theories and methodologies

Literature and Information

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THE TENTH AND FINAL "ANCHOR STANDARD FOR READING" IN THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS DEFINES AS "COLLEGE AND CAREER ready" a student who can "[r]ead and comprehend literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (35). I want to remark on just one aspect of this worthy if blandly unremarkable goal. The distinction between "literary" and "informational" texts has the sanction of common sense, but, like many commonsense notions, it cloaks some knotty issues. For the authors of the standards, "literacy" requires mastering two different if closely related sets of reading skills. One lays the groundwork for "understanding and enjoying complex works of literature," while the other is needed "to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally" (3). Pedagogically, one is the job of the "English language arts teacher," the other the responsibility of "teachers of history/social studies, science, and technical subjects" (8).

The axiom that literature cannot be read in the same way as other forms of writing is by no means universally held, but it has long governed the teaching of reading in high school and college classrooms. In ways that humanists can find heartening, the Common Core standards valorize the traits that reading literature both requires and strengthens: habits of attention and intellectual rigor; the refinement of sensibility and emotional response; the ability to analyze, to synthesize, to discriminate, to evaluate. Such virtues travel well, too. The authors of the standards recognize that students who have mastered literary reading skills are better equipped to meet the challenges posed by texts in other disciplines.

But do benefits also flow in the other direction? Does "proficien[cy] in reading complex informational texts independently in a variety of content areas" help make you a better reader of literature (4)? Does it even make sense to talk about information in the context of literary study? The authors of the standards imply that while some texts designated as informational—"seminal U.S. documents" such as the Constitution or Martin Luther King's

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"Letter from Birmingham Jail," for instance (35)—can be read literarily, the reverse is not true. The perceived value of literature is tied up with its not being a "content area," at least not in the same way that history or math is. The "content" of literature is construed not in terms of knowledge but in terms of experience. By "reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own" (7). Close engagement with literature can be personally enriching, though the authors of the standards prefer to stress its social utility. Students who can "vicariously inhabit" other worlds are better equipped for "the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace," which are "settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together" (7).

One can laud, in general terms, the goals outlined in the Common Core standards while wondering about the consequences of distinguishing, even on pragmatic grounds, between reading for information and reading for literary purposes. Such a distinction would have made little sense to, say, the first readers of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* or, for that matter, the first readers of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As J. Paul Hunter has shown, eighteenth-century readers were drawn to works such as *Crusoe* in part because they were full of interesting and useful facts (195–98). At the turn of the nineteenth century, the polymath Erasmus Darwin used heroic couplets to bring the latest news from the world of botany to readers of his long poems *The Botanic Garden* and *The Temple of Nature* (both of which were admired by Wordsworth). These poems may strike us now as mere curiosities, but in Darwin's day there was nothing eccentric about the decision to make poetry a vehicle of scientific knowledge. By the middle of the century, however, things had changed. To take a well-known example, the passages on cetology in *Moby-Dick* were met with dismay by many of Herman Melville's contemporaries, and they were recuperated by later readers only by being recast as parody or pastiche or as part of a concerted effort to disrupt the conventions of narrative fiction. By the time James Joyce describes in minute—and, it is worth saying, accurate—detail how water flows from a reservoir in county Wicklow to the kitchen faucet at 7 Eccles Street, Dublin, there is little doubt that he assumes most readers will consider such clumps of information to be out of place in a work of literature. Indeed, the "mathematical catechism" of "Ithaca" has been called a place where *Ulysses* appears "to take leave of literature altogether."[1]

These are extreme examples, but they are not anomalies. We can accept that literary texts and informational texts operate differently and still acknowledge the obvious truth that any literary text is full of information—that it may even contain "a staggering amount" of it. Even a modestly competent literary reading rests in part on the ability to comprehend, synthesize, and evaluate information as well as to gauge its status and function in the work as a whole. The Common Core standards take for granted that informational reading is primarily functionalist—a basic professional survival skill in the complex workplaces of the new millennium. To win what literature has to offer, though, is said to require not just different skills but a different disposition. The skills and the disposition have long been aligned with a range of pedagogic practices gathered under the broad headings of close or critical reading. Those practices have been central to literary criticism since the 1920s. The ideals associated with them resonate throughout the standards.

But of course literary texts respond to—indeed, actively invite—many forms of reading, not just close or critical ones. If, to borrow Michael Warner's aphorism, "critical reading

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is the folk ideology of a learned profession" (14), that ideology has been subject to illuminating scrutiny over the past fifteen years. Investigations into the history of reading have made us more aware of the many and disparate techniques that readers have brought to their engagements with literature. Contemporary critics have in turn begun to diversify their own reading practices. One effect (among many) of recent explorations of distant reading, discontinuous reading, uncritical reading, surface reading, just reading, and their historical variants has been to put information back into the conversation: not just information about texts but the information in them. What are its possible functions? What are readers to do with it? What *have* readers done with it? Is information simply inert matter in the midst of a volatile textual environment, or can it be an active element in the production of a reader's sense of the literary?

