics were in some ways more progressive than indicated by Applebee and Myers. Far from renouncing the “metaphors of experience and exploration” (Applebee 139), Brooks and Warren demonstrated some overlap with Deweyan ideals. Their interpretive approach was only systematized “to a degree,” and this important qualification highlights the fact that Brooks and Warren never wished to employ an essentially objective or scientific or industrial model that might diminish the reader’s appreciation and enjoyment of literature.

Rosenblatt and Dewey, according to Faust, shared the New Critics’ commitment to “evidentiary procedure” but valued textual evidence for a different purpose: “The difference lies
in the fact that, for Dewey and Rosenblatt, gathering of evidence . . . has everything to do with
realizing the aesthetic potential of one’s experiences with literature” (25). Brooks’s language,
however, suggests that the New Critics embraced the Deweyan goal of “experiencing” literature
to a greater extent than has been typically acknowledged.

As the founding co-editors (1935–42) of the *Southern Review*, Brooks and Warren
published the work of the leading philosophical and social science writers of the time, including
Dewey. While Brooks and Warren would not have been disposed to embrace the work of a
Northern liberal icon like Dewey, they recognized Dewey’s importance enough to publish two of
his articles (as well as a celebratory piece about Dewey in honor of his 80th birthday). In a letter
to Warren, Brooks admits that his prejudice against Dewey was perhaps unfair, commenting, “I
tend to be too grudging with John Dewey, as I well know” (Brooks quoted in Grimshaw 246).
Prior to the publication of Dewey’s *Southern Review* articles, Brooks personally rewrote some of
Dewey’s famously cumbersome prose (Winchell 98). Warren’s published conversations with
Brooks include a brief discussion of Dewey and the notion that “art in some sense completes
nature” (48).

Ransom, the New Critic who taught Brooks and Warren at Vanderbilt, read Dewey’s
*Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), and he praised Dewey for his
ability “to write at great and loving length about art and aesthetic experience,” though he
challenged Dewey’s belief that “nature absolute” is achieved only through the interaction
between the external world and the artist’s mind (“Art Worries the Naturalists” (282, 285).
Anyone with an inclination toward “New Critical rigor,” Daniel Green writes, would be troubled
by the fact that “Dewey seems so blatantly to indulge in the ‘affective fallacy’” (76). Moreover,
Green notes that Dewey’s methods, unlike the New Critics, were ill-suited for the defense of
literature as an academic discipline in the university. Nonetheless, Green argues that “many of Dewey’s comments on aesthetic form and the practice of criticism seem strikingly consonant with the views of the New Critics,” including the belief that “true perception or appreciation of art or literature requires quite rigorous effort” (76–77).

In *Art and Experience*, Dewey proposes that an aesthetic experience may begin as an intuitive and impressionistic response but that it ultimately must be cultivated through formal analysis: “But absorption in a work of art so complete as to exclude analysis cannot be long sustained. . . . We then become occupied in some degree with the formal conditions of a concrete form” (150). An aesthetic experience, Dewey suggests, often begins with an emotional “absorption” in a work of art. But for this momentary rapture to mature into an enduring understanding and appreciation of the art object, the perceiver must become conscious of the “formal conditions” of the work in a more rational way. Thus, the meaning and value first felt through absorption are confirmed and extended through formal analysis and “intervening periods of discrimination” (150). Dewey’s *Art as Experience* was published just four years before Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, and the authors use parallel language (both texts refer to the act of “discrimination”) to advance the claim that consciousness of form sustains and deepens an encounter with a work of art.

Paul Jay suggests that Dewey’s “approach to art anticipates the formalism of the New Criticism” (93). And Mark David Dietz comments that New Critics’ view of literature, in some respects, reflects a Deweyan approach: “Echoes of Dewey’s thought are quite noticeable in several aspects of the New Critical agenda, although we would not expect by the use of the language that we are witnessing anything of a direct influence” (127). Dewey and the New Critics may not define “experience” in the same way, but they share, along with Rosenblatt, a
conviction that “understanding” and “experience” are inextricably linked. Sheridan Blau usefully amalgamates the two terms in distinguishing between “fraudulent knowledge” that constitutes “mere information about a literary text” and a “genuinely experienced understanding of that text” (“Literary Competence” 45). And Rosenblatt and Brooks, despite their differences, were both determined to engage students in an experienced understanding of literature.

Rosenblatt repeatedly refers to the “lived through” experience of reading a text (Literature as Exploration), and Brooks also seems to view reading as a form of coming alive into a new awareness (Well Wrought). In describing the deceptive simplicity of Wordsworth, Brooks writes, “Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing” (Well Wrought 11). He turns to a similar phrase in his discussion of Keats: “The various figures depicted upon the urn may play music or speak or sing. If we have been alive to these items, we shall not, perhaps, be too much surprised to hear the urn speak once more” (164). To read is to come “alive” to a text—to attend actively to the drama of a poem as if it were a spectacle performed before our ears and eyes. In his characterization of reading as lived-through experience, as a transaction, and as an intellectual and emotional process, Brooks articulates a version of some of the Deweyan concepts that inspired Rosenblatt’s theories.

Addressing the Problem of Authoritative Readings

Rosenblatt and the New Critics ascribe different ontological statuses to the “meaning” of a text. For the New Critics, meaning generally is located within the text and is realized, experienced, interpreted, or performed by the reader. For Rosenblatt, meaning is created by the reader through a transaction with the text. In their essay on the “Affective Fallacy,” Wimsatt and
Beardsley take the position that discussing “what a line of poetry does” is useful only insofar as it illuminates “what the meaning of the line is” (46). The notion, however, that the correct reading is codified in CliffsNotes or that the reader’s job is to extract ready-made meaning from the text tends to vulgarize and simplify the New Critics’ stance.

One of the most serious (and not incorrect) allegations leveled against New Critics is that their influence plagued students and teachers with the “anxiety of the right reading”—the belief that texts have a single, fixed meaning that the teacher must help students to grasp (Blau, The Literature Workshop 147). Probst comments that, in practice, New Critical pedagogy marginalized student interpretations by emphasizing the “scholarly pursuit of the best reading, the correct reading, the authoritative reading” (Response & Analysis 4). In locating meaning within the text, many of the New Critics’ statements encourage readers to seek a normative or authoritative reading in a way that narrows the pluralistic sense of possibility in a text facilitated by Rosenblatt’s transactional approach.

Brooks located the meaning of the poem more firmly in the words on the page than Rosenblatt, but he did not go so far as to reduce the act of reading to the extraction of fossilized answers whose accuracy could be confirmed in the definitive teacher edition of a textbook. Instead, Brooks believed that the critical reader has a responsibility to “look for the most nearly adequate reading among many possible interpretations” (“The Primacy of the Reader” 193). While Brooks rejected the idea that all readings were equally valid, he recognized that a text could be plausibly interpreted in multiple ways: “The text may set limits, but that still leaves the reader plenty of room. We can say ‘I think the poem has this meaning,’ but in this very utterance we are not saying what the text means absolutely. . . . We need to be open to other readings but not accept them wholeheartedly or uncritically. People need to come together with their
divergent readings and discuss them and argue them out” (“Afterword” 376). Although judicious readers, according to Brooks, will strive for the most sensitive and persuasive reading of a text, no reader can be granted absolute authority in rendering a verifiably accurate judgment of the manifold meaning a text contains. Brooks’s emphasis on the reader’s finely tuned aesthetic engagement with the text is paired with a recognition that apprehending meaning is a social and incremental activity.

Brooks recalled that Warren believed criticism was a fundamentally social act: “What he said he liked best was to get together with someone in a room who was different from him and read a play, novel, poem, or whatever, and talk about it, and argue over it, and fight over it, and see where they agree and disagree. That, for him, was criticism” (“Afterword” 377). Brooks and Warren describe their preference for an academic community in which participants closely read texts, share their divergent readings with each other, and revise their readings as needed in a way that heightens their aesthetic connection with the literature. Thus, the differences in the ontologies of meaning put forward by the New Critics and Rosenblatt are not as pedagogically consequential as some have suggested, since Brooks and Warren’s view of meaning was nuanced enough to accommodate a discourse community in which multiple interpretations of a text were discussed and negotiated.

In Brooks and Warren’s vision, readers are in greater competition for discursive space than they would be in a Rosenblattian classroom, but dialogue is equally characterized by an exchange of divergent readings and not necessarily stymied by forced allegiance to a definitive reading. Thus, New Critical precepts became stultifying not in their ideal enactment but in the assumption of many teachers (and students) that novice readers lacked the authority to participate in the kind of interpretive discourse that Brooks and Warren relished. When
gracefully articulated and tactfully applied, the New Critics’ assumptions about the existence of meaning within a text, while different from Rosenblatt’s, allowed for and even demanded active engagement in an interpretive community.

**Interpreting the Misinterpretation: The Debasement of New Criticism**

If Brooks’s approach to reading literature is, in some respects, not so different from Rosenblatt’s, one might question how New Criticism came to be applied in secondary schools (and mythologized in the field of English education) in a form that would seem to be irreconcilable with Rosenblatt’s beliefs. Although Rosenblatt’s afterword in the 1995 edition of *Literature as Exploration* presents the New Critics as her adversaries, her earlier works (to the extent that they refer to the New Critics at all) tend to express concerns about the influence of New Criticism more than they attack the interpretive theories and practices of the New Critics themselves. Writing in the 1950s, Rosenblatt argued that formulaic exercises in secondary schools fail to capture meaningfully the New Critics’ important emphasis on close reading: “When the influence of the ‘New Criticism’ has permeated secondary teaching, the potentially valuable emphasis on ‘close reading’ often has been nullified also by the creation of routine formulae for analysis” (“Acid Test” 73). A 1969 article by Rosenblatt describes the New Critics as “strong influences in the intellectual climate in which curriculums were developed”; in New Criticism–influenced curricula, “questions are suggested to the teacher that will help the students analyze the work in an orderly way” (“Pattern and Process” 1005–1006).

The 1938 edition of *Literature and Exploration* includes no mention of New Criticism (a label that Ransom did not coin until 1941). Later editions of *Literature as Exploration* add a brief discussion of the New Critics in the chapter titled “The Literary Experience,” in which
Rosenblatt laments the “influence of both the New Criticism and postmodern critical approaches” which has “diminished the concern with the human meaningfulness of the literary work” (Literature as Exploration, 5th edition 29). A review of Rosenblatt’s statements about the New Critics over time reveals a growing frustration and a widening gulf; nevertheless, Rosenblatt’s comments, with the exception of the postscript to the 1995 edition of Literature as Exploration, separate the New Critics’ “influence” from the New Critics’ actual writings.

So what caused the influence of New Criticism to become so problematic? Brooks and Warren’s Understanding Poetry includes some questions that might be said to promote what Rosenblatt calls an “orderly” or “objective” reading, targeting specific formal elements of a poem. In the exercise for an excerpt from Alexander Pope’s “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,” for example, the authors ask the student to “discuss the use of caesura in this passage, particularly as a device for emphasizing antitheses” (289). But many of the questions are more open-ended, inviting an analysis of a single poem or a comparison of two texts. For example, the exercise on Blake’s “London” is simply to “write an analysis of this poem” (583). Sometimes students are encouraged to use one of the authors’ essays as a model for their own analysis. For the exercise on the poem “Absent Yet Present” by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Brooks and Warren ask the student to “write a discussion of the poem” using “the analysis of ‘the Bells of Shandon’ as a model” (233). The heart of the book is not the exercises but rather the commentaries on selected poems that aim to initiate the reader into the art of close reading by example.

But the questions with the narrowest scope (and therefore most adaptable to a multiple choice format) were the ones that were imitated in the Advanced Placement examination in English literature, which the College Board began administering in the 1950s. Emphasizing “textual analysis and literary criticism on the model of the New Critics,” the popular AP Exam
may have been more influential than Brooks’s publications in shaping the version of New Criticism passed on to high schools (Applebee 190). Paul Smith, who served on the Advanced Placement Development Committee, comments that the multiple-choice section of the exam “reads like an anthology edited by a critic whose taste and critical habits are those we’ve come to associate with the New Critics” (28). Smith concedes that the nuance present in Brooks’s reading of Donne’s “Canonization” could not be captured in a multiple-choice format, but he nonetheless contends that “the skeleton and a lot of the muscle of Brooks’s analysis of that poem could be recreated in multiple-choice questions” (30). The effect was to institutionalize a diminished version of New Criticism that would be further corrupted by textbook publishers.

The high school text *Steps to Reading Literature* is an especially fascinating case study in the distortion of New Criticism because it includes a volume that identifies Brooks as a coauthor. The series, devised by James Reid (1963), an editor and senior vice president for Harcourt Brace, teaches the “close reading of short stories, poems and plays” through exercises rooted in the belief that “students learn better when the material is presented in a carefully arranged sequence of small steps” and “students learn better when they find out immediately whether or not their answers are correct” (Brooks, Reid, et al. 1). Frank Smith defines a “program” as any educational platform, including workbooks, manuals, and activity kits, that “transfers instructional decision-making from the teacher (and children) in the classroom to procedure laid down by people removed from the teaching situation by time and distance” (636). Programmed instruction grew in popularity in the late 1950s, following the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, which ushered in an era of anxiety about the adequacy of education in the United States as well as the rise of management systems designed to solve problems with maximum efficiency (Frank Smith 636). And 1957 also marked the publication of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*, which
presented a behaviorist model of language that was applied to instructional practices (Myers 100).

While the introduction to one of the textbooks in Reid’s series states that “good literature is always a various, supple, and multiple engagement between the reader and the author,” it also maintains that “the beginning must go step-by-step” (Brooks, Reid, Ciardi, Perrine, & Gurney 1). Brooks’s contribution to the textbook comes in the form of an essay about Wallace Stegner’s “The Wolfer,” which Reid has transformed into a fill-in-the-blank exercise. One section of the essay reads as follows:

In “The Wolfer” the person to whom the story is told, the ______ [audience or listener], is neither named nor described. We must decide for ourselves who the listener might be, and our clues come from the manner in which the ______ [narrator or Mountie] tells the story. (Brooks, Reid, et al. 13)

In the rationale accompanying samples of the programmed exercises, Reid writes, “Many questions in a close reading of a literary work do have definite answers. We want you to learn those definite answers and to learn how to arrive at them yourself” (672). The statements of Reid and other high school textbook creators (more than those of Brooks and other New Critics) cemented the perception of New Criticism as rigid and prescriptive dogma. However, as Reid explains in an article he wrote for English Journal, the programmatic model was derived not from the New Critics but from B. F. Skinner, “that original genius of Harvard . . . and a leading spinner of theories about learning” (659). Skinner’s behaviorism, Myers notes, offered an educational model that “worked as long as one was content with objective parts and ‘basic reading’” (100).

For Reid, a veteran textbook editor, to write a poetry “program,” he realized that he would need to “acquire a set of teaching ideas, a body of content to put in programmed form for better teaching and learning” (659). New Criticism was not the inspiration for programmatic
programmed instruction as an opportunity to introduce the method of “close reading” advocated by the New Critics into high school classes: “The trend toward introducing this approach in the high school classroom was gaining momentum. We felt we were part of this larger movement down from colleges to the high schools. It was natural, therefore, for us to approach Cleanth Brooks and thus induct one of the best-known proponents of close reading into our literature programming efforts” (679). Reid recruited Brooks, along with other noted university professors, including poet and critic John Ciardi, to write essays that could be “programmed” into exercises for high school students.

The application of programmatic models to the teaching of reading, Frank Smith attests, ignored the fundamental truth that reading and writing are “human activities” that children “learn in the course of engaging in them” (637). According to Smith, the “purposeless and decontextualized” programs “fractionate the learning experience” by breaking down tasks into narrowly prescribed steps that the learner has no intrinsic motivation to perform (637). I would note, however, that programmed instruction’s mindless fractionating of learning has little in common with the theories and practices of New Critics such as Brooks and Warren. Responding to different political and institutional pressures, the New Critics’ approach to literature did not emerge alongside programmed instruction and other manifestations of analytic/decoding literacy. Thus, what Myers refers to as “the New Criticism of analytic/decoding literacy” (91) might be more accurately described as the version of New Criticism that was co-opted by the analytic/decoding literacy movement.

While the attempts to commercialize programmatic models of close reading seem insidious, English teachers and teacher educators might be at least somewhat sympathetic to the
desire to find a step-by-step procedure to teach New Critical methods. Even those English majors
turned high school teachers who had been personally trained by the most skillful of the New
Critics might have found themselves adrift at the prospect of teaching their adolescent students to
produce highly competent close readings of poems with model essays by Brooks and Warren as their only guide. *Understanding Poetry*, which is subtitled an “anthology for college students,”
would not be a sufficient teaching tool for most high school classes.

**Looking Forward (Closely): Implications for Teacher Education**

What *Understanding Poetry* does not fully convey (and what was certainly lost when
Brooks and Warren’s approaches were adapted in materials marketed for high school teachers) is
the pedagogical sensitivity of the authors. Robert B. Heilman, who was Brooks’s colleague at
Louisiana State, remembers Brooks as a master teacher “with a combination of patience, tact,
and a sharp eye for an ingenious path from a student’s gut reaction to the textual realities” (16).
A small clue about Brooks’s commitment to teaching appears in the dedication of *The Well
Wrought Urn*. Brooks dedicates the book to “the members of English 300-K (Summer Session of
1942, University of Michigan) who discussed the problems with me and helped me work out
some of the analyses.” With a democratic ethos not unlike Rosenblatt’s, Brooks regards his
students as apprentices and collaborators in “working out” the interpretive problems presented by
the poems.

Yet absent from Brooks’s writings (and equally absent from Rosenblatt’s) are
observations or suggestions about how teachers might establish an environment in which
students’ writing becomes a means of authentically “working out” an interpretation of a literary
text—how writing might engage students in charting a path from “gut reaction to textual
realities.” As Blau has commented, “What needs to be addressed to revitalize the teaching of literature is not so much theories about reading or literary discourse, but the culture of instruction” (The Literature Workshop 18). A narrowness of vision in the teaching of writing about literature would seem far more responsible for the perpetuation of oppressively mechanical interpretive methods than the theories underlying authentic New Critical practices. In the twenty-first century, investment in textbooks and tests (and not in the professional education of teachers) continues to fuel the misuse of the New Critics’ work, and the false dichotomy between Rosenblatt and the New Critics continues to obscure the need for generative conversations about cultures of instruction in which an experienced understanding of literature, which both Rosenblatt and Brooks valued, might flourish.

I would like to urge teacher educators to reevaluate the treatment of Rosenblatt and the New Critics in English teacher preparation courses (and certainly in doctoral courses that introduce future scholars to the foundational texts of the profession). As teacher educators, we need to make a stronger effort to debunk the historically inaccurate assumption that Rosenblatt’s theories were first formulated as a rebellion against the New Critics. And we might simultaneously repair the tendency to introduce New Criticism through secondary sources that summarize the New Critics’ positions, sometimes problematically, instead of inviting a close reading of their work alongside Rosenblatt’s. By looking back at the ways Brooks and Rosenblatt defied the educational status quo of their time, we can look ahead to future reformations in literary learning. Brooks and Rosenblatt together help frame an ever-more-relevant conversation about how we might make secondary and college classrooms more hospitable to aesthetic experiences with literature, and an examination of their work also
provides a cautionary tale in how easily theories may be corrupted when translated into classroom practice.

Smith et al. suggest a “pedagogical compromise” that would draw on New Critical and reader-response approaches. In one model lesson, the authors propose that teachers incorporate two types of discussion questions: a set of “text-dependent” questions in “the best New Critical tradition” and a series of questions “that ask students to focus on their experience of reading” (32–33, 35). As much as I appreciate the commitment to balance and the conscious effort to avoid demonizing New Criticism, I would argue that the “best New Critical tradition” does consider “the experience of reading.” Rather than training teachers to apply different “tools” from different “schools,” teacher educators may be better served to embrace the more difficult project of helping teachers heighten their sensitivity as readers of both the students and the texts that they teach. English teachers can benefit from workshops that engage them in harnessing their expertise as readers—not to impose authoritative interpretations but instead to shape spaces for meaningful discourse and to form genuine and generous master-apprentice relationships in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger).

