theories and methodologies

The Common Core: Let the Light Sing

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AS A FORMER DEAN IN A COLLEGE MADE UP OF STUDENTS FROM MORE THAN 150 COUNTRIES, MOST OF WHOM WERE THE FIRST IN THEIR FAMily to continue their education past high school, I do not find it difficult to celebrate the *pluribus* that makes up the United States. In this role, I was reminded too that America has registered important successes in its quest to offer a democratic education, an education available to all and providing every student an equal opportunity to make the most of his or her abilities.

But the *pluribus* was intended as a work in progress—*ex pluribus unum*—a work that remains radically incomplete in education. Indeed, an argument can be made that we have explicitly turned away from that goal. As much as we value the *pluribus*, it would be naive to overlook the educational price we have paid in overemphasizing our differences of origin.

That price consists of two elements. First, in our embrace of diversity, we have forgone any substantive agreement on a curriculum in the language arts (and social studies). We accept no metanarrative that could form the common study for our students, the material of our curriculum, the subject matter for our assessments. This creates a profound problem. As Hannah Arendt explains in her essay "The Crisis in Education," the absence of such a narrative for which we take responsibility neuters education by stripping substance from the classroom and authority from the teacher. We are told we need children who can think critically, but too often we end up asking them to think critically about nothing in particular.

Second, we have added economic to cultural heterogeneity, with disastrous results. The United States is the only advanced industrialized country that relies on local school districts to provide a major portion of funding for public education. As of September 2014, the approximately fourteen thousand school districts supplied almost forty-four percent of all public education funding. Because the sources of that funding are local real estate taxes in each district and because that tax base is wildly disparate, the resulting funding levels

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are vastly unequal. As for the states—which contribute about forty-three percent of the total funding—they too vary widely in wealth and in historical commitment to the equitable support of public education. The federal government's share, approximately thirteen percent of total educational expenditures, is too modest to redress the balance ("K–12 Facts"). Thus, the economic differences into which children are born are multiplied: typically, zip code predetermines educational success—two schools divided by a highway can and do lay the groundwork for vastly different life opportunities.

In English language classrooms, this double heterogeneity has produced flat reading scores for high school students for several decades; the worst-off students have made no progress in closing the achievement gap between them and their more affluent peers. In the absence of a content-rich curriculum, teachers have been reduced to teaching "skills" and championing the "relevance" of whatever they teach, trying to translate the books or excerpts students are reading into the language of the contemporary adolescent world. As a result, students are unsurprisingly attuned to finding themselves in every text. The predictable consequence is a national overdose of "me-isms"—what's important is how I *feel* about a text, a feeling often derived from a mere summary, with scant attention to what is actually written. With no incentive to teach textually—since our assessments contain no required readings—teachers have understandably privileged context over text, engaging in a weak version of the new historicism in which, once again, what the text says is less important than the circumstances under which it was written or the influence that it had.

While this approach to reading has failed to close the achievement gap in secondary schools, it has had an equally pernicious impact in colleges, where students are suddenly confronted with the need to read primary sources carefully, analyze them coherently, and make claims about what they say. Students whose high school teachers did not have the luxury, the incentive, or the preparation to teach these skills are floundering. Last year, some eighty percent of freshmen at CUNY's community colleges—all of whom passed the state's graduation exam in English language arts ("the Regents Exam") and acquired a high school diploma—had to be remediated for want of basic skills, and only about one in five of the remediated students will ever graduate from college.

The great promise of the English language arts Common Core State Standards—and the reason I supported their adoption in New York when I served as the state education commissioner—is that they will help counteract these unfortunate consequences of our commitment to educational heterogeneity. As state after state has adopted the same standards for learning, the hope has been that we can prepare teachers for a common task, equip them with excellent materials, and evaluate the results across the country with common assessments that demand analytic thinking and require higher levels of attainment.

