theories and methodologies

Learning to Read Childishly with "Master James"

PATRICIA CRAIN

THIS ESSAY WILL READ OVER THE SHOULDER OF HENRY JAMES AS HE READS A "BOY'S BOOK" BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, WITH THE DE-

sign of using that seemingly unlikely encounter to think about children, books, and learning to read. An attentive reader of Stevenson's books for children and adults, James shared an affection and admiration for the man and the works with many of his contemporaries. The two became friendly after communicating in the pages of *Longman's Magazine* in 1884, beginning with James's essay "The Art of Fiction." Often overlooked in discussions of this much cited essay is, first, the venue, a magazine that would become largely devoted to boys' adventure serials,[1] and, second, the weight that James gives there to the recently published *Treasure Island* (1883), which he treats as exemplary in that it "succeeded wonderfully in what it attempts." He contrasted it to Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie*, which "deplorably" failed in its effort to depict "the development of the moral consciousness of a child" (61), as much as James thought that particular "country" worthy of the art of fiction (62). The reader will "say Yes or No, as it may be, to what the artist puts before" him, and, as to childhood, James asserts expert personal knowledge. After all, he writes, "I have been a child in fact, but I have been on a quest for a buried treasure only in supposition" (62).

In Stevenson's genial, if critical, reply, "A Humble Remonstrance,"[2] the younger writer imagines James as a boy: "if he has never been on a quest for buried treasure, it can be demonstrated that he has never been a child. There never was a child (unless Master James) but has hunted gold, and been a pirate, and a military commander, and a bandit of the mountains; but has fought, and suffered shipwreck and prison, and imbrued its little hands in gore . . ." (94). In calling him "Master James," a decade or so before devotees would call James "the Master," Stevenson tweakingly questions James's credentials as a child. Still, if James hadn't been a boy in Stevenson's playful if hypermasculine terms, James had nevertheless been a child. And, it turns out, never more so than in recollection.

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When, a few years later, James devoted an essay to his by then intimate friend, he counted Stevenson "an artist accomplished even to sophistication, whose constant theme is the unsophisticated" and warmed to "the extraordinary vividness with which [*A Child's Garden of Verses*] reproduces early impressions; a child might have written it if a child could see childhood from the outside" ("Robert" 1236, 1237).[3] Though James thought *Kidnapped* was Stevenson's best novel, it was James's engagement, once more, with *Treasure Island* that produced the striking account of reading that I wish to read in turn:

> *Treasure Island* is a "boy's book" in the sense that it embodies a boy's vision of the extraordinary, but it is unique in this, and calculated to fascinate the weary mind of experience, that what we see in it is not only the ideal fable but, as part and parcel of that, as it were, the young reader himself and his state of mind: we seem to read it over his shoulder, with an arm around his neck. (1251)

A familiar James-style sentence, whose enwrapped, embedded clauses imitate the physical embrace of over-the-shoulder reading. If Jamesian "difficulty" often expresses itself in ghostly antecedents and disruptive figures of temporality (e.g., analeptic prolepsis), here chronological distance is embodied, and the apparitional is genial and explicit. The controlling trope is prosopopoeia, which Paul de Man influentially called "the very figure of the reader and of reading" (*Resistance* 45). But this reading event personifies personification, its superabundant prosopopoeia—not just a boy *in* a book but an extra boy *with* a book—providing a medium through and with which to engage the text. Between skillful writer and susceptible reader, a third party interposes over whose shoulder one could intimately read, in an enriching triangulation of desire. If this longed-for reading companion was not quite oneself in the past, he might be better, a companion through and with whom to safely enter the joys and terrors of boyhood adventures and boyish relations. More than this, that prepossessing boy, bibliomantically conjured by reading the "boy's book," would serve further to "fascinate the weary mind of experience."