The popular “critical lens” approach (Appleman)—in which New Criticism and Reader Response become two among many theoretical entry-points into a text—risks indenturing teachers and students, if only temporarily, as servants to ideologies they have no real intellectual investment in and only a surface-level understanding of. Appleman rightly argues that critical theories invisibly inform our readings even when we do not name them, but I worry that overemphasizing the selection of lenses inadvertently can lead to what I. A. Richards calls a “withdrawal from experience” (Practical Criticism 232)—the superficial reading that Rosenblatt and the New Critics alike sought to escape. Instead of looking at Rosenblatt and the New Critics
as variously tinted glasses we might take on and off or as a source of questions and activities to engage student readers, we might instead turn to Rosenblatt’s and Brooks’s most textured and astute theorizations to shape principles of practice that foster a disposition toward readings that are careful and imaginative, judicious and just, true to the lived-through aesthetic experience of a text. This form of close reading can be compatible with a range of critical orientations.

We may be tempted to narrate the history of ideas iconoclastically—to search for heroes and villains to personify competing ideologies—yet such narratives frequently overlook crucial details. The great tragedy in the misunderstood legacies of Rosenblatt and the New Critics lies in the failure to see the substantial common ground between two camps unnecessarily defined in opposition to one another. Hugh Kenner’s memorable portrait of the New Critic at the blackboard, mechanistically diagramming a poem, is, as Brooks points out, a witty caricature (“State of Letters” 595). And since we are, by profession, teachers and interpreters of nuance in literature, we should be loath to construct our professional narratives through caricatures. I suspect that Brooks and Rosenblatt both would appreciate a closer reading of the past that might bring us closer together in the future.
In college classrooms of the twenty-first century, various forms of close reading remain widely practiced, if not universally embraced, in the teaching and learning of literature, even as the theoretical roots and political implications of the approach have been subject to increasing scrutiny. Meanwhile, for K-12 teachers, the Common Core State Standards in literacy have contributed to the proliferation of classroom materials and pedagogical strategies supposedly targeted at the teaching of close reading, and a renewed emphasis on some version of close reading continues to shape curriculum even in states where the Common Core itself has fallen out of favor. New York’s English Language Arts Next Generation Standards, for example, are more a re-branding than a wholesale re-imagining of the Common Core, with large portions of language from the earlier standards, including the specific standards about reading closely, copied verbatim from the Common Core (“New York State English” 4). According to the state-produced document with Frequently Asked Questions about the new standards, “Reading closely is a key part of the Next Generation Learning Standards” (“Next Generation” 2).

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11 As Peter Greene observes, “The Common Core Standards may have changed their name and be re-written in a dozen different ways, but they are still alive and bubbling beneath the surface of public education.”
In this chapter, my goal is to bring together the disparate conversations about close reading in secondary and university education in order to generate more robust principles of practice for all. To that end, I will evaluate some competing versions of close reading that provide models for literary learning, with a focus on possibilities for re-connecting traditions of close reading with aesthetic education.

**Close Reading in the University: Resistance and Re-commitment**

While the term “close reading” is prevalent in K-12 education, most discourse about close reading in secondary schools shows little awareness of recent attempts to re-define, recover or re-imagine the place of close reading in university English departments. Perhaps the most serious challenge to close reading as a scholarly tool has come in Franco Moretti’s “distant reading,” which uses data analysis techniques to study large-scale trends in literary production. Moretti describes distant reading as a “condition of knowledge” in which distance “allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text” ("Conjectures" 57). For example, Moretti traces the shifting popularity of different genres of the British novel based on publication statistics from 1740-1900 ("Graphs" 78). As Moretti acknowledges, distant reading is, in a sense, not reading at all. “We know how to read texts,” Moretti writes, “now let’s learn not to read them” ("Graphs" 57). While distant reading works on a larger scale than is possible in close reading, Paula Moya notes that it is ultimately not antagonistic to close reading (9).

Moretti’s distant reading allows academic research to be advanced “without a single, direct

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12 Thomas Middleton offers a different definition of “distant reading,” focusing on the reception histories of poetry. For Middleton, “distant reading” is the examination of “temporal and other distances between reading and composition [that] are active contributors to the work of the poem” (xv). Middleton rejects the emphasis on “ideal” reading that is sometimes implicit in close reading, but careful attention to the language of a text remains compatible with his approach.
textual reading,” but it does not diminish the value of direct, human textual engagements outside the context of historical or cultural research, nor does it replace close reading as a suitable method for attending to a single text (“Graphs” 57).¹³

In what might seem, on the surface, like another challenge to close reading, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus use the term “surface reading” to question the assumption that “the most significant truths are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible” (4). Yet “surface reading” turns out to be an umbrella term that accommodates many different kinds of interactions with a text, including some forms of close reading; one definition of surface is “the intricate verbal structure of literary language” (10). Best and Marcus write, “This valorization of surface reading as willed, sustained proximity to the text recalls the aims of New Criticism, which insisted that the key to understanding a text’s meaning lay within the text itself, particularly in its formal properties” (10). In surface reading, “attentiveness to the artwork” is understood as “a kind of freedom” (16).

Neither distant reading nor surface reading does much to minimize the value of close reading in the classroom; however, pedagogies of close reading have been challenged more directly on the grounds that they tend to rely on and reinforce a narrow canon. Despite provocatively titling an essay “Against Close Reading,” Peter Rabinowitz does not argue against the usefulness of teaching or practicing close reading in some contexts. But Rabinowitz does contend that a fixation on close reading strongly and sometimes problematically shapes college literature curricula (“Against Close Reading”). Judgments of literary value, Rabinowitz notes, frequently depend on how well a text responds to “a series of standardized reading strategies—specifically, to varieties of close reading” (“Against Close Reading” 233). He observes, “Once

¹³ Inspired partly by the emergence of “distant reading,” Tom Lynch has devised assignments for secondary English classes that combine quantitative analysis, aesthetic response, and literary interpretation. See “Electrical Evocations: Computer Science, the Teaching of Literature, and the Future of English Education.”
you give priority to close reading, you implicitly favor figurative writing over realistic writing, indirect expression over direct expression, deep meaning over surface meaning, form over content, and the elite over the popular” (“Against Close Reading” 233). Implicit and sometimes unquestioned values may lead to the systematic exclusion of some voices, including authors from diverse backgrounds, in favor of others.

Taken to an extreme, Rabinowitz’s argument, though a sound defense of the importance of inclusivity and a varied reading practices, would seem to make the category of “literature” obsolete, replacing the discipline of literature with the study of social, cultural and historical documents—consigning literary studies to be subsumed by other academic fields. Close reading, Moya writes, remains the “most powerful discipline-specific tool we have at our disposal” (9). Though they would be wise to reflect on the source of their assumptions, most English teachers do believe—and can make a reasonable case to support—the benefit of seeking “deep meaning over surface meaning” (putting aside Best and Marcus’s rather deep definition of “surface,” which Rabinowitz’s use of the term predates) in the particular context of a literature course.

The Yale English Department’s famous “Major English Poets” course, for decades a prerequisite to the English major, might seem a prime example of Rabinowitz’s claim that the practice of close reading is inextricably linked to narrow assumptions about the canon. Designed as an induction into close reading for English majors, the yearlong course traditionally featured the work of eight canonical (all white male) poets from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot. Alan Liu, a former Yale faculty member, characterized the class as “the archetypal New Critical course at Yale” (Liu 79). The 2016-2017 Yale course catalog describes the first semester of the “Major English

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14 In a panel discussion with David Thorburn at MIT, Stephen Greenblatt recalled that the Major English Poets course, English 125, formerly known as English 25, cemented his decision to become an English major. “It remains the best course I ever had,” he said. Though he is best known as the founder of New Historicism who challenged the
Poets” course as follows: “An introduction to the diversity and continuity of the English literary tradition through close reading of four poets from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Donne. Emphasis on developing skills of literary interpretation and critical writing” (Yale College Programs of Study 2016).

As of 2017-2018, the course was re-named “Readings in English Poetry I,” as a result of a curriculum reform project that occurred alongside student petitions to “de-colonize” the English major (Treisman). The description in the course catalog was amended as follows:

Introduction to the English literary tradition through close reading of select poems from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries. Emphasis on developing skills of literary interpretation and critical writing; diverse linguistic and social histories; and the many varieties of identity and authority in early literary cultures. Readings may include Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, Middle English lyrics, The Faerie Queene, Paradise Lost, and poems by Isabella Whitney, Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, Amelia Lanyer, John Donne, and George Herbert, among others. (Yale College Programs of Study 2017).

The new description apparently values political performance over syntactic fluency or conceptual coherence; it reads as a negotiated patchwork of clauses, spliced together to satisfy the interests of varied constituents. Whereas the original course description placed four poets on an incontestable pedestal, the revision self-consciously avoids narrowing the canon or enshrining any single author as essential. The listing of possible authors now interweaves Amelia Lanyer theoretical assumptions of New Criticism, Greenblatt, who was an undergraduate and graduate student at Yale at the height of New Criticism, recalled his training in close reading with nostalgia:

“When I was there certainly as an undergraduate and massively as a graduate student, when I was much more sensitively aware of it, New Criticism was I won’t say the only game in town but the principal game in town and practiced with a remarkable degree of intensity and intelligence...It produced fantastic results for a generation. It was democratizing because it meant that people who didn’t come from backgrounds that had easy access to or national associations with this literature could feel they could possess it and say something interesting about it. And it was a liberation not only from historical study but from a cult of taste. It wasn’t that you had to have exquisite taste. You had to know how to deal with texts, to get your hands dirty with them and mess around with them and understand what their internal structures were, and be clever enough to grasp the ambiguities and ironies in them. One of the failures of my generation is that we had this training which, like every generation feels about its parents, we grew impatient with, but I’m enormously grateful that I had years and years of it, and I haven’t been able to reproduce it, except in very modest gestural form, with my own students, so they didn’t have that both to absorb and kick against” (Greenblatt quoted in Thorburn).
between Shakespeare and Donne; it begins with the pointedly open “readings may include” and ends with the all-inclusive “among others.”

Notably, and relevant to Rabinowitz’s argument, the change in content occurs alongside a subtle shift in methodology. The focus on “literary interpretation and critical writing” is now accompanied by a promised emphasis on “diverse linguistic and social histories” and “many varieties of identity,” “authority,” and “literary cultures.” To the extent that it challenges the canon, the course can no longer simply engage in “close reading”; it now more prominently reflects questions of history, identity, authority and culture. Despite of all of these significant changes, the Yale curriculum reform does not seem to adopt Rabinowitz’s call to decouple the practice of “close reading” from the adjudication of literary value. Perhaps what qualifies as “close reading” has been expanded, but “close reading” retains its privileged position in the first sentence of the new course description and evidently remains the course’s defining feature.

Offering a counterpoint to Rabinowitz’s claim about close reading and the canon, Yale English professor Margaret Homans, a feminist critic, argues that diversifying the syllabi of introductory courses need not diminish the emphasis on close reading. Reflecting on her own formative experience as a student in a version of the Major English Poets course, Homans recalled discussing the significance of the preposition in Wordsworth’s line “the picture of the mind revives again” in the poem “Tintern Abbey.” The fact that Wordsworth chose “of,” which implies that the vision is created by his mind, rather than merely existing “in” it, stands for Homans as a powerful reminder of the power of the imagination—and of imaginative literature. She writes, “The skill of close reading taught in ‘Major English Poets’ should be basic equipment for life. Surely it can be learned from other sources outside the canon.” Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Homans suggests, provides as apt training in interpreting ambiguity as
Wordsworth’s poetry. And the poetry of Adrienne Rich or Audre Lourde afford ample opportunities for students “to practice entering fictional worlds, empathizing beyond their range of experience and thinking—as many writers do, not just Wordsworth—about the mind’s capacity to create.” Homans makes a case for the special values of a literary education—studying texts with richness of imagination, verbal power and interpretive ambiguity—that transcend a preoccupation with canonical texts.

Although the values associated with close reading may work in some ways to restrict the range of literature curricula, the practice of close reading also can have the opposite effect—training readers to offer deep attention and empathy to unfamiliar perspectives outside of their own experiences and assumptions. Jane Gallop suggests that close reading is the ultimate defense against prejudice and a rare example of real learning:

Reading what we expect to find means finding what we already know; learning, on the other hand, means coming to know something we did not know before. Finding what we already know, projecting onto a text, is the opposite of learning. As a technique to interrupt projection, to make us see what we don’t already presume, close reading can equip us to be open to learning—to resist our presumptions, prejudices, and suppositions—to keep on learning. (“Close Reading” 16)

While Rabinowitz cautions that close readers are apt to accumulate troves of evidence that support their initial assumptions, Gallop contends that truly attentive readers are equipped to do the reverse. Drawing on theory of mind research, Moya similarly suggests that attending closely to literary fiction interrupts “taken for granted social scripts,” disrupts egocentrism, and forms new schemas, thereby expanding “the reader’s horizon of possibility for encountering, living with, and loving characters (e.g., implied people) different from themselves” (14, 26). As a scholar of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in literature, Moya, who calls her approach “socioformal,” positions close reading as an especially useful method to interrogate real and fictional worlds:
Close reading a work of literature is not merely an encounter with the self; depending on how careful the reading is, and how willing readers are to have their ideas challenged, it can also be an encounter with an other— even a radical other. A close reading of a work of literature can thus serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas— such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality— of the social worlds, as well as the worlds of sense, in which both authors and readers live. (9)

Although some claim that the practice of close reading, with roots in New Criticism, strips texts from their contexts, Moya argues that an examination of a text’s formal features can amplify awareness of the work’s complex sociocultural embeddedness. Moya defines close reading as “the kind of intensive reading and re-reading that calls for a heightened attention to literary language and form, considering both as semantic structures that mediate authors’ and readers’ perception of the social world” (9). Significantly, the intersection of the author’s and reader’s perception figures prominently in Moya’s version of close reading; the reader is not implicated merely as a passive recipient of textual content.

Equating close reading with close listening, Gallop cites Eve Sedgwick’s account of her psychotherapy in A Dialogue on Love: “When someone paraphrases in that routine way, I feel as though my own words were being set aside, disrespected” (“Close Reading” 19). For Sedgwick, what Cleanth Brooks called the “Heresy of Paraphrase” is not a violation of academic decorum but rather a violation of human dignity. To be paraphrased is to be invalidated, generalized, trivialized— subjected to an emotionally distant reading characterized by assumption rather than attention.

Close reading, Gallop argues, should not be conflated with “critical reading” or “critical thinking.” The terms are related but not synonymous since close reading may be critical or appreciative, and critical thinking may involve big-picture, systemic issues removed from careful attention to an author’s language (“Ethics of Reading”). Summarizing key ideas (often a routine
in secondary English classrooms and standardized reading assessments) is actually antithetical to Gallop’s version of close reading, which lingers over subordinate features of the text:

In fact, your usual practice of reading which focuses on main ideas would dismiss them all as marginal or trivial. Another thing they have in common is that, although they are minor, they are nonetheless conspicuous, eye-catching: they are either surprising or repeated, set off from the text or too long. Close reading pays attention to elements in the text which, although marginal, are nonetheless emphatic, prominent—elements in the text which ought to be quietly subordinate to the main idea, but which textually call attention to themselves. (“Ethics of Reading” 8)

Far from an orderly, antiseptic academic exercise, close reading is, for Gallop, analogous to the curious, if sometimes impulsive, behavior of a child: “Close reading resembles the interruptions of that child. It is a method of undoing the training that keeps us to the straight and narrow path of main ideas. It is a way of learning not to disregard those features of the text that attract our attention, but are not principal ideas” (“Ethics of Reading” 8). As a practice, close reading heightens consciousness of what the reader is inclined to notice and also expands the range of those observations. Close reading reaches inward (expanding metacognition) and outward (tuning in to a voice or voices outside oneself).

What all close reading has in common, Jonathan Culler suggests, is a form of focused attention:

The crucial thing is to slow down, though “slow reading” is doubtless a less useful slogan than either “slow food” or “close reading,” since slow reading may be inattentive, distracted, lethargic. Close asks for a certain myopia—a Verfremdungseffekt. It enjoins looking at rather than through the language of the text and thinking about how it is functioning, finding it puzzling. (23)

Some readers, under the guise of close reading, fixate on particular details in a text that support a preconceived pattern of interpretation, but close readers simultaneously may be open readers in that they look “at rather than through” the language of a text in a way that can challenge them to see beyond assumptions. The opposite of close reading, Culler suggests, would not be distant
reading or surface reading but rather inattentive reading. The opposite of close reading is, paradoxically, “close reading,” the misguided versions of close reading sometimes promulgated in schools. New Critical close reading fails, Don Bialostosky writes, when it leaves students detached from texts rather than more closely connected with them, decoupling literature from students’ experience and confining it to “another realm of meaning they are accustomed to inhabit, a sacralized realm of art to some, a realm of school meanings to others” (113). When close reading becomes intractably tied to “school meanings,” Bialostosky proposes, it needs to be replaced by “a pedagogical space where we teach productive attentiveness to literary texts” (113). Authentic close reading can be defined not by a protocol or procedure but rather by a disposition of attentiveness, which facilitates the reader’s entrance into the real and imagined space a text occupies.

Robert Scholes cautions that, in practice, “the ‘art of reading’ developed by the New Critics has become formulaic in our classroom” (Crafty 25). The so-called literary devices—theme, symbol, tone, irony—tend to, in Scholes’s account, become “woven into a screen, a special kind of texture or text that stands between the literature students read and their own humanity” (Crafty 25). On the other hand, contemplating the formal features or details of a text sometimes can provide a pathway toward profound attention. Wayne Booth acknowledges that even traditional academic study can transform the words on a page into a powerful gateway into an author’s world.

Though academic study of literature too often seems designed to make such fusions of spirit impossible, turning every ‘text’ into a thoroughly distanced puzzle or enigma, the fact remains that even the impassive puzzle solver or symbol hunter or signifier chaser is to some degree caught up in patterns determined by the puzzle—the tale as told. The only way to avoid “thinking the thought of another”—that mysteriously quite-probably-dead ‘other’ who chose to tell this tale in this way—is to stop listening” (Company 254).
Booth proposes that reading is fundamentally an act of relationship-building with a writer—not the living, breathing (or dead) author but the implied author evoked by the text. Booth admired the work of Louise Rosenblatt, and, with his formulations of the “implied author” and the “implied reader,” challenged the New Critics’ “intentional fallacy” and “affective fallacy.” Nonetheless, Booth suggests that even readers who adopt what might be called a New Critical approach, attending closely to the patterns, puzzles and formal features of the text, are likely to be entering into some form of communion with an implied author. Fundamentally, teaching close reading entails learning to listen—not just to a teacher but to the text and, by implication, its author. The teaching of reading, for Booth, has a strong ethical mission: “When we have succeeded, our students practice a kind of sensitivity to language and to other people as they employ language—a kind of listening and responding that in its combination of sympathy and criticism is always, in every society, in short supply” (Vocation 78). Acquiring a sensitivity to language entails listening with sensitivity to the human voices who compose and are composed by the language of literature.

New trends in literary scholarship like “distant reading” and “surface reading” riff on the name of close reading without displacing close reading as an essential pedagogical technique. Critical reflections about close reading as a pedagogy return to questions of listening and attention. Close reading, in its most valued form, heightens sensitivity and pushes readers to hear more than what they would expect to find in a text. The pitfall of close reading is that, in practice, it can limit possibilities for listening; it may silence voices through its association with a narrow canon and numb genuine attention when it is reduced to rote procedure.
The Anesthetizing Effect of the Common Core’s Version of Close Reading

In its ideal enactment, close reading becomes a kind of aesthetic reading, what Louise Rosenblatt would classify as a lived-through experience with a text: “In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Reader 25). Whereas an aesthetic reading relies on what happens during the reading experience, a non-aesthetic (or efferent) reading focuses on what remains after the reading is finished, on “the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out” (Reader 23).

Rosenblatt’s description of aesthetic reading follows from Dewey’s discussion of the possibility of an aesthetic (or “esthetic”) transaction with any work of art: “A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individualized experience. As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But as a work of art, it is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced” (Reader 113). For Dewey, as for Rosenblatt, art exists not primarily as a physical representation but rather as experience. Through that experience, the reader or spectator becomes a creator or re-creator of the work.

In a distinctly Deweyan definition, Maxine Greene uses the term “aesthetic” to refer to “the kinds of experiences associated with reflective and conscious encounters with the arts” and the “way in which a work of art can become an object of experience and the effect it then has in altering perspectives on nature, human beings, and moment-to-moment existence” (5). Recalling Dewey, Greene writes that the opposite of the aesthetic is the anesthetic: “Anesthesia, for me, implies numbness, an emotional incapacity, and this can immobilize, present people from
questioning, from meeting the challenge of being in and naming and (perhaps) transforming the world” (xi). For Dewey, Rosenblatt and Greene, aesthetics has a significant ethical component. In activating a reader’s engagement in the text, aesthetic experience also positions the reader as a thinking, feeling, questioning, potentially transformative actor in the world.