The Common Core State Standards are a major step forward: the requirements for early grade levels are based on the best research in reading acquisition; the standards are committed to including social studies and science topics, as well as America's founding documents, Shakespeare, and ancient mythologies; and they insist that students slow down and read texts carefully instead of summarizing them quickly. And yet, because of worry that the standards would be rejected for pushing us too far toward a uniform national approach to education (a rejection that has occurred already in a handful of states), they have been designed so that their advance toward *unum* is strictly limited. They mention Shakespeare, to be sure, but cannot name any of his plays or poems as required reading. To contain the whims of individual teachers and schools, the standards match readings

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to numerical rankings of textual complexity. To avoid controversy, the guidelines select a clinically neutral approach to reading.

The consequence of trying to balance the claims of *pluribus* and the aspirations toward *unum* is a method of reading both fiction and nonfiction that is based on skills rather than content and that can be adopted by millions of teachers in different settings. In a nutshell, the reading standards require students to master two skills for "college and career readiness": "Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it" and "cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" ("English Language Arts"). The chief architect of the standards, David Coleman, embraces the forensic thrust of these skills. In his words, the goal is to have students "read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter" (4). One could conclude that our cultural and economic diversity has led to the need to turn the book into a crime scene.

It is tempting to stop here and conclude that the Common Core standards, while perhaps a touch reductive in their prescription for reading, simply reflect the reality of what could be done under the circumstances and will at least enable more students to reach college adequately prepared than currently. But I want to slow down and read the standards against their grain: not as a pragmatic approach to reading but as a theoretical structure that deserves attention. While my approach may be inspired by academic debates, my motivation is not: I want to suggest that reading the standards this way raises questions about the limits of the method and points to a consideration of future revisions.

The scant scholarly attention that has been paid to the standards as an approach to reading has concluded that they revert to the New Criticism of the 1940s. Elements of Coleman's academic background encourage this interpretation, but more important evidence can be found in his repeated animadversions against teaching texts through historical perspectives and his celebration of "close reading" as an end in itself.

A brief detour through René Wellek's essay "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" affirms the notion that the New Critics spoke out against teaching texts by means of contextual or historical framing. Coleman's emphasis on attending to the intrinsic elements of a text thus echoes the critic R. P. Blackmur, who, in "The Lion and the Honeycomb," spoke against a scholarship that "believes it has made interpretations by surrounding the work with facts" (qtd. in Wellek 615).

But equating the Common Core standards with the New Criticism is ultimately misleading. Wellek reminds us that the New Criticism represents "a total historical scheme" (615). What does this mean? Wellek points us to Alan Tate, who writes of his "attempt . . . to see the present from the past" and stresses that this movement was deeply indebted to T. S. Eliot's evocation of a tradition that would restore a unified sensibility of intellect and feeling against the ravages of modernity (616). But, beyond Eliot, Wellek links the New Criticism back to the experience of reading itself. In a lineage that can be traced to Kant, the encounter is framed in holistic terms—about the effect on the reader of reading fine poetry, about the state of mind that can result from a careful reading that grasps the form and unity of major works. The New Critics invested the reading of poems and other works of literature with the mission of conveying a whole vision (a *Weltanschauung*) that valorized the text's aesthetic dimension. They were, Wellek writes, "overwhelmingly concerned with the *meaning of a work of art*, with the attitude, the tone, the feelings, and even with the ultimate implied world view conveyed" (618; emphasis mine).

In short, the standards' marginalizing of context and sensibility is far more radical than what the New Critics could have

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countenanced. The act of reading has now become an act of excavation, of removing the covering that renders any text opaque to the student. What is involved here is closer to the Rousseauesque odyssey, the reconstructed social and linguistic history through which Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Second Discourse* "discovers" an originary transparency wherein words lose their opacity and language is no longer clouded by social manipulation and subterfuge. With this appeal to transparency comes a repudiation of a hermeneutics of suspicion—historicism, Marxism, psychoanalysis—and a wishing away of structuralism and poststructuralism, Straussianism, postcolonial studies, and feminism. These mists evaporate, and we are returned to linguistic innocence, where words simply mean what they say.