To posit, as James does, that one's "weary mind" might be refreshed by an apparently salvific child surprisingly echoes the dependable nineteenth-century reading effect of books like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), whose notoriously endearing protagonist revivifies his grandfather's stony heart. But James describes something yet more complex and mysterious than an impression on a reader made by a fictional boy in a book, affecting or engaging though he is. Perhaps moved by Stevenson's interest in doubles, in this arresting theory of reading James imagines that, folded into the "boy's book," like a love letter or a pressed flower, is the book-owning boy, a virtual companion and a channel into that "young reader himself and his state of mind." Though a term of art for children's literature genres (a children's, boy's, girl's *book*), James's quotation marks around "boy's book" hint that it's the book *form*, the codex container, from which, under the right conditions, a friendly ghost might arise.

The Houghton Library holds the copy of *Treasure Island* that James held (that held him) and that gave rise to the mediating boy reader.[4] This copy looks well read, with a swollen spine and pages thickened and stained here and there with use.[5] As *x*'s mark spots on the frontispiece map of the island, James marked a plus sign next to one passage and commented on another page's "truthful detail" in a note written in the margin of the publisher's advertisement on the back page.[6] He signed the book, in his usual fashion, in ink on the half title, in the formal hand with which he typically marked his ownership of his books. But very unusually, possibly uniquely, he also signed on the title page,

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boyishly, in pencil, a mode of double signing that's routinely found in books owned by children but is not the norm for adults. It's as if for a moment the "young reader" possessed the adult, guided his hand, and asserted his rights across time and space.

James's attraction to this "boy's book," his account of a reading event, and the traces of his engagement with the artifact that produced that experience all have relevance for readers of James, as they think about his narrative practice or how boys show up in his fiction or his literary and personal relation to Stevenson, among other things. But I offer the anecdote here for what it says about learning to read, in its biographical and historical specificity, in its figuring of a particular reading posture, in its relation to the book form and to children's literature, and, most strikingly, in its invocation of and access to an imagined child reader.

To read over a shoulder: learning to read often begins in this posture, as a child rests in the lap of a caretaker who holds a book. But all too soon thereafter, over-the-shoulder reading becomes a figure for surveillance—on the subway or social media, in the classroom or the prison, or everywhere the state roams. The famous wartime handbook on English style *The Reader over Your Shoulder* (1944) urges the writer to imagine a "crowd of prospective readers . . . looking over his shoulder" when he sits down to work (Graves and Hodge 22); its authors, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, model and answer the questions asked by those helpfully hectoring phantom readers demanding clarity. Resonating with the subject of this essay, William Sherman, in his work on Renaissance readers' marks, captures the "thrilling, and sometimes unnerving, sense that I am looking over the shoulder of a long-dead reader" (257). There are many such examples. Fantasized, suspected, or real; desired or feared; kindly or hostilely intended, over-the-shoulder reading suggests a need or wish for control or guidance, a sense of excitement, and a hint of shame in the observer and observed.

And it takes two to have a shoulder to read over. As the "'boy's book' . . . embodies a boy's vision," that embodiment expands to give physical form to "the young reader himself and his state of mind," a boy receptive to James's "arm around his neck." James's fantasy of over-the-shoulder reading, predominantly and passively companionable, breaches while bridging the space between reading selves, without disturbing or imposing on the child-other. This posture situates James as more nurtured than nurturing, seeking guidance rather than guiding. If we might want to unmask that summoned "young reader" as "Master James," James more explicitly read over the shoulder of his younger self when preparing the New York edition and detailed the experiences in his prefaces (1907–09). Eve Sedgwick described these rereadings as "reparenting": "The James of the prefaces revels in the same startling metaphor that animates the present-day popular literature of the 'inner child': the metaphor that presents one's relation to one's own past as a relationship, intersubjective as it is intergenerational. And, it might be added, for most people by definition homoerotic" (40). No longer a boy himself (if ever he had been one), accompanied by the "young reader . . . and his state of mind," James engages as if for the first time a "boy's book," ameliorating the belatedness of his discovery. The encounter with *Treasure Island* may have come at just the right time, not long after the deaths of both parents in 1882. Is it overreading to imagine that, attuned and susceptible, James experiences a recuperative reparenting after those losses, while at the same time projecting his reparented self onto that implacable, spectral reading boy?