Arguments for and against close reading in the college classroom tend to appeal to aesthetics or ethics. Rabinowitz challenges close reading partly on ethical grounds, arguing that the requirement for canonical works to be congenial to close reading unfairly marginalizes certain texts and their authors. Bialostosky’s claim that close reading impedes the reader’s authentic engagement implies that close reading interferes with an aesthetic experience. Gallop and Moya both make a principled ethical argument for close reading, suggesting that close reading can serve as a tool to counter prejudice and encourage attention to unfamiliar perspectives. In affirming the place of close reading in the college literature curriculum, Homans looks toward aesthetics, citing the special value of imaginative literature, as well as ethics, noting that imagination is directly related to empathy.

Notably, the Common Core Standards make neither an aesthetic nor an ethical case for the value of close reading. The Common Core curriculum guide co-authored by Coleman states that the standards require “reading closely to draw evidence and knowledge from the text” and dictates that “close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities” (Hinchman and Moore 443). In the version of close reading embraced by the Common Core, Thomas Newkirk comments, “the job of the student is to locate and ‘gather’ or ‘extract’ or pull facts from a ‘repository,’” which stands in opposition to “a transactional or constructivist view” (306).
In *Research-based Practices for Teaching Common Core Literacy*, Pearson and Hiebert write, “The ultimate goal of reading is (1) the integration of knowledge and ideas from the text; (2) the delineation, evaluation and critique of arguments and specific claims in the text; and (3) the analysis of ideas encountered across multiple texts and experiences to build knowledge” (4-5). In the approach to reading implicit in the Common Core, the text becomes a container of ideas—the material for a knowledge-building enterprise—not an aesthetic experience.

Although they sometimes acknowledge applications outside the realm of poetry and fiction, proponents of close reading in college English departments tend to associate the teaching of close reading with the study of literature. The language of ethics and aesthetics, so prominent in discussions of close reading in colleges, is virtually absent from the Common Core and from publications intended to guide the standards’ implementation. Instead, the Common Core reading standards imply a utilitarian definition of “close reading” in which literary reading is barely distinguished from informational reading. For grades 9-10, the first standard for reading literary texts duplicates the language of the first standard for informational texts: “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the texts says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (National Governors). The second standard for literary texts is almost identical to its informational counterpart: “Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text” (National Governors). All of the language from the corresponding informational standard is included; the only differences are the addition of the word “theme” and the phrase “in detail.” In writing, students are expected to “draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research” (National Governors). Close reading, as defined in the Common Core
Standards, is not a distinctively literary form of reading and amounts largely to processing information. The fixation on finding a “theme or central idea” departs from Gallop’s suggestion that close reading, rather than focusing on a main idea, has the power to illuminate “elements in the text which ought to be quietly subordinate to the main idea, but which textually call attention to themselves” (“Ethics of Reading” 8). The focus on “theme” also risks positioning literary elements as a “screen,” in Scholes’s terms, that intervenes in the transaction between reader and text.

The Common Core Standards document only uses the word “aesthetic” once, in the eleventh and twelfth-grade standards for reading literature, which ask students to analyze how an author’s choices contribute to a work’s “overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact” (National Governors). Here the “aesthetic impact” is framed as secondary to, rather than intertwined with, “meaning and structure,” and the standards remain cryptic about what “aesthetic impact” means and whether it involves the reader’s experience. Moreover, we might question why “aesthetic impact” is excluded from the reading standards for grades 9-10, or, for that matter, the elementary grades, where aesthetic learning would seem to be more rather than less crucial.

The standards for grades 11-12 also require that students “analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.” The inclusion of “beauty” suggests some attention to literary or aesthetic qualities of language. However, the standards seem to frame beauty in objective rather than subjective terms that minimize the reader’s freedom in experiencing and evaluating a word’s impact. Aesthetics is primarily passive and appreciative rather than transactional.
Coleman’s stance on aesthetic education is elaborated on in a document he authored to guide arts curriculum developers (but which remains excluded from the Common Core standards themselves). Coleman makes numerous attempts to connect literacy and the arts, suggesting that a visual arts education should begin with “close observation” and teach students to “re-examine and observe closely” complex texts (“Guiding” 1). At times, Coleman describes a practice of close observation in sensible and defensible terms. For example, the call to develop a tolerance for confusion—“Appreciation requires tolerating any initial confusion or uncertainty and staying with it until more is seen”—would be a welcome addition to the literacy standards (“Guiding” 1). Coleman even encourages students to adopt the role of creator, applying specific techniques from the works that they study. Yet the gestures toward a comprehensive aesthetic education fall short because Coleman marginalizes the emotional dimension of artistic response, de-emphasizes the power of the perceiver to make interpretive choices, and neglects to highlight possibilities for playful engagements with works of art. Coleman writes, “Aligned arts curriculum materials should include explicit models of high quality evidence-based answers to questions about—samples of proficient student responses—specific works of art from each grade” (“Guiding” 4). Close observation becomes enfolded in a joy-killing and freedom-killing exercise of answering evidence-based questions.

In a literary turn, Coleman quotes C.S. Lewis’s comparison of viewing a painting to reading a verbal text: “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender” (3). Lewis’s command may provide a helpful reminder about receptivity in an aesthetic encounter, but Coleman’s choice of quote ultimately seems unfortunate. To surrender is an apt description of what Coleman expects of students—to suppress their thoughts and feelings and submit to an authority outside themselves. And more than surrendering to a work of art, students are
compelled to surrender their freedom to textbook publishers and test-makers who, at Coleman’s behest, impose “text-dependent questions” that limit their opportunity to exercise curiosity, observation, and wonder.

In his 2012 MLA Presidential Address, Russell A. Berman recounts a conversation with a first-year student at Stanford, who says that she appreciates the information provided in her humanities classes but dislikes the emphasis on interpretation and discussion. The student’s perspective, Berman laments, reflects the emphasis in secondary English classes, which, under the influence of the Common Core, have “redefined success away from literary reading, substituting a model of technical competence” (456). Although David Steiner, in his role as New York State Education Commissioner, supported the development of the Common Core Standards, he has voiced concern that the standards may diminish students’ experiences with literature. Steiner expresses doubt about whether the “forensic skills of a detective,” if they come with the impoverishment of aesthetic experience, will prepare students for success in college (709). The close reading sanctioned by the Common Core is decidedly not the close reading that college English professors of diverse theoretical orientations continue to embrace. And the Common Core’s presentation of close reading—as an information-gleaning, argument-dissecting, and argument-building skill—runs counter to the ethics and aesthetics-based rationales that college teachers use to defend close reading’s continuing relevance.

**Disentangling New Criticism, Close Reading, and the Common Core Standards**

In secondary English education, the history of close reading is most commonly associated with the much-maligned New Criticism, and the Common Core Standards, with their emphasis on close reading, frequently have been interpreted as part of a New Critical revival. This linkage,
however, represents an incomplete understanding of New Criticism and the Common Core and seriously limits possibilities for effectively critiquing the standards and advocating for more educationally productive models of close reading.

Coleman, the lead architect of the standards, has prioritized “the close, sustained reading of complex texts” and has urged teachers to “focus on what lies within the four corners of the text” (Coleman and Pimentel 4). With Coleman’s text-centered vision in mind, many commentators have traced the deficiencies of the Common Core to the theories and pedagogies of the New Critics. Newkirk situates the standards within a history of reading in which the “balance between reader and text has shifted” from the New Critics’ emphasis on close reading to Louise Rosenblatt’s reader-centered pedagogy (306). For Newkirk, the Common Core represents a pendulum swing back in the direction of New Criticism. “Viewed along this continuum,” he writes, “the CCSS could be viewed as an unbalanced return back to the text” (306). Like Newkirk, Hinchman and Moore suggest that the Common Core’s preoccupation with excavating knowledge from the text reflects a New Critical definition of close reading.

According to Hinchman and Moore, “New Criticism theorists such as Richards and Brooks stipulated close reading as a rigorous objective method for extracting the correct meaning of the text” (443). Chris Gilbert similarly argues that the “text-dependent” method of the Common Core Standards “mirrors New Criticism literary theory as it asserts that meaning resides in the text and the reader’s purpose is to extract said meaning” (27).

Peter Smagorinsky suggests the Common Core Standards have provided a “major comeback for New Criticism,” which, he asserts, “requires engagement with the technical rather than thematic aspects of a work” and “thus seeks to distance readers from texts so they may undertake a cold analysis that is spared their idiosyncratic reading of personal experiences into
texts” (29). What seems ironic—and what most of the New Critics would surely dispute—is that a pedagogy of genuine close reading would be employed to “distance readers from texts.”

Rabinowitz has coined the phrase “Zombie New Criticism” to describe the Common Core Standards’ mangled implementation of New Critical concepts (“Euclid”). Deborah Appleman, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm, following Rabinowitz, argue that the Common Core reflects the “ghostly vestiges of the New Criticism” but acknowledge that “David Coleman’s version of the New Criticism isn’t even fair to the New Critics” (26, 35). Citing Rene Wellek, Steiner comments that New Criticism is rooted in a commitment to “the experience of reading itself” and a “whole vision (a Weltanschauung) that valorized the text’s aesthetic dimension” (706). Thus, the Common Core Standards come closer to representing superficial reading than true New Critical reading in an approach that, Steiner warns, “may put at risk joyful freedom in response to what is beautiful” (708). As the object of interrogation or inquiry, literature and information are treated in the standards as essentially interchangeable—a utilitarian attitude that runs counter to the views of Cleanth Brooks, who maintained that “poems and novels cannot be treated as if they were newspaper reports, editorials on current events or even philosophical essays” (Brooks quoted in Warren 18). Like Rosenblatt, who described reading literature as a “special kind of experience” (A Performing Art” 999-1000), Brooks believed that literary texts “have their own kind of truth and their own mode of utterance” (Brooks quoted in Warren 18). The New Critics valued the experiential dimension of reading and were loath to reduce a literary text to its paraphrasable “content.” Accordingly, the notion of reading to “extract” ideas from a text seems nearly as far removed from the language of the New Critics as it is from the writings of Rosenblatt.
The identification of irony or paradox is a classic New Critical interpretive move, and the Common Core Standards’ version of close reading might come closest to resembling the New Critics’ pedagogy when the standards writers mention the importance of irony. Eleventh and twelfth-grade students must be able to “analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in the text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement)” (National Board of Governors). Cleanth Brooks, in his signature reading of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” proposes that the final lines of the poem can be understood ironically, not as the poet’s statement of philosophy but instead as a dramatic address delivered from the point-of-view of the urn. The concluding statement that “beauty is truth,” Brooks suggests, is “not intended to be a generalization which can march out of the poem and take its place alongside the scientific and practical generalizations of the workaday world” (Well Wrought 193). For Brooks, poets like Keats and Coleridge exemplify a “reluctance to force didacticism,” and they “respect the complexity of experience too much to violate it by oversimplification; the concrete, too much to indulge in easy abstractions” (Well Wrought 193).

Brooks’s reading of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” would seem to be a model of—in the language of the Common Core Standards—“distinguishing what is directly stated in the text” from a more complex meaning. At the same time, the Common Core Standards’ treatment of irony makes a subtle yet significant departure from the New Critics. In encouraging students to “distinguish what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant,” the standards imply that the text has a “real” meaning—an authoritative truth available beneath a surface misreading. Many secondary school literature classes have been hindered by what Sheridan Blau calls the “anxiety of the right reading” (Literature Workshop 147)—the belief that texts have a single, fixed meaning that the teacher must help students to grasp. Robert Probst associates the anxiety
of the right reading with New Critical pedagogy: “The pedagogy inspired by the New Critical theories had emphasized the single text…it was a pedagogy in which students and their views were of little significance in the scholarly pursuit of the best reading, the correct reading, the authoritative reading” (Response & Analysis 4).

But the New Critics, contrary to popular assumption among English educators, did not insist that readers always and immediately accept only one “real” meaning. While Brooks did not believe that all readings of a text were valid, he recognized that a text could be plausibly interpreted in multiple ways: “The text may set limits, but that still leaves the reader plenty of room. We can say ‘I think the poem has this meaning,’ but in this very utterance we are not saying what the text means absolutely…We need to be open to other readings but not accept them wholeheartedly or uncritically. People need to come together with their divergent readings and discuss them and argue them out” (“Afterword” 376). Thus, the New Critics’ valorization of aesthetics is paired with a recognition that the determination of meaning is a social and incremental activity. Brooks is not interested in extracting information from a text so much as he is in conversing about “divergent readings” that yield further insight.

The notion of attending to divergent perspectives, embraced by Brooks, appears not in the Common Core Standards for reading but instead in the standards for speaking and listening. The grades 11-12 speaking and listening standards dictate that students should be able to “propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives” (National Board of Governors). Tragically, because the speaking and listening standards are not easily incorporated into high-stakes standardized assessments, they are largely ignored. If applied to the literacy standards, the
practice of “ensuring a hearing” of a wide range of positions and promoting “divergent and creative perspectives” would allow for a more nuanced and ethical definition of close reading.

Discussions of the Common Core’s so-called New Critical heritage further skew literary history by conflating I.A. Richards and the New Critics. For example, Frank Serafini peculiarly sandwiches Richards in between Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom: “The term close reading was originally associated with the work of the New Critics, in particular Cleanth Brooks, I.A. Richards, John Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. New Criticism emphasized structural and textual analysis by focusing on the work of literature itself and excluded a reader’s responses…” (299). Richards, though an influence on the American New Critics, is generally not considered a New Critic himself. Serafini risks exaggeration with the statement that the New Critics “excluded a reader’s response,” but the fact that he would attach the statement to Richards, known for his landmark study of reader’s responses, is particularly baffling. Similarly misapprehending Richards’s connection to the New Critics, Hinchman and Moore, in their discussion of the Common Core’s brand of close reading, cite “New Criticism theorists such as Richards and Brooks (443).

Questioning the widely accepted narrative that the New Critics directly extended the work of Richards and William Empson, Joseph North instead argues that Richards and the American New Critics represented “extremely divergent methods, directed toward diametrically opposed ends” (142). Whereas the New Critics often invoked an ideal reader, Richards was chiefly concerned with the responses of real readers. Richards advanced a materialist and pragmatic vision of close reading, in which, as North comments, he emphasized literary works’ “aesthetic potential, by which he meant not their beauty as an end in itself, but their ability to act as a means by which readers can develop many of their most useful practical faculties” (143).
North elaborates, “For Richards ‘close reading’ was a way to intervene in the context of reception, which is to say, the minds of actual, living readers. Criticism, as Richards saw it, was a project of aesthetic education” (146). North’s account makes Richards seem a particularly poor example of a theorist who discounted the role of the human reader: Richards’s interest in aesthetic education places him in conversation with Dewey and positions him as an antecedent of Greene and Rosenblatt.

According to North, the assumption that close reading shifts focus away from the reader and toward the text reflects the New Critics’ re-appropriation of close reading as a “thoroughly idealized practice, based in a neo-Kantian aesthetics of disinterest and transcendent value” (142). The New Critics’ attempt to “secure the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object” departs from Richard’s critique of the “phantom aesthetic state” (153). In re-writing the commonly oversimplified history of close reading, North makes broad and conclusive gestures that—while in many ways apt—risk oversimplification in another direction. A thorough examination of the writings of Brooks and Warren, as I have undertaken in the previous chapter, suggests that the most progressive and pragmatic of the New Critics did not divorce literary experience from readerly participation to the degree that North claims, nor did they conceive of aesthetic experience in a way that denies the reader any role. Yet North’s argument remains valuable in highlighting that attempts to reject “close reading” on the basis of its connection to the New Critics’ Christian conservatism fail to acknowledge an alternative intellectual lineage for close reading in Richards’s participatory aesthetics. Claims that the Common Core reinstates Richards’s tendency to suppress the reader and minimize the aesthetic dimension of reading are misinformed and counterproductive. In fact, some of Richards’s literary, aesthetic, reader-driven approaches might provide a helpful antidote to the Common Core.
Graff’s Reading for Argument

and the Common Core’s Anti-New Critical Underpinnings

Pearson and Hiebert claim that the Common Core standards use the phrase “close reading” in “much the same way it entered the field of literary interpretation during the era of I.A. Richards and the New Criticism in the mid-20th century” (4). North would likely suggest that they disentangle Richards from their reference to New Criticism. But the way Pearson and Hiebert define “close reading,” as reading for argument, bears little resemblance to the aesthetic reading either Richards or the New Critics aspired to teach their students.

If the Common Core’s version of close reading does not reflect—and in many ways opposes—the practices of the New Critics, where does Common Core’s concept of close reading come from? Surely, the expediency of defining close reading in a way that is conducive to standardized testing has an outsize role in shaping the standards. To the extent that the Common Core has any basis in theory, the goal of “drawing evidence and knowledge from the text” would seem to represent an intellectual tradition that conflicts with Richards’s approaches and New Criticism and that might be traced to Gerald Graff, who is perhaps the most prominent academic to endorse the Common Core Standards and who also has a history of critiquing the New Critics. While Graff’s support for the Common Core has not been unqualified, he has championed the “intellectual merits” of the standards (“Reaction”). In particular, he has praised the Common Core for requiring students to evaluate argumentative claims in a text, assess the soundness of an author’s reasoning, and construct their own arguments. The Common Core appendix on the “special place of argument” cites Graff’s belief that the “university is largely an argument culture” and “argument literacy is fundamental to being educated” (National Governors). The Common Core distinguishes itself from previous standards, according to Graff and Mike
Schmoker, in its “ringing endorsement of argument as the primary mode for reading, talking, and writing about complex texts.”

For Graff and Schmoker, a crucial marker of college readiness is the ability to engage in “close, evaluative, and argumentative reading, discussion and writing.” While the New Critics idealized careful reading as pathway to an aesthetic experience, Graff advocates for a version of close reading in which readers unpack the assertions made in a text and position an author’s ideas in the context of a larger conversation. In a pointed departure from New Critical pedagogy, Graff has questioned the assumption that close reading alone will foster meaningful writing and conversation. According to Graff, the idea that “studying literature is a matter of closely reading primary texts” is a time-honored but problematic “illusion” (Graff and Di Leo 114). To the extent that the Common Core draws upon Graff’s model of reading for argument, it is not embracing a New Critical model but rather invoking a challenge to the New Critics’ belief that “closely reading primary texts” is the foundation of a student’s literary education.

The Common Core adopts, in a caricatured form, Graff’s anti-New Critical view that the aesthetic experience of reading is secondary to the discourse of ideas in which literature participates. Graff’s first book, Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma, challenges the paradigm of the New Critics and finds a more palatable alternative in Yvor Winters’s poetics of belief.  

15 Winters, who was Graff’s mentor at Stanford in the 1960s, resisted the New Critics’ concept of a poem as a largely self-contained aesthetic object: “The poem…is not an obscurely isolated end in itself…We must accept, first, that a poem is about human experience, and second, that it is or ought to be a rational statement about such an experience…” (139). The emotional content of poetry, Winters proposed, was “motivated” by the poem’s rational argument. Although John Crowe Ransom included a chapter on Winters in his book, The New Criticism, Winters’s moralistic approach to literature clashed strongly with the New Critics who were his contemporaries. Challenging Winters’ view of poetry, Ransom writes, “None of the poets mentioned above would ever have been heard of if their poetry had consisted in their moral ideas, or really been determined by them. To the extent that Winters as a critic has devoted himself to this kind of moralism, his effect on the new criticism has been to blight it” (New Criticism 216). In a review of Winters’s Anatomy of Nonsense, Brooks questions Winters’s preoccupation with the rational and logical quality of poetry: “His principal point of theoretical difference with [I.A. Richards and William Empson] resides in the special emphasis he gives to the ‘rational content’ of a poem. It is an overemphasis, I believe”
Graff, the New Critics elevated the importance of literary “experience” to a counterproductive extreme: “The talismanic use of the term ‘experience’ and the ritualistic opposition between experience and logical concepts about experience were perfected by the New Critics…In fact, so insistently did the New Critics maintain that literature is experience in process and not static propositions about experience that it is often difficult to see what distinguishes their position from radical subjectivism” (Literature Against 39).