In the remainder of this brief essay, I take up these questions by looking at a seminal work by one of the great—and by that I mean at once exhilarating and utterly maddening—readers of the nineteenth century, John Ruskin. The work is *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), written at a time, like now, in which literacy and general education were issues of spirited public debate. *Sesame and Lilies* is composed of two lectures Ruskin delivered in Manchester in late 1864, "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Gardens." The volume has been of interest to scholars primarily for Ruskin's vexed and vexing positions on gender, but it also contains some of his longest sustained meditations on the practice of reading and the aims of education. Each of the lectures was associated with a fund-raising effort: the first to finance the construction of a new public library, the second to help build and outfit schools in a densely populated area near the center of Manchester. Advertised under the title "Mr. J. Ruskin on 'How and What to Read'" (Marsh 161n1), the lectures were delivered to audiences consisting primarily of the powerful and well-to-do: to those, that is, most likely to have a hand in shaping the institutional structures of education. Ruskin opens "Of Kings' Treasuries" by claiming that his goal is "only to bring before you a few simple thoughts about reading" (27–28). His thoughts are neither few nor simple. I touch on only a small fraction of them here—those having to do with the relation between information and what Ruskin calls "true" reading.

"If you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—, that is to say, with real accuracy,—you are for evermore in some measure an educated person" (35): this is Ruskin's promise. To read well is to read closely, which is the only way to earn "the treasures hidden in books" (27). Like virtually every close reader since, Ruskin offers no methodology, simply the unhelpful injunction that we discipline ourselves to read "letter by letter . . . with real accuracy." In lieu of a theory of close reading, Ruskin memorably demonstrates close reading in action. His tour-de-force explication of a passage from John Milton's "Lycidas" takes up, one by one, a handful of keywords to show how a microscopic attention to them reveals dizzying vistas of historical, social, and aesthetic knowledge (38–43). For us, as presumably for his contemporaries, what is initially most striking about Ruskin's exegesis is the casual erudition that informs it, the range of reference and association it brings into play. He tells us "earnestly and authoritatively" that we "must get in the habit of looking intensely at words" (35), but looking intensely is productive only when accompanied by a vision capable of ranging over fields of learning and information that may be activated by a particular text but are, strictly speaking, nowhere in that text. Ruskin's practice everywhere confirms this insight, even as his rhetoric tends to elide it. An exception occurs by way of a vivid metaphor in which reading is figured as gold mining. The gold is "the author's mind or meaning, his words are as the rock you have to crush" to uncover the gold, and "your

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pickaxes are your own care, wit, and learning" (35). Learning helps supply the information that the reader needs to acquire the riches of a good book, but information itself forms no part of those riches. Presumably, a book made entirely of treasure would contain no information at all, just truth.

In Ruskin's taxonomy, there are not only "bad books" and "good books" but also "books of the hour" and "books for all time." The latter pair form a remarkably close fit with what the Common Core standards call "informational" and "literary" texts. In Ruskin's view, the distinction between bad books and good is "one of quality only," while the one between books of the hour and books for all time is "a distinction of species" (31–32). It is not enough that a book be a good book. Only books that are good for all time will reward a letter-by-letter reading. Ruskin takes for granted (as the standards do not) the existence of a permanent canon of "true books" whose timeless truths apply in all ages and places (32). But those truths are not simply given to readers, Ruskin cautions. They must be earned. They are "open to labour and to merit, but to nothing else" (33). The sole way to unearth the "treasures hidden in books" is through strenuous close reading. The Common Core echoes the vocabulary of labor and reward in connection with literary reading, though here the reward is figured, as we saw, in terms of acquiring valuable vicarious experience rather than timeless truth. This shift largely obviates the need to identify a stable canon, since the range of texts capable of providing such experience is both extensive and governed at least in part by a reader's specific background and circumstances. The most the standards will commit to is a few dozen "illustrative" or "representative" texts (58), for which many other such texts can be substituted as need dictates.