Thus understood, perhaps the hermeneutical method embedded in the standards is contemporary. It bears comparison with Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's notion of "surface reading," featured in a recent piece by Jeffrey J. Williams in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—a reading method intended, in words Coleman could surely endorse, to "read, describe, and mine data." My guide here is Heather Love's sympathetic treatment of similar new approaches. Love outlines what she terms sociological modes of readings that are close but not deep. Citing the work of Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman, she highlights their focus on "surfaces, operations, and interactions," on "documentation and description" (375). From Latour: "No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description" (376). For his part, Goffman is interested in "gestures, behavior, and pattern." Summarizing their approaches, Love concludes that what we are after as readers "leaves little room for the ethical heroism of the critic, who gives up the role of interpreting divine messages to take up a position as a humble analyst and observer" (381).

There are also echoes of Coleman's theoretical approach in the contemporary science of reading, which in Andrew Elfenbein's account focuses on "simpler texts," developing "[d]escriptions of common strategies involved in understanding, such as pattern recognition and storing or retrieving information" (484), and which produces what Paul van den Broek and Kathleen Kremer call "a coherent and usable mental representation of the text" (qtd. in Elfenbein 485). Seen this way, the English language arts standards are focused on developing our working memory—the facility that allows us to "store, process and manipulate textual input through such operations as comparisons with other parts of the texts, retrieval of relevant background information and the creation of forward and backward inferences" (487).[1]

Like the New Criticism, the methods of these contemporary theorists share elements with but also differ deeply from those embedded in the Common Core standards. "Surface reading" is a specialized skill involving sophisticated pattern recognition, and it is not going to be taught in high school. More fundamentally, contra the sociologists and the psychologists, the ideal reader envisaged by the standards is perhaps more concerned with learning about the text than he or she is about gaining insights into the world from the text.

This is a complex matter. On the one hand, it is clear that the English language arts standards point (in appendix B) to a rich array of canonical literature as recommended reading material. As Robert Pondiscio, a frequent commentator on the standards, reminds us, they explicitly call for a content-rich curriculum and the reading of major literature, even as they cannot require either one. The working assumption may be that if students read "good" literature (fiction or nonfiction), they thereby gain important insights about the human condition. But, on the other hand, the primary focus of the standards is on understanding the language in texts clearly. This

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focus is suggested in the publishers' guidelines to the Common Core: "reading well means gaining the maximum insight or knowledge possible from each source. Student knowledge drawn from the text is demonstrated when the student uses evidence from the text to support a claim about the text. Hence evidence and knowledge link directly to the text" (Coleman and Pimentel 1). The self-referential circularity is clear—we never leave the text.

Stripped of the ethico-historical frame of the New Criticism, parasitic on postideological, postdeconstruction approaches to reading but without their theoretical sophistication, the forensic methodology embedded in the standards is an unparalleled exercise in hermeneutic innocence. But if this methodology maps onto college readiness and thus helps level the demographic playing field, does it carry any risks?

I want to focus on two aspects of reading—joy and freedom. Or, rather, the freedom to take pleasure in, and to share, a judgment made in response to a text and to know oneself as the author of that judgment. In *Speaking of Beauty*, a book written over a decade ago, Denis Donoghue cites Louise Richardson's distinction between "efferent reading," in which "the reader's attention is focused on what he will take away from the transaction," and "aesthetic reading," in which the reader's attention is focused on what he or she "is living through during the reading event" (46). The standards take hold of the reading transaction and batten down the hatches—we read to push vocabulary growth and develop our forensic skills. This is why the standards' strictures concerning nonfiction and fiction are almost identical. Both textual sites are treated as forensic scenes for empirical discovery by the literary detective. For his part, Coleman emphasized that our emotive responses are suspect, that our detective work must remain robustly empirical. The text is mined for the main idea, the main tone, the logical argument, not for false consciousness or epistemic aporias. Any pleasure taken in the text is ancillary, indeed treated with skepticism as potentially emotive.