Graff’s critique of the New Critics also distances him from Rosenblatt, who writes that a literary work “is not simply a mirror of, or a report on, life. It is not a homily setting forth moral or philosophic or religious precepts. As a work of art, it offers a special kind of experience. It is a mode of living” (“A Performing Art” 999-1000). Brooks and Warren describe this experiential reception of literature as “knowledge by imaginative enactment” (Warren 48). For Brooks, literature is experienced as an art form, and the reader must “respect the mode of art, the particular way in which ideas and emotions are presented” (Brooks quoted in Warren 18). This respect for formal artistry does not preclude the possibility that the “special kind of experience” offered by literature will yield ethical reflection or moral insight.

Graff disputes I.A. Richards’s contention that “it is never what the poem says that matters but what it is” and that “the greatest poets, as poets…refrain from assertion” (Poetic Statement (“Cantankerous” 287). In a retrospective essay on Winters’s teaching, Graff describes his mentor’s distinctive view of literature: “Literature appeals to its readers not as merely as a series of intense experiences, mythical hypotheses, or adventures on the frontiers of the human psyche, but as a mode of belief that solicits conviction” (“Yvor Winters” 294). While the New Critics, in Graff’s account, tended to “divorce literature from belief,” Winters approaches literary meaning as “a view of life” (“Yvor Winters” 294). Literature might involve aesthetic experience, but experience, for Winters, did not in itself encapsulate poetry’s value. Graff explains, “By making demands on writers, even to the point of holding what they say to the test of philosophic credibility, he felt he was acknowledging the importance of the craft” (“Yvor Winters” 294). In conversation with the New Critics, Winters’s work remains helpful in providing a check against the limitations of a dogmatic allegiance to the most rigid formulations of the New Critical fallacies and heresies, which can stultify productive lines of inquiry by delegitimizing ethical questions as potentially productive contributions to literary discourse.
xi). While Richards discouraged a fixation on what the poem says, Winters (and Graff following in his footsteps) found what the poet says to be indispensable. And the Common Core Standards’ injunction to analyze “what the text says explicitly” invokes language that is more compatible with Graff or Winters’s perspective than with that of the New Critics (National Governors 2010).

Rabinowitz, Scholes and others have chastised the New Critics for inspiring overzealous message-hunting in secondary school English classes. But Graff expressed frustration with the New Critics for the opposite reason: their commitment to literature as experience seemed to render the message of a poem inaccessible. Graff writes, “To say that a poem ‘should not mean but be’…was not very helpful in suggesting how literary works do convey their messages…The loss of belief—or loss of interest—in literature as a means of understanding weakens the educational claims of literature…” (Literature Against 6-7). Thus, when the Common Core Standards for reading literature ask students to “determine a theme or central idea of a text” and “provide an objective summary of the text” (National Governors), the standards come closer to Graff’s approach than to a New Critical paradigm. To ask students to provide an objective summary of a literary work is to subscribe, in Brooks’s famous words (which Rosenblatt echoes), to the heresy of paraphrase, yet Graff suggests that the potentially paraphrasable

16 Graff continued his dispute with the New Critics in his 1980 article, “Who Killed Criticism?” in which he argues that Cleanth Brooks “seemed to legislate all statements out of literature, and thus left unclear how a literary work referred to reality—as Brooks nevertheless still insisted it did” (348). Graff is especially critical of Brooks for divorcing poetry from philosophy, “suggesting that it is a mistake to see views of life as advocated by the literature in question, indeed that it is a mistake to see literature as advocating anything” (“Who Killed” 348). Mark Jancovich offers a useful complication of Graff’s argument in proposing that the aesthetic approach of the New Critics did not preclude a sense of social responsibility. For New Critics such as Robert Penn Warren, “aesthetic activity is not an asocial or self-indulgent activity”; rather, “it is presented as a process of creation which examines and evaluates social relations” (134). The fact that the New Critics were concerned with literature as a form of artistic expression did not mean that they denied literature the power to respond to the world. For the New Critics, close reading cannot be isolated from human experience because reading is experience. To Graff’s credit, in a seldom-cited addendum to his earlier essay, he retracted some of his previous attacks on the New Critics. On reflection, Graff decided that “it was unfair to blame the New Critics for the routinization of their methodology, for what methodology is not routinized?” (“Who Killed” 126). The demonization of the New Critics, Graff wrote, “may be a satisfying story for those who relish narratives of decline and fall, but I have ceased to believe it” (“Who Killed” 129).
philosophical content of a literary work cannot be overlooked. A Wintersian reading of a poem’s “rational content” would be more sophisticated than an “objective summary,” but the language of the Common Core seems closer to “Zombie Winters-ism” than to what Rabinowitz terms “Zombie New Criticism.” One can hardly imagine, however, that Winters, an accomplished poet as well as a critic, would embrace the anti-literary tasks perpretuated by the Common Core.

Brooks and Warren envisioned an ideal learning community in which participants closely read texts, share their divergent readings with each other, and revise their readings as needed in a way that heightens their aesthetic connection with the primary text. Brooks recalled that Warren believed that criticism was a fundamentally “social act,” in which readers argued about different interpretations of a text: “…What he said he liked best was to get together with someone in a room who was different from him and read a play, novel, poem, or whatever, and talk about it, and argue over it, and fight over it, and see where they agree and disagree. That, for him, was criticism” (“Afterword” 377). While Warren’s social view of criticism seems essentially compatible with Graff’s view of an “argument culture,” the New Critics emphasized the aesthetic experience of the text as the wellspring from which potentially competing interpretations of a text would emerge. Graff charts a reverse trajectory, with critical discourse providing a kind of back door into a richer experience of the text itself.

Graff uses his own induction into critical reading to question the tendency of teachers, in the wake of New Criticism, to celebrate the “primary experience of literature” (Beyond the

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17 Graff resists Brooks’s ironic reading of the “beauty is truth” line in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” arguing that Brooks’s refusal to engage with the poem’s concluding lines as a statement of philosophy reflects “a typically debased conception of reason” and a “self-defeating skepticism toward rational, discursive thought” (Poetic Statement 13, 15). Graff laments the extent to which, under the New Critics’ influence, the “problem of belief was now smoothed over” and “convenient elasticity of terms such as paradox and irony” allowed readers to sidestep “difficult choices” about the validity of a poem’s philosophical content (Professing 205-206).
Describing his own difficulty in engaging with literature as a college student, Graff does not actually renounce the need to “get into immediate contact with the text”; he observes that, for him, the “immediate contact” was a “curiously triangular business” that became possible through “a conversation with other readers” (Beyond the Culture Wars 70). With the critical debate over the ending of Huckleberry Finn in mind, Graff was able to engage with the novel in what might be called an aesthetic transaction: “And having issues to watch out for made it possible not only to concentrate, as I had not been able to do earlier, but to put myself in the text—to read with a sense of engagement I had not felt before” (Beyond the Culture Wars 68). Graff finds satisfaction not only in the ability to speak about the text but also in the ability to put himself in the text. If the Common Core adopts Graff’s focus on argumentative reading, it seems to miss the way this approach to literature interfaces with aesthetic reading—the importance of helping students put themselves in the texts they read, the cultivation of literary experience.

The persistent myth that the Common Core is a New Critical document is harmful for several reasons: (1) it misrepresents literary history and promotes reductive accounts of literary theory by conflating Richards with the New Critics and framing the New Critics and transactional theorists as diametrically opposed; (2) it masks a more plausible source for the version of close reading described in the Common Core in Graff’s anti-New Critical formulations, obscuring discussion of the benefits and limitations of Graff’s approaches as well as the ways the Common Core oversimplifies them; (3) it distracts from building a wide coalition to challenge the most pressing flaw of the Common Core—the failure to define “close reading” in the context of aesthetic experience and the failure to place appropriate value on aesthetic education in general; (4) it discourages teachers from reading and taking seriously the work of
Richards and the New Critics, who sometimes provide helpful perspectives about how close reading contributes to aesthetic education; and (5) it allows the supposed unsoundness of theory to serve as a scapegoat for what amounts to an unsound framework for creating effective cultures of teaching and learning.

Close Reading for the Twentieth Century

The Common Core’s focus on close reading, Ellen Carillo writes, makes it akin to a twenty-first century reissuing of Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*: “Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s directive to pay attention to the ‘object in itself’ in their 1938 textbook *Understanding Poetry* has seemingly evolved into the theoretical model for reading outlined in ‘The Revised Publisher’s Criteria for the Common Core State Standards’” (29). Carillo identifies numerous parallels between New Criticism and the Common Core: “Both the New Criticism and the Common Core are far-reaching…both pedagogies insist on the existence of objectivity and, by extension, objective readings…[and] both pedagogies eschew the role of feeling when reading and interpreting” (29). Carillo herself ultimately suggests that the second edition of *Understanding Poetry* provides a greater acknowledgement of the reader’s role and could represent an appropriate direction for revising the Common Core Standards. The tendencies in the Common Core that Carillo identifies—the elevation of objectivity and the rejection of feeling—may not mirror any iteration of New Criticism in the way that Carillo attests, but they are nonetheless cause for concern, representing a theoretical model that is, at best, a watered down version of Graff’s reading for argument, and, at worst, a systematic repudiation of aesthetic experience in literacy education.
To address the problematic, anti-aesthetic definition of “close reading” that the Common Core promotes, I suggest that we look past the vociferous condemnations of New Criticism that animate much of the conversation about the Common Core, develop a clearer view of the Common Core’s shortcomings, and point toward more nuanced twentieth and twenty-first century definitions of close reading (including some of the work of the New Critics) that may help to remediate the errors of the Common Core and redirect the future of literary learning.

To frame this discussion, I want to put side-by-side, for a bit of close reading, two comments by Brooks and Rosenblatt that both describe an aesthetic process of reading literature. In a recorded conversation with Brooks, Warren posited that poetry has an “emotional structure” or rhythm that resonates in the reader (24). Brooks concurred, comparing the reader to the orchestra that plays a musical score:

> For the artifact of which we are speaking is not static. It is dynamic or, at least when realized by a human being, it unfolds as a dynamic experience. As an analogy, consider the musical score for Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. The notes written on the page don’t literally move us but, as realized by the orchestra, they do move us. (Brooks quoted in Warren 24).

Rosenblatt captures the act of reading using a similar metaphor:

> The text of a poem or of a novel or a drama is like a musical score. The artist who created the score—the composer or poet—has set down the notations for others, to guide them in the production of a work of art. Moreover, in the literary reading, even the keyboard on which the performer plays is—himself. From the linkage of his own experiences with words, from his own store of memories, he must draw the appropriate elements symbolized by the score or text, to structure a new experience, the work of art. (Reader 14).

Although Rosenblatt goes further than Brooks in granting the reader the agency to create “the poem,” Brooks and Rosenblatt share a belief that the reader participates in the “dynamic” realization of the literary phenomenon. Warren, in conversation with Brooks, proposes that
reading is “an actual physical experience—the resonance, the enactment in the whole human organism, from tongue to toes” in which “body and nervous system” function as a “participating sound box” (Warren 24). While Brooks would not describe, as Rosenblatt might, the reader’s mind and body as the primary site of study, he did believe that “the words on the page are simply a potential poem” until they are “realized by some actual flesh-and-blood reader” (Warren 26-27). In comparison with Brooks, Rosenblatt gives the reader’s memories and life experiences a larger role in the construction of meaning. But the two teachers both approached reading as a form of what Rosenblatt calls a “performing art.”

Newkirk argues that the Common Core’s “splitting of ‘meaning’ and ‘feeling’” reflects the influence of the New Critics, defying the Deweyan notion that “all analytic thought begins in a ‘felt difficulty’” (307). Yet Brooks and Warren, with their acknowledgement of the “emotional structure” and rhythm in which the reader participates, do not insist that thought and feeling are entirely separate. The New Critics have been ridiculed for overemphasizing the “unity” of the literary work. Yet “unity,” for the New Critics, was not primarily a matter of logical organization but rather of aesthetic apprehension. Warren describes the “felt unity” of a poem perceived through the poem’s “impact on the senses” (44)—language that resembles Dewey’s description of “felt difficulty.”

In making the case for the primacy of argument in the Common Core, David Coleman has stated that “as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you think and what you feel” (“Bringing” 3). For Brooks and Warren, as for Rosenblatt, an intellectual and emotional response to a text provides the entry-point for analysis. The idea that the act of reading produces verifiable data—and not thoughts and feelings—reflects an anti-
aesthetic stance that undermines even the New Critics’ justification for why close reading matters.

The sense of reading as embodied, creative and liberating is sorely missing from the Common Core and its heirs. Too often, what standards-producers, curriculum developers and test-makers call “close reading” instrumentalizes students, forcing them into the role of passive consumers. Rosenblatt, in fact, considered “instrumental” reading as a possible label for what she instead came to call “efferent” or “non-aesthetic” reading (Reader 24). Now more than ever we need a definition of close reading that releases the emancipatory power of the imagination—that treats the reader not as the instrument but as the disciplined artist, the player—actively participating in an aesthetic experience.

The future of close reading should not end with a return to Brooks or Rosenblatt (or Richards, who influenced both of them). One possible “epilogue” to the story of close reading is offered by John Guillory. Noting that Richards developed his close reading techniques as an intervention to focus readerly attention, Guillory observes an echo of Richards’s language in N. Katherine Hayles’s recent discussion of “deep attention.” Distraction by stock responses was, in Richards’s account, “inattentive activity” (Hayles 12). Close reading, on the other hand, requires what Hayles calls “deep attention”—“characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods of time”—in contrast with “hyper attention”—“characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (Hayles 8). Hayles argues that educators now have a responsibility to hybridize deep and hyper attention, while continuing to cultivate deep attention as a necessary disposition for reading most literary texts. Deep attention might also be thought of as deep listening, a capacity that depends on both emotion and reason.
Although Richards acknowledged the affective dimension of reading, Isobel Armstrong argues that his methods in practical criticism “were not intended to be tools for recognizing affect or responding to it but for controlling it” (88). Armstrong proposes that readers have a responsibility to go further than Richards in bringing feeling to the center of their conscious engagement with literature: “The task of a new definition of close reading is to rethink the power of affect, feeling and emotion in a cognitive space. The power of affect needs to be included within a definition of thought and knowledge rather than theorized as outside of them, excluded from the rational” (87). Moya has begun to shape the kind of definition of close reading that Armstrong favors, one that would address the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse. Moya suggests that alteration of readerly schemas—or systems for interpreting the social world—becomes possible through an emotional engagement with literature; close reading, for Moya, has a strong affective dimension (35). For Armstrong, play, which she frames as a “form of knowledge itself,” can displace the hegemony of rationalism in literary discourse (37). She writes, “Play, that fundamental activity, is cognate with aesthetic production…Play sets up a constant dialectic between rules and freedom. It is thus constantly a questioning activity. But more than this, it is only in play that it is possible to make an essential cognitive leap which radically changes one’s relation to reality” (37). Armstrong’s “new definition of close reading” channels the teachings of Dewey and Rosenblatt, who decades earlier wrote that aesthetic reading “fuses the cognitive and the emotive” (46). The Common Core’s focus on close reading as a rigorous, objective activity discourages teachers from fostering an imaginative, playful disposition toward literature.
With the musical score of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony—and an analogous symphony of Brooks, Rosenblatt, and many others—playing in my ear, I offer the following principles of practice that could guide a reformation of close reading in the twenty-first century:

- Acknowledge the affective dimension of reading and the relationship between emotion and cognition in literary learning.
- Define close reading in a way that empowers the reader, articulates a space for the reader’s agency, heightens deep noticing/listening, and emphasizes metacognition.
- Participate in a redistribution of pedagogical authority, reactivating and updating the democratizing impulse of close reading present in the practice’s New Critical heritage.
- Affirm the distinctive value of literary texts—with their density of language, depth of imagination, and richness of interpretive ambiguity—as both a means and end for acquiring close reading skills.
- Embrace various forms of interpretive difficulty as opportunities for engagement, and experiment with a sometimes interconnected relationship between comprehension and interpretation.
- Account for alternatives to close reading such as hyper-attentive reading, perpetuated and popularized by new media, while also applying close reading technique to new texts and new forms.
- Recognize reading as iterative—process-driven as well as product-driven—and reconceive assessments to be more humane and more effective than the current
regiment of standardized tests whose format, generally emphasizing multiple choice questions and formulaic writing, is dictated by efficiency.

- Renovate the academic essay in order to facilitate the embodied experience of reading—in both its personal and social dimensions—and explore non-traditional assignments and assessments that promote close reading in imaginative ways.

- Cultivate pedagogical approaches that promote the development of close reading skills through apprenticeship and situated learning in a community of practice rather than rote drilling.

- Celebrate the practice of close reading as both disciplined and playful.

- Consider the ethical and political imperative of closely reading literature representing a range of voices and perspectives.

Culler comments that, despite the popularity of close reading, “what we do when we think we are doing close reading is very different” (20). The applications of the term are so varied that one might be tempted to replace it entirely. Yet the term “close reading” also has a storied history and remains a unique discipline-specific practice that can unite teachers of English who represent many different perspectives, interests, and institutional affiliations. Conversation about “close reading” is a natural rallying point to connect K-12 and college teachers of English, whose vocabularies and priorities are too often incongruous, thereby making progress toward the failed aim of the Common Core, enhancing the college readiness of high school students. The Common Core and its ghostly remnants, still visible in subsequent standards, should not define the terms of this discussion. To imagine close reading as an ethical practice of aesthetic attention—a vital window into literature and life—can provide a dynamic alternative.
In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, scenes of reading, models of interpretive activity, and references to the author’s own literary experiences haunt the novel as persistently as Victor Frankenstein’s Creature, who is himself a remarkable reader of literature. *Frankenstein*, as Garrett Stewart observes, is “a novel preoccupied with storytelling and transcription”; it is “as much about reading as about writing, about narrative consumption as about narrative production” (116). *Frankenstein* unfolds as Shelley’s meditation on literary as well as scientific creation, and Michele Sharp comments that the novel reflects Shelley’s interest in the complex relationship between readers, writers and texts: “The central concern of the novel is with how reading shapes creative work, while also impinging on the relationship between writers and books” (72). Woven deeply through Shelley’s narrative are questions about reading, authorship and the shifting authority of readers who re-define the boundaries of their role as passive recipients of someone else’s knowledge.

The different frames of *Frankenstein* form what Mary Favret calls a “kaleidoscope of mirroring narratives...three versions of the same tale, one commenting upon and responding to
“the other two” (182). *Frankenstein*, therefore, is a drama of narrative reception, of reader response and interpretation. Presenting her tale as a transcribed testimony embedded in an epistolary exchange, Shelley compels readers to navigate multiple layers of fictionalized listening, reading and interpreting, all of which heighten the external readers’ consciousness of their own encounters with the text. We are Margaret, reading her brother Robert Walton’s letters about crossing paths with a forlorn Victor Frankenstein at sea. We are Walton, listening to and supposedly recording Victor’s words, contemplating the implicit parallels between Victor’s ambition and our own. We are Victor, listening to and resisting the counter-narrative that the Creature, who in his childhood away from Victor finds himself steeped in language and literature, constructs as his own autobiography. And we are Victor’s Creature, picking up the journal that Victor has left behind after fleeing his laboratory, reckoning with a textualized creation that inscribes meaning on the created self we embody. We are the reader of all these readers and of Mary Shelley, who, in her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, sends forth the novel as her “hideous progeny,” likening the book to the being Victor brings to life.

Yet Shelley, too, is a reader, as she reminds us through her allusions to the poetry of John Milton, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and her husband Percy. The novel electrifies and reanimates an array of poetic fragments—like the many body parts from which Victor’s Creature is engineered—transforming them into her own literary creation. Shelley’s tale of knowledge and creation, with an epigraph pointing to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, is in some sense a reading and re-writing of that epic. Harold Bloom suggests that *Frankenstein*, at its core, is a classic Romantic reading of *Paradise Lost* (616). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar treat Shelley’s novel more as a pointed intervention in a traditional reading of Milton’s epic, arguing that Shelley uses “her novel as a tool to help her make sense of her reading” and, ultimately, to re-
write *Paradise Lost* in a way that highlights and problematizes Eve’s lack of power (230).

Literary reading and interpretation—and, if one accepts Gilbert and Gubar’s argument, transformative reading and interpretation—are at the heart of Shelley’s creative project.