Ruskin's attitude to informational texts—his books of the hour—changes several times over the course of his lecture. At one point he pauses to condemn "the spread of a shallow, blotching, blundering, infectious 'information,' or rather deformation, everywhere, and to the teaching of catechisms and phrases at school rather than human meanings" (36). But this expression of blistering contempt comes shortly after he acknowledges the utility of books of the hour. A good book of the hour is not, properly speaking, writing at all but instead "simply the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with, printed for you." Not exactly ephemera, books of the hour—printed talk—are nevertheless bound to their moment. Like the utterances they substitute for, such works leave no lasting trace. They convey mere information, and while "we ought to be . . . entirely ashamed of ourselves if we make no good use" of such offerings, what is offered is finally just the news of the day. Useful as it is, pleasant as it is, the book of the hour, Ruskin concludes, in the end "may not be, in the real sense of the word, a 'book' at all, nor, in the real sense, to be 'read'" (32). The distinction between books of the hour and true books runs along the axis of information. In the best cases, the former supply us with the pickaxes we need to dig in the latter. But for Ruskin there is no precise equivalent to the informational reading skills outlined in the Common Core standards. In his view, reading books of the hour does not require any special training or technique, since what such books offer is sitting on the surface of the text, just waiting to be picked up.

Ruskin acknowledges that no pure examples exist of any of the textual types he describes. All texts are mixtures of ore and dross, eternal truth and ephemeral talk. Exhibit A turns out to be *Sesame and Lilies* itself. Ruskin's claim that a true book is "essentially not a talking thing, but a written thing" comes shortly after he calls attention to the fact that *Sesame and Lilies* was written for oral delivery (32). Fearing that his listeners would be fatigued by the effort of following complex arguments (27), Ruskin casts his

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ideas in the form of "useful or pleasant talk." The lectures stand in place of the essays he might have written but did not. Those essays would, he implies, have taken a different and considerably more difficult form—he would have worked to make them into a book in the true sense and thus more full of the treasures that invite close reading.

Ruskin's solicitude for his Manchester audience may seem no more than a conventional gesture, given that much of what he goes on to say in the lecture is far from straightforward. To readers—a category that includes everyone not in attendance those evenings in Manchester, since Ruskin never delivered these lectures again—it may seem inconsequential that he conceived of *Sesame and Lilies* as printed talk. But he considered the distinction important. In 1871 Ruskin reissued *Sesame and Lilies* as the first volume of a projected series of his works. The series, he writes, was intended to preserve "such parts of my works as now seem to me . . . likely to be of permanent use" (9). No doubt to the surprise of many, applying this criterion leads Ruskin to exclude large portions of the texts that made his reputation: *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, *The Stones of Venice*, and *Modern Painters*. The situation with *Sesame and Lilies* is more complex. Unlike his other works, it does not allow the extraction of what is "likely to be of permanent use" from the rest because the book is so thoroughly blended together. The lectures failed as lectures, he now believes, because too much of their matter was cast in a form intelligible only to intense, letter-by-letter reading, which listeners cannot practice. But they also fail as essays, "since phrases written for oral delivery become ineffective when quietly read" (10). In the final analysis, *Sesame and Lilies* is neither a talking thing nor a written thing, or rather it is both and therefore a failure as either. As a result, it is not fully responsive to either of the reading strategies that Ruskin describes in the work. Much of the 1871 preface is given over to Ruskin's rather tortuous efforts to forestall misreadings of his contradictory, hybrid text by identifying and parsing its key passages ahead of time.

What are we to make of these contortions? A fuller account than I have space for would situate Ruskin's worry about being misread in the context of changing pedagogies of reading in the period, themselves a consequence of changes in the structures and goals of primary education over the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain. It would take in the slow but gradually accelerating growth of the reading public as well as the parallel expansion and diversification of print culture. These developments, which Ruskin viewed with wary interest, focused attention on reading itself as composed of many, varied, and context-specific procedures. The possibilities for misreading in any particular context were thus multiplied. Ruskin's taxonomy is in part an effort to make sense of an increasingly heterogeneous field of textual production—a field marked, in his view, by a proliferation of informational books of the hour. Readers in the 1860s were not the first to feel that theirs was an age about to be submerged beneath the "staggering amount of information" now in circulation thanks to advances in print technology. What distinguishes mid-Victorian responses to the stress of information overload from those of earlier periods is the focus on developing pedagogies of reading adequate to this new landscape. *Sesame and Lilies* is an entry—illuminating in its very eccentricities and contradictions—in a wider cultural conversation over how best to train readers capable of navigating books of the hour as well as of unearthing the spiritual riches buried in books for all time. As initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards indicate, that conversation persists today, if under different terms. But to continue to cordon off literature from information produces the same complications Ruskin faced, and for many of the same reasons.

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Note

1. Joyce described "Ithaca" as a "mathematical catechism" in a 1921 letter to Frank Budgen (159–60). The claim that in "Ithaca" *Ulysses* takes leave of literature is Jeri Johnson's (958).

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