Richardson's aesthetic reading, on the other hand, points us toward a very different comportment, an aesthetic experience "to which no linguistic expression is completely adequate," in Kant's famous phrase in his *Critique of Judgment* (316). Kant suggests that in this experience—an emotive, subjective response—we discover the source of our most intensely free judgments: those we term aesthetic. In responding to what is potentially beautiful, "[w]e engage in thought and imaginative reflection for themselves rather than to gain knowledge of the world or of moral certainties" (Kemal 47). Kant argues that this gives rise to a "feeling of life"—a sense of our power to think and act freely. The association of ideas proceeds as the power of thought develops in a relation with the powers of imagination and ordering.

This attaining of harmony between faculties is an art, requiring a judgment that the order of ideas, images, and theme is appropriate and balanced. The most important point is that the achievement of that harmonious relation of faculties, a well-formed mental work that synthesizes cognition and imagination, is pleasurable because we enjoy such operations of the mind. This is the pleasure of aesthetic judgments, whose experience is of beauty itself. While differing in their understanding of exactly how aesthetic judgment works, literary critics and philosophers across the ages place this experience at the core of our subjectivity.

Donoghue assembles a number of these otherwise disparate figures. For I. A. Richards, who is usually grouped with the New Critics, subjectivity and aesthetic response are inseparable. In Donoghue's gloss on Richards's approach, "the work of art is inexhaustible to meditation," and the act of contemplating the work "bring[s] the whole of personality into play" (10, 37). Donoghue

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points us to an apt phrase on aesthetic response by Hans Urs von Balthasar: "subjectivity frees itself in an objective work, in which it rediscovers itself" (qtd. in Donoghue 39). We are led also to Theodor Adorno, who writes that objects of disinterested contemplation offer promise of "a happiness cured of domination over nature" (qtd. in Donoghue 82), and finally to Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom the work of art speaks to us "in a significant and definite way, [opening up for us] the area in which freedom operates in the play of our mental faculties" (qtd. in Donoghue 70, 73).

This cognitive and imaginative play is far from the mindless narcissism that Coleman rightly decries. The challenge for us is that the standards not only threaten that narcissism but also may put at risk joyful freedom in the thoughtful response to what is beautiful—such as fine literature and poetry, whose greatest gift to the human spirit, arguably, is beauty. The risk is to teachers as well as to students. Or, rather, to the teachers of literature who came into the field in part because they found literature compelling and fine and felt an urge to share that discovery with students.

The Common Core standards are right: textual respect—the careful decoding of vocabulary, of metaphors and images, of inferences and structure—is not to be trivialized, no more than the study of perspective and paint choice and brush technique is to be ignored in art criticism. But these skills and studies can only take you so far.

Breaking for a moment with the strictures of the standards, I would like to contextualize a quotation: imagine an old man, a poet tinged with madness and complex regrets, composing himself for the end of a life of voyaging and magnificent writing. Let's read this short late canto of Ezra Pound's not forensically but to share the joy, the conviction, that we are in the presence of beauty:

> A blown husk that is finished
> But the light sings eternal
> A pale flare over marshes,
> Where the salt hay whispers to tide's change.
> (794)

Will our least privileged children, those with the fewest opportunities to experience this kind of joy in the encounter with major works of fiction, become more effective college students for systematically cultivating the forensic skills of the detective? If those skills are linked to the acquisition of adequate knowledge about the world, yes—and that would be an important advance. But at what risk to their experience of literature and to what the humanities, taken in their richest sense, can bring? The standards are a vital corrective and an important step toward bringing all students into the company of serious readers. Let's build on this foundation with a greater sense of the magic to be found in such company.

Note

1. By "background information," the standards mean largely vocabulary. Interesting in this context is a statement by Cleanth Brooks, quoted by Wellek, that the (new) critic is indebted to the "lexicographer" but also, when it comes to proper nouns, to "the historian" (615).

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