Although Frankenstein’s creation sometimes has been interpreted as an embodiment of anxieties about mass literacy, I propose that the novel can be more usefully understood as a meta-lesson in the importance of ethical, imaginative, empathetic engagements with literature, the causes and consequences of misreading, and the value of community participation in a literary experience. In contrast with Victor Frankenstein’s sloppy and self-absorbed misreadings, the Creature’s disposition of aesthetic, humane, experiential reading may provide an implicit model for reading Shelley’s novel. And yet, despite an ability to read text and world with the utmost sensitivity, the Creature suffers because he is denied the opportunity to participate in a community of discourse, suggesting that an ideal reading experience has, as Louise Rosenblatt attests, both personal and social dimensions. In some ways, the Creature’s reading, which is inflected with a Miltonic appreciation of learning through direct experience, embodies the Coleridgean imagination that would provide a source of inspiration for I.A. Richards, John Dewey, the New Critics and Rosenblatt in their twentieth-century articulations of the relationship between reader and text. Ironically, therefore, the Creature’s orientation as a reader presents an alternative to the Frankenstein monstrosities of corrupted, mechanized pedagogy that have too often characterized literature instruction in schools.

Although the readers within Frankenstein have long been a source of scholarly fascination, critics have not addressed the close connection between the Creature’s reading and Shelley’s interest in Coleridgean imagination. The novel’s internal model for reading—which, I will argue, embraces active, aesthetic, Coleridgean reading—is especially significant given
Frankenstein’s status as a perennially taught text in secondary schools and in colleges, where it is included in introductory literature courses, in courses in literary theory, and in a great variety of surveys and seminars that directly or indirectly provide instruction in reading.

**Frankenstein’s Human Readers and the Creature’s Humane Readings**

In her depiction of Victor Frankenstein’s early life, Shelley highlights the death of Victor’s mother and the continuing presence of his father. But she also takes care to indicate the ways that Victor is formed through his reading. Victor reads Cornelius Agrippa and later Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus with “the greatest avidity,” in pursuit of “secret stores of knowledge” (Shelley 22). Victor recalls, “I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known to few besides myself...The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favorite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought” (Shelley 23).

In the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Victor describes his reading even more explicitly in terms of his desire for power. Victor sees books as a compendium of the male authority he wants to emulate, a course of instruction in “penetrating” the secrets of the universe: “But here were books, and here were men who penetrated deeper and knew more” (Shelley 25-26). Victor’s interest in books is less about absorption and more about a desire to impose his will on the world around him. Rather than providing fulfillment or even a pathway to knowledge, however, Victor’s early reading leaves him “discontented and unsatisfied”—without the ability to master nature that he sought (Shelley 25). Whereas his friend Clerval’s “favorite study consisted in books of chivalry and romance,” Victor reads avidly—but somewhat narrowly and
instrumentally—with a fixation on the scientific or pseudoscientific texts he believes will enhance his knowledge and power (Shelley 21).

In contrast to Victor, the Creature emerges midway through the novel as a humane reader with an aesthetic sensibility. The Creature’s ability to rapidly learn language, and later read literature, is partly a testament to his emotional sensitivity. When listening to the cottagers talk to each other, the Creature intuits the feeling behind their words before he deciphers the language: “I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers” (Shelley 77). Shelley’s emphasis on the emotional dimension of communication may point to the influence of Condillac, Rousseau and other eighteenth-century linguists (Jones 276). The Creature’s extraordinary capacity to absorb emotion facilitates his rapid absorption of language, which he sees chiefly as a method for people to communicate “experiences and feelings” and to impress particular emotions on others.

Not long after learning to read, the Creature encounters a portmanteau with three books: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives* and Goethe’s *Sorrows of Werter*. Together, the three texts form what Peter Brooks calls a “possible Romantic *cyclopaedia universalis,*” encompassing knowledge of self, world and cosmos (quoted in Brantlinger 61). The Creature’s portmanteau-proferred curriculum frames knowledge differently from Victor’s self-constructed syllabus; while Victor reads to gain power over the world outside himself, the Creature’s reading allows him to better understand himself and others.

Shelley’s journals show that she herself read the three books the Creature devours—*Werter*, Plutarch’s *Lives* and *Paradise Lost*—in 1815, the year before she wrote *Frankenstein*.
(Gilbert and Gubar 237). Between 1815 and 1817, Shelley read *Paradise Lost* twice (Gilbert and Gubar 224). Goethe, Plutarch and Milton serve as examples, Gilbert and Gubar write, “of the literary categories [Shelley] thought it necessary to study: the contemporary novel of sensibility, the serious history of Western civilization, and the highly cultivated epic poem” (237). Given that the contents of the mysterious portmanteau mirrors Shelley’s own reading list, the Creature’s role as a reader would seem in some way to reflect or refract Shelley’s own literary experiences. “Modeling the monster’s reading program on her own in 1815,” Maureen McClane comments, “Shelley furnished her creature’s consciousness with the stuff of her own mind” (969). Shelley’s deliberate presentation of the Creature’s consciousness as a reader, therefore, might serve as a bridge to assist her readers in traversing the gap between their own consciousness and Shelley’s authorial vision. In reading *Paradise Lost* with the Creature, we are also reading as Shelley or at least reading as her alter ego, for whom literary meaning is embedded in an emotional and embodied response.

Reading, for the Creature, is a source of “extreme delight” as well as an occasion for serious labor. He reports, “I now continually studied and exercised my mind upon these histories, whilst my friends were employed in their ordinary occupations (Shelley 89). Through this exertion of mental effort, the Creature produces not a summary of the books’ content but instead a description of the “effect of these books,” which “produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings” (Shelley 89). While Victor’s reading might be classified by Rosenblatt as *efferent*—he is seeking to extract information from books to unlock the secrets of the universe—the Creature’s experience seems an exemplar of an aesthetic response. Ian Balfour comments that much of the Creature’s reading, including *Paradise Lost, Werther, Plutarch’s Lives* and even
Volney’s *The Ruins*, reflects a preoccupation with origins (796). The Creature's reading, a highly personal endeavor, is part of a project to understand and construct his own origin story.

By the Creature’s own account, *Paradise Lost* is the most influential of his readings because it is the most intimately interconnected with his own self-knowledge:

But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. (Shelley 90)

The Creature’s reading of *Paradise Lost*, defined by the “deeper emotions” and personal parallels it inspires, stands out as an embodied encounter with the literature, a sensitive, emotional, distinctly human textual engagement. Shelley’s repeated use of the word “excite,” along with “move” and “struck,” calls attention to a transaction with the text; the book is a transmission not of information but instead of physiological impact. The first felt response the Creature mentions—wonder and awe—demonstrates his innate curiosity and receptivity. As the Creature learns to read by peering through the window of the DeLacey family’s cottage, Shelley uses the Creature’s reading to provide a window into the Creature’s humanity, namely his open-minded and open-hearted disposition.

Rosenblatt’s account of a literary transaction can be instructively applied to the Creature’s reading:

The reader, too, is creative. The text may produce that moment of balanced perception, a complete aesthetic experience. But it will not be the result of passivity on the reader’s part; the literary experience has been phrased as a *transaction* between the reader’s and the author’s text. Moreover, as in the creative activity of the artist, there will be selective factors molding the reader’s response. He comes to the book from life. He turns for a moment from his direct concern with the various problems and satisfactions of his own life. He will resume his concern with them when the book is closed. Even while he is reading, these things present as probably the most important guiding factors in his experience. (34-35)
In Rosenblatt’s terms, the concerns of the Creature’s own life animate his reading of *Paradise Lost* as perhaps “the most important guiding factors in his experience.” Thus, Shelley’s creation narrative—in which creation is inflected with biblical, scientific and literary meaning—also positions reading as a potentially creative act. Molded from the Promethean clay of Victor’s ambition, the Creature also molds himself through his reading, providing a model for the “creative activity” Shelley’s reader might bring to the text.

**Shelley’s Reading Lesson: Evaluating Exemplary Reading and Misreading**

Stewart characterizes the Creature’s encounter with Victor Frankenstein’s journal, whose contents remain a mystery to the reader of Shelley’s novel, as a “primal reading lesson” (122). The entirety of Shelley’s novel also might be thought of as a kind of reading lesson, though readers have disagreed about what particular reading habits Shelley wishes to teach. Critics have provided differing assessments of the Creature’s abilities as a reader. Anne McWhir argues that the Creature is “an uncritical reader” who is chronically disposed to provide “an inconsistent reading” (79), and Sharp calls the Creature “the worst kind of reader imaginable” (82). On the other hand, Lauren Shohet presents the Creature as “the best reader of *Paradise Lost* in the novel,” who stands apart from Robert Walton, the “novel’s worst Miltonist” and Victor, who occupies “a middle ground of Miltonic literacy” (157). At stake in the debate over the Creature’s reading skills is how we define a “good” reader. Does making personal connections or responding emotionally to a text reflect the habits of an adept reader or an inept one? Does a skillful reader entertain multiple, contradictory interpretations of a text simultaneously or show a capacity to provide convincing evidence to defend a single, consistent interpretation? Is the ideal
reader the believer who walks in the world of the text and seeks to absorb its truths, or the skeptic who approaches literature with a critical distance?

Shohet suggests that the Creature’s ability to “‘feel’ as well as ‘speak’ Milton” demonstrates his Miltonic literacy (161). After reading Paradise Lost, the Creature “consistently interprets his own experience through the lens of Milton’s epic”; the poem furnishes him with “an internalized language” through which he can articulate his thoughts and feelings (Shohet 160). In Shelley’s novel about creation, Shohet argues, the Creature is “created by reading Milton” (160). As Stewart writes, “In a more radical way than that in which the phrase is ordinarily taken, the Creature is humanized by reading” (120).

Sharp, however, takes the position that the Creature’s reading is excessively humanized and that his emotional identification with the characters in Paradise Lost violates the decorum to which an educated reader should adhere: “Unable to distinguish between kinds of books, the monster is equally unable to draw lines between himself and his books, and reads himself into all the major roles” (81). Sharp’s words could have been spoken by many schoolmasters, rebuking their pupils with a reductive application of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s affective fallacy. Yet affect, as some of the New Critics would acknowledge and Rosenblatt helped clarify, is not inherently a fallacy (Rejan, “Reconciling”).

I.A. Richards coined the term mnemonic irrelevance to describe tangential personal associations that distract the reader from an encounter with the content of a text, but the Creature’s comparison of himself to Adam and Satan seem more like mnemonic relevances. Shelley’s frequent gestures to Paradise Lost outside the Creature’s first-person monologue—for example, the epigraph, “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man?”—corroborate his readings. Moreover, the Creature shows every sign that he reads himself into
literature not as a byproduct of self-indulgent myopia but instead as part of his quest for self-knowledge. The Creature’s reading leads him to a series of existential questions: “What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them” (Shelley 90). He is an emotionally active reader as well as a philosophical one, compelled to ask the question “Who am I?”

Sharp makes a credible challenge to the Creature’s reading proficiency in pointing to the fact that the Creature describes *Paradise Lost* as a “true” history: “He can distinguish neither truth from fiction, nor the truth of fiction from that of history. He lacks training in the kinds of interpretive skills that would allow him to gauge the evidentiary status of the written word, to distinguish between kinds of writing and to bring appropriate tools to bear” (80). The Creature’s description of *Paradise Lost* as a “true history” should give us pause: ought the Creature treat Milton’s reading of the Bible as fiction—not as “true history” but as a work of literature that reflects truth in a different sense? The Creature would not be the first reader to approach Milton’s epic with a believer’s zeal; however, his tendency to treat the text as true might be profitably viewed as a form of aesthetic commitment rather than as an act of faith.

Drawing on Peter Elbow’s hermeneutics of believing and doubting as well as Stanley Fish’s influential reader-response-based interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, Sheridan Blau counsels his Milton students to encounter the poem as “true”:

What I ask of my students, more specifically, is that they study the poem under a set of assumptions that represent our provisional belief in the profound wisdom of its author and the integrity and truth of his text...Thus I ask my students to approach the poem under the assumption that it is poetically and humanly and universally true as the greatest works of literature are also true, that we have much to learn from its wisdom, that it will continue to reward study and re-reading with additional insight over a lifetime of readings. (10)

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18 Peter Elbow describes the “believing game” as “the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them; not just trying to restate them without bias; but actually trying to believe them” (1).
The temptation to dismiss a perceived contradiction or inconsistency discovered in the text as an authorial error or blind spot limits the rich discoveries that can be yielded from approaching the text with a stance of disciplined aesthetic attention and respect.

Whereas doubting represents the “rhetoric of propositions,” believing constitutes what Elbow calls a “rhetoric of experience” (8). The language of experience—with the aim of understanding and describing a perspective “from the inside”—is “imaginative, metaphorical, narrative, personal, even poetic” (Elbow 8). The tendency to doubt, so often regarded as the signature move of critical thinking, is in Elbow’s account only intellectually valuable when applied in tandem with a practice of believing. In approaching *Paradise Lost* as a “true history,” the Creature shows reverence for and deep attention to a masterwork—precisely what Victor Frankenstein denies his Creation. The Creature reads *Paradise Lost*, as Elbow would say, from the “inside.”

Patrick Brantlinger argues that the Creature’s simultaneous identification with Adam and Satan reflects a problematic reading of *Paradise Lost*, “an uncontrollable, irrational excess of signification that transcends the boundaries of normal, comprehensible discourse” (59). McWhir similarly suggests that multiplicity of meanings precipitates the Creature’s downfall, commenting that all of the books the Creature reads have been subject to multiple interpretations and reflect a “multiplicity of ideas and beliefs” (81). According to McWhir, the Creature who compares himself to Adam and Satan is ultimately “destroyed by the same perplexities that confuse the reader” (81). On the other hand, the Creature’s capacity for provisional thinking, his ability to change his interpretation and identifications as his understanding unfolds, also might be understood as characteristic of highly literate readers:
Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (90)

The “contradictions and inconsistencies” readers encounter in *Paradise Lost*, Blau suggests, often point toward aspects of “a text whose dramatic logic and psychological insight is probably more nuanced and profound than we are at the moment prepared to appreciate” (10). While Brantlinger and McWhir propose that an excess of signification ultimately devastates the Creature, one might argue that the more harmful trait is Victor’s paucity of meaning, his unwillingness to entertain the possibility of multiple interpretations or to revise and reframe his initial understanding.

The need for the reader to navigate the gaps in Victor’s understanding is, Shohet contends, an essential part of Shelley’s narrative: “Victor’s strategic avoidance of uncomfortable insights extends beyond reading Milton to more general interpretive challenges. *Frankenstein* trains its reader early on to spot the symptomatic absence whereby the novel signals what Victor is missing or hiding” (169). Victor, Shohet notes, seems unable to recognize his own responsibility for the Creature’s pain, despite the fact that he attributes his own childhood happiness to the fact that his parents “fulfilled their duties toward [him]” (169).

Nowhere is Victor’s tendency to project, deflect and misread more evident than in his first encounter with his creation. The Creature’s reading of *Paradise Lost* might be profitably contrasted with Victor’s “reading” of the Creature soon after Victor brings him to life:

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster.
whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be
called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds,
while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was
stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. (Shelley 36)

Victor implies that his horror begins when he sees or beholds his creation. But the structure and
sequence of the sentence hint that his feelings of horror emanate from his nightmare, before he
actually sees the Creature, and that he projects onto his vision of the creature the darkness of his
own mind. Victor is the author of the creature but is unwilling to become his Creation’s receptive
reader; instead, he inscribes his own assumptions on his creation, naming him the *wretch* before
he can define himself otherwise. Victor believes that the Creature plans to attack him, but the
word “seemingly” points to the subjectivity of Victor’s interpretation and signals a possible
misreading. The cues that Victor treats as signs of aggression—a sound, a grin, and an
outstretched hand—could alternately be interpreted as the behavior of a child, smiling, babbling,
and reaching out seeking a parent’s care and love.

When the creature attempts to communicate, a miraculous feat for a newborn, Victor
does not listen. “He might have spoken,” Victor says, “but I did not hear,” and this refusal to
listen is re-enacted when the Creature later returns to meet his creator, repeatedly imploring
Victor to hear his testimony. Victor’s use of the word “might” underscores the instability of his
perceptions and his unreliability as narrator. In grounding Victor’s first-person account in a
visceral reaction, Shelley seduces the reader to join in Victor’s judgement against his creation
and to sympathize with Victor’s decision to flee. Yet she also seems to challenge the reader to re-
read the passage after the Creature reveals his anguish over his perceived abandonment by
Victor. When evaluated through a lens of sympathy for the Creature, the language of the text
leaves considerable uncertainty about whether Victor’s rash judgements can be trusted. The
episode provides a lesson in close reading—a mode of reading in which Victor falters but in
which the Creature excels. Among the hallmarks of this close reading skill are sensitivity, empathy, an ability to entertain multiple possibilities simultaneously, and an openness to learning from experience.

**Coleridgean Imagination as a Model for Reading**

Throughout the novel, Shelley positions her characters as interpreters of text and world, describing the reading habits of Robert Walton, Henry Clerval, Victor Frankenstein and Frankenstein’s Creature.\(^{19}\) Sharp comments that Shelley embeds the novel with “multiple readers reading in multiple ways” and constructs the novel to test “precisely the kinds of limit cases that were particularly troubling to ‘superior’ readers and writers in Shelley’s day” (73). As an experiment in reading and misreading, Shelley’s novel might be imagined as a kind of literary precursor of the empirical studies of reading that I.A. Richards conducted at Cambridge about a century after *Frankenstein* was published. The best prepared students of literature in the world, Richards concluded in his analysis of the “protocols” his students wrote in response to the poems he assigned, were disposed to chronic misreading. Seeking to correct his students’ errors, Richards proposed a pedagogy of close reading (*Practical Criticism*).

In *Frankenstein*, a novel filled with readers and misreaders, the Creature’s aesthetic experiences as a reader of literature represent a form of close reading from which the novel’s other readers would benefit, anticipating some of the theories and practices of Richards, John

\(^{19}\) Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Walton, Victor and the Creature all interface with Shelley’s reading *Paradise Lost* since all three characters “appear to be trying to understand their presence in a fallen world, and trying at the same time to define the nature of the lost paradise that must have existed before the fall” (225). In his youth, Walton read his uncle’s “books of voyages” as well as “the celebrated poets,” fueling his passion for adventure (Shelley 10). Yet Walton is, in his own words, “self-educated” and “more illiterate than many school boys of fifteen” (Sharp 74). According to Sharp, Walton’s “untrained and unkempt reading” results in “unwarranted imaginative leaps,” and his “insufficient critical acumen” leaves him unable to close the gap between what he reads and what he desires (Sharp 73). But Walton’s limitations as a reader may come less from his self-education and more from his tendency, mirroring Victor, to experience reading as a form of ego-driven self-absorption.
Dewey, and the Richards-influenced Rosenblatt. That the Creature’s reading would reflect the aesthetic principles of Richards, Dewey or Rosenblatt might at first seem an implausible anachronism. Yet the resonances make sense when one considers that all of these influential figures in the history of literature education (along with the New Critics, whose intellectual lineage, as I have previously shown, is intertwined with Rosenblatt’s) share an interest in Coleridge, who was Shelley’s contemporary. Shelley quotes Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” liberally in *Frankenstein*, and Coleridge’s theory of imagination also may have influenced Shelley significantly.\(^{20}\)

As Beth Lau observes, Coleridge, a close friend and regular houseguest of Mary Shelley’s father, William Godwin, was a “profoundly sympathetic and congenial figure to Mary Shelley whose beliefs, themes and literary techniques resonated with and helped shape her own” (74).\(^{21}\) The young Mary was treated to a personal recitation of “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” performed by Coleridge in her living room, and, with her family, she attended Coleridge’s lectures on Shakespeare and Milton (Lau 74). In adulthood, both she and her husband Percy remained avid readers of Coleridge’s poetry and prose. In 1817, as Mary was writing

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\(^{20}\) Coleridge’s influence on I.A Richards, who wrote a book titled *Coleridge and the Imagination*, is especially evident, though references to the Coleridgean imagination also reverberate through the writing of Dewey, Rosenblatt and Cleanth Brooks. Dewey gives an extended gloss of Coleridge’s distinction between Imagination and Fancy, and, drawing on Coleridge’s description of the imagination as *esemplastic*, suggests that “an imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world” (*Art as Experience* 278-279). Dewey’s entire treatment of aesthetic activity seems significantly indebted to Coleridge. He writes, “What Coleridge said of the reader of poetry is true in its way of all who are happily absorbed in their activities of mind and body: ‘The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, not by restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the journey itself’” (*Art as Experience* 3-4). Following Dewey, Rosenblatt compares literature students forced to hear others’ interpretations in the absence of having their own felt response to a text to Coleridge’s lament in “Dejection” when the poet looks at the stars in the sky and can only “see, not feel, how beautiful they are” (56). In his discussion of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, Brooks turns to Coleridge’s commentary on Shakespearean imagery, citing Coleridge’s emphasis on “the perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader...the rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images” (26).

\(^{21}\) Godwin’s own reading of Milton might be called both Coleridgean and Creature-like. He writes in *The Enquirer*, “When I read Thomson, I become Thomson; when I read Milton, I become Milton. I find myself a sort of intellectual camelion, assuming the colour of the substances on which I rest” (Godwin quoted in Kilgour 54).
Frankenstein, Percy read (and likely discussed with Mary) Coleridge’s newly published Biographia Literaria, which details his famous distinction between Imagination and Fancy (Lau 74).

Richards was influenced throughout his career by Coleridge, to whom he is indebted for his philosophy of rhetoric as well as his concept of “practical criticism” (Berthoff 61). Together with Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, Coleridge’s theory of imagination contributed to Richards’s view of interpretation as what Ann Berthoff terms a “dialectic of creation and recreation, of activity and reflection” (63). Mary Shelley’s creation novel certainly has reason to make use of the Coleridgean dialectic of creation and recreation that would so appeal to Richards a century after Frankenstein’s composition.

Like Milton before him, Coleridge was suspicious that schooling often failed to enlarge the mind’s capacity or yield the benefits of true learning from personal reflection:

Alas! How many examples are now present to my memory, of young men the most anxiously and expensively be-school-mastered, be-tutored, anything but educated; who have received arms and ammunition, instead of skill, strength and courage; varnished rather than polished; perilously over-civilized, and most pitifully uncultivated! And all from inattention to the method dictated by nature herself, to the simple truth, that as the forms in all organized existence, so must all true and living knowledge proceed from within; that it may be trained, supported, fed, excited, but can never be infused or impressed. (Coleridge quoted in Berthoff 58)

To be “school mastered,” Coleridge cautions, is not the same as to be educated, and Coleridge notes that teachers can provide shortcuts to knowledge that ultimately compromise the depth of learning. Coleridge frequently uses organic metaphors for knowledge (which also appealed to the New Critics); Berthoff notes that Coleridge attributes to mind and language an “organic character essentially active, growing, developing, transforming power” (Berthoff 59). In this instance, Coleridge characteristically frames “true and living knowledge” as following a “method dictated by nature herself.” In Frankenstein, the fact that the Creature, the product of Victor’s
violation of nature, has a more “natural” mind than his creator seems a pointed irony. Victor, who constantly fails to grow and transform—or to act in a way that shows he has internalized some learning—in some ways resembles Milton’s Satan, who is impervious to change. With his privileged upbringing and formal education, Victor may be an example of what Coleridge calls “the most perilously over-civilized and most pitiably uncultivated.” Given that Walton initially perceives the Creature as “a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered land” and, in contrast, recognizes Victor as a European, the distinction between who is civilized and who is uncivilized seems to form a crucial subtext in the novel.

Coleridge, who asks, “Know? Ay…but how do you know your knowledge?” characterizes learning as a form of “reflective attention” (quoted in Berthoff 59). Paraphrasing Coleridge, Richards writes, “We must be more than merely aware, we must be aware of our awareness, and of the form and mode of operation of our awareness” (Coleridge on Imagination 47). Describing the Coleridgean principles that informed Richards’s pedagogy, Berthoff explains, “All his teaching was based on a conception of mind empowered by language to act and reflect. Thinking about our thinking, ‘arranging our techniques for arranging, comprehending our comprehensions more comprehensively’; it is a consciousness of consciousness which constitutes method” (Berthoff 66). Richards and Dewey both seem to draw from Coleridge the language to articulate the value of metacognition. In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge writes, “To know is in its very essence a verb active” (quoted in Berthoff 57). Dewey, seemingly riffing on Coleridge, writes that “Primarily a verb” (Art as Experience 274).

Shelley’s Creature, acutely conscious and painfully reflective, empowered by the language he has freshly discovered, is a monster of metacognition, a distinctively Coleridgean mind. The famous scene when the Creature encounters his image in a pool of water (which also
alludes to Eve’s experience in Paradise Lost) literalizes his reflective tendencies. In How To Read a Page, Richards implies that metacognition is at the heart of close reading: “If we are to get any light on the reading process, on why it goes wrong and how it might be improved, we must look as closely as we can into our own minds as we read and form as live a conception as we may of the sort of experience with words in sentences which makes better readers” (24). A Coleridgean reading looks not without but within, and Shelley’s Creature, with his capacity to look closely into his own mind as he reads, makes him a prototype of a Coleridgean close reader. When the creature’s reading prompts him to ask “Who am I?” he channels a version of Coleridge’s embrace of self-knowledge. Coleridge writes, “The postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of philosophic capacity, is no other than the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF” (quoted in Coleridge on Imagination 47).

The reading habits of the Creature may be informed by Coleridge’s account of the relationship between subjects and objects as well as his discussion of imagination and fancy. In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge distinguishes between “primary imagination,” “secondary imagination,” and “fancy.” Primary imagination, according to Coleridge’s definition, is “the living Power and the prime Agent of all human perception” (Coleridge 313). Secondary imagination, unlike the primary imagination, has an element of “conscious will” and is the kind of imagination on which most creative work depends. Of the secondary imagination, Coleridge writes, “it dissolves, diffuses, dissipitates, in order to recreate” (Coleridge 313). As compared with the secondary imagination, fancy is a lesser faculty, which “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Coleridge 313). Richards identifies the secondary imagination as the source of art, meaning and feeling: “The Secondary Imagination, re-forming this world, gives us not only poetry—in the limited sense in which literary critics concern
themselves with it—but every aspect of the routine world in which it is invested with other values than those necessary for our bare continuance as living beings: all objects for, which we can feel love, awe, admiration...every awareness for which a civilized life is preferred by us to an uncivilized” (*Coleridge on Imagination* 59). Whereas the primary imagination essentially operates through of perception, the secondary imagination involves a more cultivated poetic attention. Fancy, which is passive and associative, has neither the direct perceptual power of the primary imagination nor the conscious will of the secondary imagination. In Richards’s gloss, Fancy has the ability to arrange but not to create: “Fancy—which collects and re-arranges, without re-making them, units of meaning already constituted by Imagination. In Imagination the mind is growing; in Fancy it is merely reassembling the products of its past creation” (*Coleridge on Imagination* 59). Victor re-assembles the Creature from the pre-existing body parts of the dead—and from feelings of loss and desire already present in his psyche—suggesting that the Creature might be thought of as Victor’s Fancy given physical form. Yet the freshness and urgency of the Creature’s own reading (and the originality of a consciousness that Victor did not anticipate) make him a poetic figure gifted with secondary imagination.

According to Dewey, Coleridge’s understanding of imagination and fancy have implications for aesthetic reception as well as poetic composition: “One may find in what [Coleridge] says an intimation not that imagination is the power that does certain things, but that an imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world” (*Art as Experience* 279). Dewey suggests that what Coleridge saw as the “esemplastic” or fusing experience of the imagination was distinct from fancy, in which “mind and material do not squarely meet and
interpenetrate” (Art as Experience 278-279). The poetic imagination—with an element of willful, active reflection—transcends the haphazard, dream-like assemblages of Fancy.

An aesthetic transaction, Dewey implies, requires a form of “secondary imagination.” Coleridge’s discussion of the subject-object distinction even more directly anticipates the terms of Dewey’s transactional theory of aesthetics. No object, Coleridge posits, can be perceived independently of the consciousness that encounters it. Richards explains, “Nothing of which we are in any way conscious is given to the mind. Into the simplest seeming ‘datum’ a constructing, forming activity from the mind has entered. The subject (the self) has gone into what it perceives, and what it perceives is, in this sense, itself” (Coleridge on Imagination 57).

Coleridge’s emphasis on perception as construction reflects a version of what Dewey (and later Rosenblatt) would call a transaction.

Richards provides an example of Coleridge’s subject-object model in his reading of Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis”:

All these separable meanings are here brought into one. And as they come together, as the reader’s mind finds cross-connexion after cross-connexion between them, he seems, in becoming more aware of them, to be discovering not only Shakespeare’s meaning, but something which he, the reader, is himself making. His understanding of Shakespeare is sanctioned by his own activity in it. As Coleridge says: “You feel him to be a poet, inasmuch as for a time he has made you one—an active creative being.” (84)

Rosenblatt’s definition of the poem as the event of a text’s rendering in the reader’s consciousness rather than the mere presence of word symbols seems to be derived partly from Richards’s reading of Coleridge. The reader, seeking connections, not only discovers meaning but also makes meaning.

Shelley’s Frankenstein embraces the agency of its reader as a Coleridgean creator and cross-connector of meaning. In her study of Shelley’s use of the epistolary form, Mary Favret
posits that the letters framing Shelley’s narrative heighten the reader’s participatory role in a correspondence or dialogue: “The power of this novel rides in between-ness, in the spaces that open up between speakers, as between mountain peaks; in the cracks that appear between statements, as between ice floes; in the seams that emerge between stories, as between monstrous ‘component parts’” (195). Shelley’s juxtaposition of different narratives demands that the reader weigh competing perspectives and possibilities. Confronted with a patchwork of multiple authors’ stories, the reader is also implicated as an author, stitching the seams to fill the “gaps,” as Wolfgang Iser would write, in the narrative. Percy Shelley’s “Remarks on Frankenstein” praise Mary’s novel for engaging the reader emotional and physiologically: “We are led breathless with suspense and sympathy and the heaping of incident upon incident, and the working of passion out of passion. We cry, ‘Hold, hold, enough!’—but there is something to come; and like the victim whose history it relates, we think we can bear no more, and yet more is to be borne” (quoted in Favret 195).

As Favret observes, Percy positions the reader as a participant in “the active world of the novel,” likening the reader’s movement through the narrative to the traversing of physical geography (195). The reader is implicated in a “present, ongoing, shared experience” (Favret 195). Percy writes, “We climb Alp after Alp, until the horizon is seen blank, vacant and limitless; and the head turns giddy, and the ground seems to fail under our feet” (quoted in Favret 195). Percy implies that Victor is the “victim” with whom the reader ought to sympathize, yet the idea of reading in breathless sympathy may resonate more with the experience of the novel’s other victim, the Creature.

Responding to the first book that he encounters, Volney’s Ruins of Empires, which Felix reads to Safie, the Creature “heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with
Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants” (83). While Walton promises to one day read Victor’s story with “interest and sympathy,” the Creature is the reader who realizes a felt, sympathetic response inside the story (18). He is the transactional reader who models for Mary Shelley’s reader the possibility of what Favret, channeling Percy Shelley and reflecting Coleridge’s theories, terms a “present, ongoing, shared experience” of a text. Anna Clark argues that the Creature distinguishes himself from Victor and Walton in his “ability to understand and narrate the perspectives of other characters,” which is especially exemplified in his narration of Safie’s story (245). If, as Lisa Zunshine suggests, reading literature helps strengthen theory of mind and the capacity for empathy, then we might surmise that the Creature’s reading both reflects and re-trains his capacity for empathy.

**The Reading Public and the Reading Community**

Some have argued that Shelley’s Creature represents not Shelley’s ideal reader for her own novel—a meta-textual manifestation of what Wayne Booth would call the “implied reader”—but instead the embodiment of anxiety about mass literacy. In the decades prior to Shelley’s writing of *Frankenstein*, Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre cautioned that the French Revolution was instigated, in part, by mass reading and that a boom in publication and literacy could provoke similar unrest in Britain (Sharp 77). Burke and de Maistre viewed writing as a potentially dangerous technology capable of upending traditional authority. Brantlinger observes, “The suspicions about writing expressed by both Burke and de Maistre were partly expressions of their profound distrust of mass literacy, of empowering the wrong people to read

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22 Clark draws on Gérard Genette’s distinction between internal and external focalization and on Adam Smith’s theory of imaginative sympathy to suggest that the Creature exemplifies “protagonism,” meaning that, although he is ostensibly not the novel’s main character, he demonstrates protagonist-like qualities in the way he “reflexively signals his own depth of consciousness by depicting the complex interiority of other characters” (246).
and write, and therefore to begin questioning and attempting to rewrite the forms of traditional authority” (Brantlinger 56). Burke and de Maistre’s view of mass literacy as monstrous, Brantlinger suggests, lurks in the backdrop of Shelley’s Frankenstein. 23

According to Sharp, the uneducated Creature, who misconstrues poetry as fact and uses Paradise Lost to justify a Satan-inspired quest for vengeance against his creator, represents the anxieties of the literati about the expanding population of readers, including women and working class men who lacked the training and interpretive skill to interpret texts accurately and responsibly (76). Sharp contends that “the creature is a very poor reader, and, as such, he bodies forth the anxiety that many educated men and women experienced in the face of new readers not adequately formed in the ways of reading and the subtleties of literature” (80). Shelley read Areopagitica, Milton’s defense of a free press, shortly before writing Frankenstein, and Sharp argues that Shelley offers a more qualified and cautious version of Milton’s thesis, focusing on “the limits to which Milton so readily accedes and on the monstrous aspect of reading so troubling to many of Shelley’s peers” (88). The readings of Frankenstein as a conservatively tilting modification of Areopagitica must be taken seriously, especially in light of the concerns that Coleridge, who influenced Shelley so significantly, expressed about unenlightened readers. Coleridge feared that mechanistic instruction in literacy, pursued without teaching moral habits of mind, would lead to “poisoning the children of the poor” (Brantlinger 58). Yet in Shelley’s novel, the monstrous reader who is poisoned by immoral literacy may not be the Creature but rather Victor Frankenstein. Sharp equates the Creature’s ignorance of “literary conventions” with

23 For Brantlinger, the common erasure of the Creature’s literacy in adaptations of the novel in film and other media speaks to an underlying anxiety about the creature’s reading (63). However, Nick Dear’s notable 2011 adaptation for the National Theater departs from the norm in giving extended attention to the Creature’s development as a reader. “Don’t you remember your Milton?” DeLacey asks the Creature, prompting the Creature to recite from Book IV of Paradise Lost. The Creature adds, “Because with all that I read, all that I learn, I discover how much I do not know. Ideas batter me like hailstones. Questions but no answers. Who am I? Where am I from? Do I have a family?” (21-22).
a lack of interpretive facility, but schooling in conventions may be largely separate from the
growth of interpretive skills, which are learned through the practice of reading and through
conversation with other readers (80). The Creature’s fundamental problem is not his lack of
genteel schooling, which does not save Victor from moral degradation, but his lack of
socialization.

Unlike Brantlinger and Sharp, Anthony Backes suggests that Shelley’s novel idealizes
self-education. Backes sees Frankenstein as presenting two narratives of education, Victor’s and
the Creature’s, and finds that Shelley implies that the Creature’s autodidactism yields superior
results: “In short, he has become a new Emile, showing the Rousseauian principle of
fundamental human goodness which will blossom with self-education if only it is not tinkered
with by civilization” (35). Rousseauian logic may imply that the Creature could have retained his
goodness if he remained separated from civilization, but I would propose that the corrective to
the Creature’s moral fall might be a more inclusive community within which his reading,
reflection and humane education could flourish.

Described by Robert Walton as non-European and othered by every person he encounters
(except for the blind DeLacey), the Creature sees literacy and literature as an opportunity for
membership into the culture and community from which he has been excluded. McClane
observes that the Creature “understands human beings to be constituted through a very particular
‘discourse network,’” yet despite his attempts to earn entrance he is denied membership in the
community of discourse that would affirm his own humanity (972). For McClane, Shelley’s
novel therefore dramatizes the failure of the humanities to realize the promise of humanization
because the Creature is unable to use “language and European history and literature as the media
for his transformation into a member of the community” (972). The Creature reaches out to
William, Jonathan Jones points out, with the goal of teaching him. The Creature tells Victor that his first killing began with an attempted lesson, which went horribly wrong when William misconstrued his motives as malevolent. Desperate for companionship, the Creature reasoned, “If, therefore, I could seize him and educate him as my companion and friend, I should not be so desolate in this peopled earth” (as quoted in Jones 283). Jones argues that the Creature’s understanding of education is consistent with Enlightenment thought: “The initial educational potential that the Creature perceives in the boy resembles the increasing stress that the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers placed on education as a means of counteracting the ingrained customs and prejudices of the modern world” (Jones 284). Yet the Creature’s attempt at instruction fails miserably.

The Creature’s murder of William, McClane argues, marks the end of a prolonged “pedagogical fantasy” during which the Creature “succumbs to the ruse of the humanities” and believes he can be an “appropriate object of the liberal arts” (974-975). In the Creature’s plea for Victor to create a fellow monster, he turns to science to fulfill the promise of community that the liberal arts—“language, literature or consciousness”—have failed to realize (McClane 977). Although the Creature’s education in language and literature, gleaned as he listens, unseen, to the De Lacey family, enables him to “find a voice through the articulation of the cultural discourses that he has overheard,” he ultimately learns that “these discourses do not belong to him but are borrowed from the very ideology that excludes him” (Jones 284).

**Teaching Frankenstein and Frankenstein’s Teachings**

If the Creature’s aesthetic sensibility gives him the potential, in some ways, to be a model student of literature, his systematic exclusion from the discourses that surround him presents a
clear countermodel for teaching. Thoughtful literature teachers show their students that they are welcome in a community of interpretive discourse. They help students realize that their varied and shifting transactions with the texts they read are, far from demons to be exorcised, the signs of their humanity. In teaching *Frankenstein*, Backes invites students to reflect on their own education and to compare their experiences as learners with those of Victor and the Creature. His students, he reports, tend to conclude that the Creature is a superior learner, yet they also acknowledge that the story of their own education is more like Victor’s than the Creature’s. Backes concludes, “Perhaps the realization that school can provide only a small part of the education needed to function in the complex world is the most important benefit of reading the novel... The realization that they have become passively dependent upon schools is often the first step toward becoming more independent learners” (35). With a Coleridgean imagination, the Creature reads literature with a sensitivity and reflective engagement that is often absent from literature instruction in school.

One might argue that Victor and the Creature both attempt to learn independently, yet the Creature’s virtuosic autodidactism outclasses his creator’s not only in how rapidly he absorbs knowledge but also in how he fuses intellectual and emotional activity to generate new insight. If the Creature’s education, in contrast with traditional schooling, realizes some of the promise of the humanities’ humanizing power, the extent of the Creature’s independence as a learner also seems to stymie his potential. Yes, the Creature’s textual transactions provide evidence of independent learning, but the failure of any other reader to corroborate or respectfully challenge his interpretations renders the Creature’s humanization incomplete. The Creature’s tendency to see himself as Milton’s Satan—and to act out his interpretation of Satanic vengeance in horrific ways—could have been corrected by a different reading of his character, affirming his inkling
that he might have been (or could become) an Adam and perhaps attaching the Satanic label to Victor’s power-craving solipsism.

The Creature’s emotional involvement in his reading bears particular resemblance to the adolescent reader, whose attention, Rosenblatt writes, “will be diverted to those phases of any work that apply most clearly to his own emotional tensions and perplexities” (Literature as Exploration, 87). The literature teacher’s role, according to Rosenblatt, is not to discount the students’ personal response but rather to help them hone their facility in processing their responses, recognizing “misinterpretations and distorted reactions” and “helping the student arrive at a more lucid sense of the work” through “the parallel effort to help him understand and evaluate his personal emphases” (91). A burgeoning close reader, the Creature receives none of the education that Rosenblatt deems essential, even though he seems extraordinarily disposed to benefit from this kind of teaching and learning.

True interpretive discourse about literature is inherently humanizing; the capacity to contribute—and be recognized as a contributor in a community—dignifies each reader as a thinking and feeling person who deserves to speak and be heard. Seen as non-human by all the readers with whom he comes into context, the Creature is forced to read in isolation; he is a languaged and languaging being who is denied the right to constitute himself through language in the presence of a responsive audience. Coleridge views imagination, Richards writes, as a form of “self-creation” (Richards 49). Literary experience nearly allows the Creature, Victor’s spurned creation, to re-form his sense of self, yet he is, ironically, unable to complete the process of “self-creation” alone.

Literature education, as Rosenblatt observes, is ideally a social process in which “the teacher’s challenge, as well as the challenge of the other students, will stimulate each of them to
search for knowledge that will clarify the problems he encounters and will supply the basis for valid judgements” (114). Despite the impressiveness of his independent learning, therefore, the Creature did need a literature teacher after all—not the guide who would interpret the text on his behalf but instead the listener who would hear his thoughts, test his interpretations, make him feel accepted in a community of discourse and, through all of these actions, affirm his humanity.
Chapter Seven

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE:
PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES IN A COURSE ON
“CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE”

As the scent of blooming lilacs overwhelmed the parking lot and unpredictable institutional heating gave way to intermittent, sometimes barely perceptible air-conditioning, I sensed the usual shift in energies in the high school hallways—the rise in boisterous levity that marked the arrival of May. Yet, for me, in the summer of 2019, the cyclical ending of the school year was accompanied by a new beginning. Twice a week, after the modulated clang of the last afternoon bell, I would rush out of the school building to make my train to Harlem in time for the evening graduate course, “Critical Approaches to Literature,” that I was teaching to pre-service and in-service English teachers.

In the days before our first class meeting, I anticipated the thrill of teaching in the same seminar room in which I had taken some of the formative courses in my own graduate studies. I had a renewed sense of possibility in the opportunity to learn from my students, who would bring their own visions, inquiries and commitments as teachers. And I was eager to lead experiences and experiments that would test models for embedding the close reading of literature in meaningful and authentic discourse. At the same time, I felt uncertain about how theory would
interact with practice—how I could live up to the lofty visions of literature education that luminaries like Louise Rosenblatt and Cleanth Brooks powerfully invoke but whose enactment in actual classrooms they seldom depict. And I felt hesitant, at times, about whether my experience as a teacher would equip me to be an effective mentor to all my students, some of whom would be teaching English in diverse urban communities different from any place I had worked. I knew that I would rely on my curiosity as a learner, and on the depth of my experience as a learner of literature, to position myself in this new role.

**Diving into the Foxhole**

In the first session of the course, I shared an image from George Saunders’s illustrated fable *Fox 8*. A fox, sketched by the artist Chelsea Cardinal, peers into the window of a house; inside, a mother reads a bed-time story to a child. Saunders’s book, I told the students, begins with the phrase “Deer Reeder,” and we soon learn that our narrator, and ostensibly the writer of the tale, is a fox. Witnessing the human mother’s act of reading and storytelling, Fox 8 is launched into an extraordinarily accelerated process of learning language and literature. He develops the capacity to understand, and then read, English—or “Yuman,” as he calls it—and comes to question some of the narratives in the mother’s repertoire, where foxes are often figured as villains with insatiable appetites. Later, Fox 8 uses his literacy skills to decipher a Yuman sign that says “Fox View Commons,” and he discovers that the Yumans are building a giant shopping mall that will destroy the foxes’ habitat. Fox 8 subsequently attempts to use his

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24 The principles of language acquisition may provide a model or metaphor for many forms of authentic learning. Pointing to the work of Jerome Bruner, Blau comments on the way the adoption of academic discourse in a classroom community mirrors “the same kind of process that defines the learning of language and thought by children in their interactions with parents and older siblings” (*The Literature Workshop* 160).
command of language to connect and communicate with humans, but his efforts yield only more turmoil for himself and his fellow foxes.

One could examine the fable from a variety of perspectives—drawing on a Marxist or ecocritical framework, for example—but I chose to begin with the image of the fox listening to stories. I selected this scene as an enthralling not only because it provides a mythic introduction to a discussion of literary learning but also because it echoes a touchstone moment in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which I envisioned as the centerpiece for the course, in which Victor Frankenstein’s creation miraculously absorbs language—and an interest in reading literature—by listening in through the window of the DeLacey family’s cottage.

With Saunders’s sketch of the literate fox in mind, I invited the students to reflect on a moment when they felt like they learned a piece of literature in some deep or lasting way, in or out of a classroom. Rob remembered his dad sitting in an armchair, reading Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, as Rob listened, at the age of six or seven, not necessarily “understanding” all of the story but being transported through the magic of the narrative. Harold shared his experience reading a Terry Pratchett novel that challenged his ideas about “fixed narrative.” The novel was “hilarious” and “liberating” and shifted his “perspective of what literature could be.” Reading and writing, he reflected, could be a form of play.

Several of the students described immersive reading experiences outside of school, but some recounted stories connected to the classroom. Jed remembered completing an “annoying assignment” that turned out to provide a roadmap to a new way of reading. Writing journal entries from the point-of-view of characters in William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*, he

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25 Student names are pseudonyms. Student work is quoted with the students’ permission. Class dialogues are reconstructed from memory.
realized that studying a text could be more than “receiving a story,” as interpretation and awareness of multiple perspectives wove their way into the reading.

I recalled a conversation with my Romantic poetry professor, the wise and sensitive Leslie Brisman, who, looking at me skeptically, asked if I really believed that my outlandish interpretation of a Wordsworth poem was true. A teacher hadn’t asked me that question before, and, when I wrote another paper on a Keats poem, Brisman listened to me as I read all ten pages of it aloud, working through an attempt to articulate meaning in the poem line by line. This time, I believed in the truth of what I was writing, and, from Professor Brisman’s gracefully present act of listening, I could see that he did too.

Marvin’s experience did not begin as a direct literary transaction but instead came through reading D.T Suzuki’s commentary on a haiku by Basho, which Marvin encountered in the book *Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*. I pointed out that Marvin’s experience seems to challenge Rosenblatt’s adage that accepting someone else’s interpretation of a text in place of engaging with the text oneself is like letting someone else eat your dinner for you. Yet, for Marvin, Suzuki’s commentary was more like “learning how to shuck an oyster.”

Marvin elaborated on his story in his final paper: “Returning to my parents’ house in the winter of 2002, I happened on a book whose title struck my curiosity and, after discovering a poem written hundreds of years ago by Basho, literature changed my life. When I look carefully, I see the nazuna Blooming by the hedge! This poem opened my mind to the transformative power of literary experience and to a love of reading closely. Years later, when I started to consider becoming a teacher of literature, this poem also became a narrative that I composed my teaching life. Or at least that’s what I’ve told myself. I began Critical Approaches to Literature by reflecting on this encounter with Basho’s haiku—exploring its role in shaping my life as a reader and as a teacher. The poem captures a moment of reverence to the seemingly insignificant—a sacred communion with a humble flower—that I often call to mind when I look carefully at a poem or a person. The nazuna and hedge have become symbolic fixtures in my life, and looking carefully has become what it means to me to be a mindful learner, a constant beginner, a newcomer.

So I was surprised in my initial writing for the course when I realized that my love for Basho’s looking might actually be more properly called a reanimation of D.T. Suzuki’s thinking in his interpretive commentary. Through writing about my experience I realized that my appreciation for the poem and its long-lasting resonance, maybe even my aesthetic reading of the poem itself) were essentially constructed from Suzuki’s accompanying

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Reflecting on all the narratives we had heard, I asked the students, “What do these stories have in common? What’s unique? Can we generate a list of features that are characteristic of moments of literary learning?” Rather than developing a list of features as I had proposed, however, the students ended up asking more questions. Can a work of commentary or criticism about a text act as a teacher? Can teachers and students profitably use criticism in authentic experiences of literary learning? What is the relationship between being a responsible and being open to interpretive play? How does commentary written about a text deepen or impinge upon a reader’s relationship with the text itself? What is the relationship between immersion and understanding, between feeling and studying, between the freedom of exploration and the possibly productive constraints of school assignments?

**A Tremor in the Foundation**

The questions raised in that class seemed to affirm my selection of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a primary site of literary experimentation and exploration for the course. I chose to place a reading of *Frankenstein* at the center of the course for several reasons. First, the novel is highly receptive to a remarkable range of critical perspectives and practices. As Laurence Lipking observes, “Like *Hamlet*, *Lycidas*, and *Turn of the Screw* in previous generations, it furnishes a testing ground for every conceivable mode of interpretation, in casebooks or collections of articles where students can be instructed in the infinite varieties of criticism and fledgling critics can cut their teeth on new readings” (416). Second, *Frankenstein* is a story partly about education, literacy and literary learning, including the iconic scene of the Creature’s notes to the poem. At the very least, these notes made an aesthetic reading possible for me and led me to my own discoveries. That is, I experienced the commentary before I could encounter the poem.”
reading *Paradise Lost*. Third, as a classic work by a female author once viewed as a genre text, the study of the novel raises questions about canonicity. Moreover, given how large the novel looms in popular culture, a study of *Frankenstein* also invites engagements with adaptations in a variety of media. Fourth, the novel entangles its readers in many different kinds of interpretive difficulty; its textual landscape provides a fertile space for exploring the authority of teacher and text. Among the challenges the novel presents novice readers is a web of intertextuality that includes significant allusions to *Paradise Lost* and poems by the great Romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and P.B. Shelley. Fifth, I had firsthand experience teaching *Frankenstein* with secondary students for many years, and, just months before the course, I had re-tooled my approach to *Frankenstein* in honor of the 200th anniversary of its original publication, organizing a school-wide symposium for my tenth-grade honors students.

The tenth-grade students shared their own creative works inspired by Shelley’s text and discussed the self-designed essay topics that they wrote about in a class anthology inquiring into the continuing meaning and interpretive complexity of the novel. Since I recently had been writing about acts of reading and interpretation in *Frankenstein*, considering the Creature as an aesthetic reader, the novel had a strong personal resonance for me in my scholarship as well as my teaching.

Early in the course, I presented Susan Hynds’s distinction between problems and puzzles and Blau’s traits of performative literacy, and I encouraged the graduate students to grapple with interpretive problems in their reading as a means of bridging the gap between authentic, embodied engagement in a text and critical discourse about literature. We spent a good deal of time talking about how we might define an authentic “problem” for ourselves and for our students.
We considered whether some of the critical essays in the Norton edition diminished or enhanced our reading experience, and whether such essays have an application in a high school classroom. We experimented with Deborah Appleman’s critical lens approach, and the students devised ingenious feminist, Marxist and postcolonial readings of the novel, yet my graduate students questioned whether their own students, with much less familiarity with these critical orientations, could engage in meaningful feminist or postcolonial discourse with the mere aid of Appleman’s questions. I objected to Appleman’s description of “Reader Response” and “New Criticism” as critical lenses to take on and off, and the students mostly nodded receptively. Yet one student pushed back a bit against my proposal, suggesting that close reading was not an all-encompassing mode of engagement but a specific political stance that tends to minimize attention to the social structures that textual worlds may evoke, interrogate or replicate.

This moment of tension foreshadowed a more foundational tremor in a subsequent class session, when I introduced an activity I called “The Monstrous Department Meeting.” I gave the students the following scenario:

The tenth-grade English team at your school, of which you are a member, meets to discuss book orders for the next year. Your department chair intends to replace damaged, missing and deteriorated *Frankenstein* books with more copies of the Bantam Classics, Mass Market Paperback edition, which uses the 1831 text. The school has had this inexpensive edition in the book room for many years.

Your colleague Jen proposes that the department instead invest in the Norton Critical Edition (1818 text plus critical essays and excerpts of selected intertexts/sources). Lily suggests other more imaginative possibilities, including MIT’s *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers and Creators of All Kinds*, which makes use of the 1818 text. Further investigation reveals that the more moderately priced Penguin Classics edition uses the 1818 text but does not include the critical essays and supplemental materials in the Norton.

Emily points out that the novel is in the public domain and that the full text is available online. Why, she asks, do we even need to order the books at all? Students can read the book on their phones or other devices. In fact, Emily has created her own abridged e-text for students in which she has cut out some of the parts of the book that cause her students the most difficulty, including Walton’s letters, some allusions to literary works the students aren’t familiar with, and some of Shelley’s more convoluted,
cumbersome sentences. Emily makes tweaks to the text each year based on the reading level of the students in her class. Also available for free online is the Pennsylvania Electronic Edition, edited by UPenn professor Stuart Curran (knarf.english.upenn.edu), which includes both the 1818 and 1831 texts and extensive hyperlinked annotations.

Mark likes the idea of using an online text and has a new plan for the coming year. His students have always struggled to get through Frankenstein, so he will give students an outline of the plot, divide the students into groups and send each group the link to one key chapter from the story. The groups will present out to the whole class on their assigned chapter, and then Mark will show selected scenes from two different versions of the movie to help students explore the impact of Frankenstein in popular culture.

Nick questions whether Frankenstein belongs in the curriculum at all and comments that the department should be focusing on integrating more contemporary books by diverse authors. The department chair notes that the book budget is limited and that ordering a more expensive edition of Frankenstein may limit the number of new titles that can be purchased.

So, what will you tell your colleagues and your department chair? What do you make of the different proposals offered, and where do you stand? What recommendations would you make in terms of the book orders, what rationale would you provide, and what Frankenstein text would you want to use with your own students? Consider the possibility of citing some of our class readings to help you support or situate your argument.

I had imagined that the students would assiduously cite details from the readings assigned for the day—including Anne Mellor’s argument for preferring the 1818 edition to the 1830 text and N. Katherine Hayles’s exploration of the distinction between “deep reading” and online “hyperreading” online—as they offered a careful and informed response to each colleague’s proposal. The issue of how to navigate difficulty in the text also, I thought, might inspire the students to return to earlier readings by Hynds and Blau.

After a mere two or three minutes of writing in response to my prompt, however, most of the students had ceased moving their pens or tapping their keyboards. None were leafing back through the pages of the readings as I had anticipated. When I asked the students to share and discuss their responses, first in small groups and then as a full class, I found that most of the students voiced strong agreement with Nick’s stated viewpoint—to eliminate Frankenstein from the curriculum in favor of texts by more diverse authors—and therefore saw little need to engage
with the other perspectives I devised in relation to the course readings. I felt my body tightening with discomfort, my entire concept for the course seemingly on the verge of being invalidated by the class.

A New Direction

One of the students enrolled in my course, Marvin, occupied a unique position as he had been my classmate in numerous doctoral courses and, for nearly ten years, a close friend. As I walked back to the subway with Marvin after the class had taken an uncomfortable turn, I struggled to find the words to articulate my frustration.

“This class felt different from any of the sessions so far,” I said. “I feel like we’re getting stuck.”

“Do you have any sense of where that stuckness is coming from?” Marvin asked.

“Well, I think there was something anti-aesthetic in the response to the text. So many of them just rejected Frankenstein, and they didn’t even seem to really consider it.”

Marvin had a different interpretation. “I think this was the first time that you opened up any space to resist the novel, even a small one,” he said, “and people in the class were looking for that space, waiting for that opportunity, and they seized it.”

With my plans thrown off course, I felt annoyed that Marvin wasn’t emerging as my steady ally in the classroom, a shadow T.A. who would intuit the trajectory I wanted the discussion to go in and could gently nudge it in that direction. Instead, he intervened with his own divergent and resistant readings, commenting on fairly obscure features of the text—like Victor’s physical descriptions of his teachers—or seemingly tangential connections to pedagogical problems he was encountering in his own classroom.
“The questions that you’re raising are interesting,” I said, “but for the context of this class they are kind of idiosyncratic.” Immediately I could see the hurt in his face.

“A”Andrew,” he said after a pause, “I love your readings of Frankenstein and your structuring of the class, but your way of seeing the text is extremely idiosyncratic.”

The difficult wisdom in Marvin’s reply stayed with me for several days. Was I, under the guise of open-ended writing prompts and free-flowing discussion, imposing a tight interpretive and pedagogical agenda—perhaps more problematic because of its covertness—that strangulated the space for students to express their own idiosyncratic responses? Was I expecting the students to form a community based on their willingness to normalize my idiosyncrasies rather than my ability to engage theirs? And was I confusing aesthetic engagement in the text with submission to my pedagogical authority—the text of my teaching? I recognized that I needed to open more opportunities for the students to pursue their own questions, including ones that might challenge my preconceived agenda.

For a later class, we read Anne Mellor’s essay on representations of race in Frankenstein, a selection from Elizabeth Young’s book about the cultural history of the Frankenstein monster as a racial metaphor, excerpts from Victor LaVelle’s Destroyer, a recently published graphic novel that re-imagines Frankenstein in the age of Black Lives Matter, and Jill Lepore’s New Yorker article about reading Frankenstein as a slave narrative, which Marvin had recommended. I had included some of these readings on my original syllabus, but the context in which I found myself attending to the students’ responses had shifted from what I had initially expected.

Lepore cites evidence that Percy and Mary Shelley were both abolitionists but that Percy favored gradual emancipation: “Percy Shelley was among those abolitionists who urged not immediate but gradual emancipation, fearing that the enslaved, so long and so violently
oppressed, and denied education, would, if unconditionally freed, seek a vengeance of blood.”

The bloody vengeance pursued by Victor’s Creature, depicted as non-European, could be read as a cautionary tale that enacts the perils of granting slaves full freedom, making the novel’s politics—despite the pains Shelley takes to humanize the Creature—seem regressive by contemporary standards.

In a climactic confrontation with Victor, which might be viewed as a kind of slave rebellion, the Creature says, “You are my creator, but I am your master. Obey!” (Shelley 120). Lepore compares the Creature’s account of his education with the conventions of slave narratives like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which was published 27 years after the first edition of *Frankenstein*. Based on my re-reading of Lepore’s essay and the conversation with the students, I added an excerpt from Douglass’s memoir to our syllabus. Douglass, who learns to read despite the prohibition against slaves becoming literate, describes a transformative experience reading anti-slavery arguments in *The Columbian Orator*:

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan’s mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind...The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery...As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy...I often found myself regretting my own existence and wishing myself dead. (47-48)

The parallels between Douglass’s experience and the Creature’s are striking. Both learn to read surreptitiously, both identify personally with the narratives they read, and through their literacy, both gain a vocabulary for defying their masters. Both are sensitive, reflective and intensely emotional readers, and the immediate effect of their newfound knowledge is not liberation but
rather heightened pain. Echoing the language of the Creature, Douglass laments his “wretched condition.” Michele Sharp argues that the Creature’s lack of proper schooling interferes with his success as a reader, leading him to commit the error of “reading everything through the narrow scope of his own situation” (82-84). Yet, as Marvin pointed out during our class discussion, one can hardly imagine Sharp leveling this same critique against Douglass, whose painful personal connection to his reading seems unequivocally justified: Given his enslavement, what other way of reading *The Columbian Orator* could be imaginable?

In our discussion of Lepore’s article and Douglass’s account of his education, several students continued to express serious reservations about teaching *Frankenstein*:

I wonder about being a white teacher and white reader of *Frankenstein*. There is a safe distance for me that many of my students of color don’t get to enjoy. What kinds of responsibilities do I have as a white teacher in discussing literature that resonates with students as fact? I’m not sure, and I’m not even sure how to talk about it.

While we as adults with the privilege whiteness affords us might be inclined to dismiss any reservations around using this text to have conversations about race with our students, I think it’s important to reassess these inclinations in favor of what best serves our students.

I have thought a great deal about my hesitation to teach *Frankenstein* to disenfranchised readers. It certainly does open a conversation that shouldn’t be shied away from. The parts of the novel I’m struggling with, though, and where I see the contradictions in themes of oppression and justice, is the helpless injustices that never go addressed, like Justine. We see the creature struggle against his creator because of his isolation, but we never see any struggle with Justine and these other injustices throughout the story. In fact, we see Victor perpetuating them when he is the only person that could right the wrongs.

I had chosen to frame the course around the parallel between *Fox 8* and *Frankenstein*, and the comparison to a literacy fable involving a talking fox, I realized, sidestepped the horrifying history of *human* literacy narratives. Frederick Douglass’s story was, in effect, masked behind my opening class discussion of *Fox 8*, raising a set of problems that Saunders’s story had not brought to the forefront. Questions of race, privilege and marginalized readers were
conspicuously absent, I recognized, from the investigative entry-points we derived in our first session, when the parallel between the Creature’s literacy and an imaginary fox’s concealed another haunting parallel, slave narratives that mirrored the Creature’s acquisition of literacy.

The Creature’s narrative of his literacy education is fiction, yet Douglass’s story is fact and therefore, some of my students argued persuasively, necessitates a different treatment in academic discussion. What about, my students pointed out, adolescents whose personal histories of racism and injustice dispose them to connect with the Creature’s story as fact? To imply that students’ lived experience is akin to a nineteenth century science-fiction novel or an outlandish fairy tale, subject to analysis for its literary qualities, could risk invalidating their perspective in ways that perpetuate further oppression.

Jed, a white teacher who taught in a school populated predominantly by students of color, was eloquent in articulating his reservations about teaching *Frankenstein*: “Shelley presents a story of a character who is othered and oppressed based on his appearance. He gains access to literacy, but his literacy ultimately isn’t a means of empowerment. It only heightens his self-loathing. There is no arc of redemption in this narrative that moves toward justice and empowerment. I’m concerned that my students of color will experience *Frankenstein* as a disempowering, damaging, destructive narrative.”

Another student, Maureen, called attention to what she saw as the toxic Eurocentrism of *Frankenstein* and curricula that featured it: “We could use this novel to interrogate issues of whiteness and racism with our students, but other texts would be much more effective for those goals. Shelley’s Eurocentric perspective dominates the novel, and the Creature’s de-humanization could be traumatizing for students of color. We need to be more critical and
sensitive about the ways that analyzing and discussing literature are part of Eurocentric discourse.”

The conversation raised a number of questions. In what sense is literary study a site of social justice and progressive action? How are conversations about racism, privilege and justice best positioned within a literature curriculum? To what extent can the dramatic or moral content of a literary text render real psychological or emotional harm to student readers, and what responsibility do teachers have for navigating or mitigating against this possibility? What are the implications of a teacher imagining that students will experience a text in a certain way and acting to protect them from that assumed feeling—particularly when a white teacher is anticipating the response of students of color? Given that the literary canon has historically privileged white male authors, who sometimes have minimized or problematically represented the perspectives of people of color, in what context can canonical literature fit into a twenty-first century literature curriculum? To what extent do the fundamental assumptions that define practices of reading, writing, and interpretation in the English classroom—such as closely analyzing the relationship between form and content—reflect problematically Eurocentric discourse that should be challenged? And when raising questions about Eurocentrism, racism and the literary canon, how do we avoid sometimes counterproductive binaries?

I remained reluctant, however, to accept the argument that *Frankenstein* should not be taught because of its representations of injustice. Such a stance suggests that the value of a literary text is tied to the degree to which a story’s plot reinforces a morally defensible model of conduct. If justice is fairly apportioned to the characters, then the text has instructional value for students. Such a stance, however, minimizes the importance of how the novel is situated in the interpretive discourse of a class, where the values and assumptions present in the text could be
challenged. It also minimizes the potential for the how of an author’s storytelling to complicate the what—in the case of Frankenstein, the way Shelley’s layered frame narratives invite readers to question narrator reliability and, potentially, confront their prejudice and revise their initial perspective. Yet I was open to the possibility that the pitfalls of teaching Frankenstein could outweigh the benefits, in some contexts, including, perhaps, the context of the “Critical Approaches to Literature” course I had designed.

**Jed’s Journey**

As the end of the term approached, I wanted to invite students to propose final projects that would engage with the teaching of Frankenstein, that would challenge the teaching of Frankenstein—and with it, perhaps, the design of my course—or that would resist Frankenstein indirectly by turning to other texts not assigned on my syllabus to enact a “critical approach to literature.” For his final paper for my course, Jed decided to evaluate his concerns about teaching Frankenstein by talking with three students and one colleague at his school, where Frankenstein was commonly taught in tenth-grade English.

As a white, Southern man teaching in Harlem, Jed identified his commitment to “overcoming the sins of my ancestors” and “teaching responsibly in light of my implicit bias.” After college, Jed completed a law degree, before he decided that a career in teaching or perhaps, some day, education policy, could contribute more directly to the pursuit of justice. Jed’s background shaped the questions that animated his teaching life: “How do I grant access where access has so long been denied? How do I create a space that is not about overcoming disenfranchisement but about empowerment in its most authentic form?”
Given these questions and this context, Jed found himself attuned to “racial undertones” in *Frankenstein* and especially repelled by the persistent denial of justice in the novel. He assumed that the tenth-graders at his school who read *Frankenstein* in class would react to the text with outrage, and this response led him to “abhor the idea of teaching *Frankenstein* to a classroom of black and brown students.” He reflected on his assumptions that undergirded his strong resistance to teaching the text:

It appeared to me that there were zero themes of justice—Justine is falsely convicted of killing William, the De Lacey family is on the run for crimes they did not commit, Victor never admits to or pays for the wrongs he committed in creating the creature and consequently not nurturing the creature. How could kids who live a life threatened by injustice daily appropriately digest these problems? Could they make sense of the way the creature is treated solely based on his appearance, or is that reality too real for them? And furthermore, as a white, straight, cisgender male, am I making too many assumptions about how these students of color would ascertain and respond to these problems?

Two of the students of color Jed interviewed did not seem to connect representations of race in *Frankenstein* with their own experience. Another student did describe a personal resonance with the exclusion and injustice the Creature experiences on account of his appearance, yet he reported that a consideration of race and prejudice was necessary and helpful—and not traumatizing—in encountering *Frankenstein*. Jed’s colleague typically assigns *Frankenstein* after her students have read other works, including *The Bluest Eye* and *Othello*, through what she calls a “racial lens,” so the students are primed to consider issues of race in the novel. If the connections don’t emerge organically, she pairs passages related to prejudice and injustice in *Frankenstein* with thematically related moments from the texts they have already read. Typically, she told Jed, “the students activate the racial lens when they realize the creature is being tormented solely based on his appearance, even when he proves himself intelligent and caring.”
Jed’s colleague noted her concern about “re-traumatizing” students through their encounter with the physical and emotional violence of the novel, yet she ultimately decided that the pedagogical benefits of applying the “racial lens” to *Frankenstein* outweigh the potential pitfalls of teaching the novel. “It is important that my mindset going into the novel is one that is open to learning about the racial lens from my students. Since their experience is literally one of the racial lens, they offer analysis of the text through the racial lens that I had never thought of before.” Rather than positioning students to be victimized by the text, Jed’s colleague constructed her curriculum to transfer some of her interpretive and pedagogical authority to the students.

Jed found himself returning to a line from Gloria Ladson-Billings’s *Dreamkeepers* that had resonated with him months earlier: “It is the way we teach that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum” (15). Based on his conversations with students and colleagues, Jed decided to revise his earlier position that the novel should be excised from his school’s curriculum. He devised the following guiding questions for teachers to consider in planning a unit on *Frankenstein*:

1. As the teacher, do I encounter *Frankenstein* as fact or fiction?
   a. If fact/fiction, which groups of students in my classes do I have/not have
      the same perspective as?
   b. Which lens(es) does my perspective bias me towards?
   c. What can I learn from my students through studying this novel, and how
      can I present that I am open to learning from their perspectives and
      experiences?
2. Which student(s) in my classroom might encounter *Frankenstein* as fact?
   a. How can I demonstrate value for this perspective in my classroom?
   b. How can I encourage his/her/their voice(s) in discussions about the novel?
3. What solutions can I offer for the helplessness that the creature and many other
   characters face throughout the novel?
   a. How do I help students create a counternarrative?
   b. What other texts can I point them to grapple with this further?
4. What supplemental materials can I offer than present a perspective not
   represented in my classroom?
Jed’s questions seem especially valuable in that they require teachers of *Frankenstein* to reflect on their own interpretive experience with the text but not to ascribe absolute authority to their own reading. Students’ particular perspective and experience as readers, which may be different from the teacher’s, are also honored, and students have the opportunity to resist the assumptions of text (and teacher).

Jed’s approach to teaching the novel, notably, would include a focus on close reading. In particular, Jed would want students to grapple with Shelley’s use of frame narrators and the epistolary format of storytelling. In reading the text closely, students discover that the presentation of the Creature as other is enfolded within Shelley’s layering of potentially unreliable first person narrators in Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein. The structure of *Frankenstein*, Jed commented, can be a vehicle for teaching “the theme of truth finding”; teachers can use the form of *Frankenstein* to push students to “question authority and authenticity when it comes to passed down stories—to always question the narrative.”

To teach *Frankenstein* in a sensitive and just manner, Jed concluded, requires significant imagination, openness, and reflectiveness—a creative engagement far more nuanced than Victor Frankenstein’s:

The perfect *Frankenstein* unit will never exist, though that’s the nature of teaching. It will take structuring and restructuring limb by limb, questioning motives and biases, reflecting on and exploring the stories students bring into our classrooms, and maybe even sometimes completely ripping apart your second creation though your first attempt demanded a second. After all, this revision and questioning is precisely what we aim to do in our classrooms—create relentless thinkers that will analyze, critique, imagine, and continue to create —just hopefully a little more responsibly than Victor.

To analyze, critique, imagine, and create—a recursive, even “relentless” cycle of engagement—these interpretive acts are among the hallmarks of the kind of close reading needed more than
ever in the twenty-first century. And the curriculum is, in some sense, co-created with the students, a conversation in which the students, the author of the novel, and the teacher are all granted ample discursive space.

The creative experience of revising and questioning—and sometimes restructuring limb by limb—became a powerful metaphor not only for the teaching of Frankenstein but also for my own teaching of the “Critical Approaches to Literature” course.

Coda: Re-writing the Scripts

I didn’t consider, in planning my “Critical Approaches to Literature” course, that it would take place in the backdrop of two major theatrical events in New York City: Jacqueline Drury’s Fairview, recipient of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and Aaron Sorkin’s adaptation of To Kill a Mockingbird, the highest-grossing play in Broadway history.

Drury’s Fairview opens in an elegant middle class home. Around the pristine, white-tinted decor runs a dark frame, and when four black characters arrive on the scene, preparing for a birthday dinner, the audience might be peering through a TV set, experiencing the script of a 90s TV show, a family drama with witty dialogue but no direct reference to race. That dynamic changes abruptly in the second movement of the play, when the opening act is reprised, this time in silent pantomime, as a group of initially invisible white spectators comment on the action, addressing race in ways that seem alternately naive, attempting to skew toward political correctness, and downright offensive; eventually, they make a game of asking each other, “If you could be any race, what would you want to be?” After one decides “I’d like to be African-American,” the three white characters infiltrate the stage for the third movement of the play, taking on the roles of three black characters in performances that embody uncomfortable
stereotypes. In the shattering finale, the black actors step into the audience and invite audience members who identify as white to step onstage, reversing the roles of gazed-upon-performer and spectator.

After the performance I attended, at the end of which I tentatively stepped onto the stage, I listened to a talkback featuring Nicholas Mirzoeff, a scholar of visual culture and media at NYU, and Mia Mask, a professor of film at Vassar. Among the topics they discussed were the growing field of whiteness studies and the imperative to challenge the Eurocentric curriculum that remains prevalent at most colleges and universities.

At the same time that *Fairview* was playing at the venerable but small Theater for a New Audience in Brooklyn, Aaron Sorkin’s adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the highest grossing play on Broadway. The white Sorkin, a graduate of the same suburban high school I attended, intervenes in Harper Lee’s 1960 novel, a staple in secondary curricula for decades, in ways that attempt to participate in twenty-first century conversations about race while still appealing to a mainstream Broadway audience.

In March 2018, the estate of Harper Lee sued on the grounds that Sorkin’s adaptation violated the contract agreed upon by Lee, which demanded fidelity to her conception of the characters and story (Alter). While the novel, presented through young Scout Finch’s eyes, offers what has been typically regarded as a heroic portrait of her father Atticus, the initial draft of the play complicated that vision of the character, showing an Atticus who begins with a belief in the goodness of all people, with sympathy even for virulent racists. His values evolve over the course of the drama, largely as a result of his interactions with his black maid Calpurnia, whose role, in Sorkin’s adaptation, is greatly expanded from the original text. According to a contract signed by Harper Lee months before her death in 2015, “the Play shall not derogate or depart in
any manner from the spirit of the Novel nor alter its characters” (Alter). But the character of Atticus as written by Harper Lee has long been subject to multiple interpretations.

In a 2009 article for The New Yorker, Malcom Gladwell argues that Atticus, far from a progressive activist, represents “old-style Southern liberalism—gradual and paternalistic.” In Gladwell’s reading, Atticus “dare not challenge the foundation” of his white jurors’ privilege and instead “encourages them to swap one of their prejudices for another” in playing to class bias against the Ewells. Atticus, who downplays the moral depravity of the KKK, will not “look at the problem of racism outside the immediate context of the trial.”

In Go Set a Watchman, the precursor of To Kill a Mockingbird published in 2015, Lee shows Atticus from Scout’s adult perspective. In this context, Scout’s youthful idealization of Atticus becomes far murkier: Atticus is a loving father and a defender of the law, but he is decidedly opposed to the NAACP and the movement to desegregate the South.

In the course of the legal challenge from Lee’s estate, a real courtroom drama with Sorkin’s fictional courtroom drama at its center, the producer Scott Rudin provocatively offered to have a performance of the play staged in court since he claimed that only by seeing the script in performance could its allegiance to Lee’s authorial vision be fairly assessed (Paulson). The legal proceedings were remarkable in that they placed literary interpretation and literary theory (e.g., questions of the relationship between interpretive validity and authorial intent) out of the rarefied halls of the academy and instead at the center of a court case with major legal, economic, artistic and political implications. Both sides would need to mobilize the tool of close reading in order to make a compelling argument. But the case also spotlighted the fraught issue of how the study of literature—or a reader’s participation in a literary experience—might be
Rudin told The New York Times, “I can’t and won’t present a play that feels like it was written in the year the book was written in terms of its racial politics: It wouldn’t be of interest. The world has changed since then” (Alter). Given the racial politics reflected in the original Mockingbird, the novelist Alice Randall recently questioned the book’s enshrinement in the literature curriculum: “We should be asking whether then novel, written by a privileged daughter of the Old South, should still take up space in curriculum that could be well used to expose students to literary voices on race and injustice that have emerged in the past 50 years.” The way Mockingbird is traditionally taught, Randall suggests, reinforces stereotypes in ways that are especially harmful for young readers of color. She writes, “Every student who reads Lee’s book does not identify with Atticus or with Scout, and teaching it as though they do, or they must, may reinforce the very stereotypes about black men and impoverished women that teaching the book is supposed to combat.”

I saw Mockingbird on a hot July evening at the Shubert Theater, and while I appreciated many aspects of the acting, staging and storytelling, I also saw how Sorkin’s treatment of race could be seen as problematic. His re-envisioning of Mockingbird is not nearly so radical, painful or provocative as Drury’s Fairview, and the play ultimately allows Atticus to retain the heroism—and the privileged place at the fulcrum of the narrative—that the character has held in the cultural imagination since Gregory Peck’s iconic performance in the 1962 film. Racism, in Sorkin’s play, is not so much a structural problem as the product of a localized, seething rage—embodied by the uneducated Bob Ewell—from whom audience members can comfortably distance themselves, joining Atticus on a plane of enlightenment and moral righteousness.
At the talkback I attended after the performance of *Fairview*, one of the audience members asked a question about the structure of the play. The play, he said, was remarkable for its innovative form, which collapsed, recombined and exploded traditions of performance. The realism of the first movement, executed with humor and verve, turns out to be a ruse, a set-up for the re-mixed second act, in which the spectators of the performance—and their fraught participation in what they are seeing—come into focus, escalating from audible commentary overlaying the action to surrealist spectacle. And then, in the final turn, the real-time spectating experience of the audience becomes the object of the playwright’s and the actors’ attention.

At the end of a talkback in which much of the discussion, appropriately, engaged with the play as a commentary on the present political climate, the final question returned to formal considerations. The way Drury challenges the audience’s assumptions about race, bias, performance and the white gaze plays out primarily through the *structure* of the work, which propels the audience’s improbable peripeteia, forcing a repeated re-orientation and interrogation of perspective.

A focal point in Jed’s proposal for teaching *Frankenstein*, the call to question the source of the narrative, is built into the structure of *Fairview*. A thoughtful and responsible teacher of *To Kill a Mockingbird* also, I reflected, would embrace this kind of questioning.

I planned my course on Critical Approaches to Literature before I saw *Fairview* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I believed I had some responsibility, in a literature course for teachers, to address racial literacy and culturally responsive teaching, but those concerns were, in my mind, subordinated to larger questions about how teachers might deepen their students’ (and their own) critical and aesthetic engagement in literary texts. Only later, retrospectively, would I come to
see how the conversations about race that *Fairview* and *Mockingbird* provoked—and in which they participated—would provide a context for my literature course that I hadn’t expected.

At the final class meeting of the Critical Approaches course, I shared with the students a passage from Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. At the end of the first session, I had invited discussion of a passage from *Literature as Exploration* in which Rosenblatt critiques an approach to literature education that “focuses on the so-called literary aspect”—in other words, identifying formal features of a text and applying technical terms (51). Instead, Rosenblatt argues that literary education should be “viewed primarily as the refinement of the student’s power to enter into literary experiences and to interpret them” (51). Morrison, with a different emphasis, offers her own challenge to conventional assumptions about what a critical approach to literature would entail. Launching her study of what white American authors reveal about themselves through their constructions of blackness, Morrison reframes literary criticism as a fundamentally imaginative activity:

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest...I would like it to be clear at the outset that I do not bring to these matters solely or even principally the tools of a literary critic. As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do. But books revealed themselves rather differently to me as a writer. In that capacity I have to place enormous trust in my ability to imagine others and my willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for me. I am drawn to the ways all writers do this...I am in awe of the authority of Faulkner’s Benny, James’s Maisie, Flaubert’s Emma. Melville’s Pip, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein—each of us can extend that list. (3-4)

Much as Rosenblatt distinguishes between the production of literary criticism and literary experience, Morrison separates the tools of the literary critic from the practice of reading as a writer. Morrison distinguishes, moreover, what she was taught about reading from what she learned about reading through writing—a pointed reminder of the hazards of the literature
classroom, which has since its early history been conceptualized as space shaped by authority rather than authorship. A practice of reading as a writer was behind the formation of New Criticism, among whose early exponents were distinguished poets like John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, though that sensibility was certainly lost in the institutionalization and corruption of so-called close reading exercises as a mass-marketed educational product.

Morrison aims for a different kind of closeness—a close exploration—which opens space for discovery and intellectual adventure. Disentangling discovery from conquest is no easy task, yet it may begin with steps toward “corners of the consciousness.” Shelley’s Frankenstein is among the sites of literary imagination and estrangement that Morrison salutes in her list of characters who embody the possibilities and limitations of empathy.

As she demonstrates in her preface to Song of Solomon, in which she devotes several paragraphs to a word-by-word explication of her own opening sentence (a passage I love to teach), Morrison is a dazzling close reader. Morrison, whose death shattered generations of readers and writers and inspired homages all through the literary world as I was writing this chapter, wrote in her Nobel address that “word-work is sublime...because it is generative.” A generative work, Morrison elsewhere writes, enacts and invites the “acquisition of self-knowledge” (“Goodness”). Such learning, unlike the false knowledge of a teacher’s answer key or Satan’s apple, comes from experience.

When I began the Critical Approaches to Literature course, I hoped that I would leave the class with pages of notes that I could reconstruct and dramatize in this chapter in the form of workshops that teachers might directly replicate or adapt to their own contexts. What I have instead, out of these pages of notes, is another reading, this time of my own teaching. Perhaps that turn should be no surprise for a project whose form, as much as its content, has been about
reading at every turn. Re-reading my notes, during and after the class, I have tried to honor my students’ words as a kind of literary text. The opposite of projecting what we already know or assume to be true onto a text, *true close reading*, Jane Gallop writes, is true learning—that is, “coming to know something we did not know before” (“Close Reading” 16).

Through my dialogues with Jed, Marvin and with others in the class, I had to reflect on and revise some of my preconceived ideas about interpretive discourse, *Frankenstein*, and my role as a teacher. Ruth Vinz has written that teaching is an act of composing; literature teachers, I would add, are readers not only of the texts we teach but also of our own teaching lives—and all the rich, ambiguous and uncertain moments that comprise them. In replaying in my inner ear the words, the pauses, the gaps, the distortions of each class session, I have tried to shake off the limiting veil of my own assumptions and to re-read, ever more closely, the text of my own teaching.

The knowledge that I acquired through the self-reflection Marvin and Jed prompted in me—and perhaps some of the knowledge the students acquired for themselves from our shared experience—sometimes came painfully or unexpectedly, with the shocks of new awareness. Yet the resonance and immediacy of that learning mimics the learning literature makes possible, the dance between readers and writers, who compose, revise and re-envision each other. I’m imagining, then, that the literature classroom of the present and future, shaped by the richest threads of disciplinary tradition yet decidedly non-disciplinarian and non-traditional, will take the form of literature itself, subtle and supple, an opening of discursive space, where many voices—students, teachers and texts—are afforded a careful hearing.
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