The nineteenth century specialized in such absorptive, hypnagogic, hallucinogenic reading. Here the trope of reading reaches beyond the text, creating in that "young reader" a figure for reading itself. His embodiment

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depends on the haptic qualities of the codex: its capacity to open and close, to be richly present and hidden at the same time, to be endlessly accessible—in short, to play the fort-da game.[7] The book scarcely needs such material attractions to serve as what D. W. Winnicott called a "transitional object" (xvi). In his theory, such an object—a blanket, a teddy bear—must be equally and, as he emphasizes, paradoxically made and found by the baby: "The baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object" (119). Functioning first to manage the drama of loss and separation between baby and caregiver, the object serves, as Barbara Johnson puts it, "as a kind of navel of the arts: [Winnicott] includes not only objects but also words, patterns, tunes, and mannerisms in his lists of things that can function as transitional objects" (98).

When James recalled his childhood in New York, he remembered the thrill of bringing "spoil" home from the bookstore and "a great and various practice of burying my nose in the half-open book for the strong smell of paper and printer's ink, known to us as the English smell" (*Small Boy* 42–43). "The English smell" meant not only books but, through them, his own filial inheritance of his parents' "homesick" longing "for the ancient order" of Europe, against the way "the modern pressed upon us" (44). James concludes this passage by asserting that "if success in life may perhaps be best defined as the performance in age of some intention arrested in youth I may frankly put in a claim to it" (45). In almost mock-epic terms, James founds his vocation and his adoption of a homeland on burying his nose in a book as boy. James's account maps onto the way Winnicott's theory of the transitional object, originally established in the dance of dependence and separation in the parent-baby dyad, expands to create "the potential space," which encompasses "all developments derived from this phenomenon." Winnicott calls this a "third area of human living, one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality" (148).

In his account of reading *Treasure Island*, then, James personifies the potential space, the space of experience, as "the young reader and his state of mind" in the same gesture by which he projects his reading experience into the figure of that boy reader. The figure of prosopopoeia is often read, in the light of its Greek root ("*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face" [de Man, "Autobiography" 76]), as engaging the face or the voice, associated with the speaking dead. But here the figure animates a silent reader, without face or voice, as if an absorbed "part and parcel" of the book. The intermediary "young reader" carries the positive affect of the act of reading without, for example, showing his face and opening to some other experience—shame, irritation, boredom, desire.

Historians of books and reading, as Leah Price handily sums them (us) up, tend to "recapitulate a . . . diffuse tradition—both religious (specifically Augustinian) and literary (specifically Wordsworthian)—which relies on the encounter with the book to account for the development of a self" (123). If this is a cherished dream of personal and professional formation (lost and found in a book), it's also a culturally and historically specific, not to say phantasmagoric, one. Enticing as I find James's account of an apparitional reading experience, I raise it to trouble our faith in books and reading. That is to say, if book-besotted adults were to bundle all the complex affects and effects of their reading experiences into the figure of a nameless, faceless, speechless child, what would this mean for children? In the end, the image of "the young reader himself and his state of mind" (even or especially when the reader is oneself) and the desire to fold into the painful posture of reading over one's own shoulder threaten to get in the way of understanding what children really want and need from learning to read or anything

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else. When we read over children's shoulders as we set them to learning to read, we risk enacting what James imagines, by insisting on their mediality. The danger is in thus reifying the third area, by collapsing it into the figure of a child rather than allowing the third area to remain—for children but also for oneself—that open, potential space in which play can continue, without censure or curtailment. This is what's at stake, I think, if, as inheritors of nineteenth-century values and practices, we fail to take full account of the seductive, nostalgic image of a child absorbed in a book.

An overinvestment in immersive childhood reading is one peril, at least, that the Common Core State Standards for English language arts manage to avoid. Understandably, literature professors and all others for whom relationships with books and reading have been formative may find the standards dispiriting in the sheerly instrumental terms in which they describe reading, leaving out almost everything that brings one to books and reading over a lifetime. And yet more worrying to me are the instrumental terms in which the Common Core implicitly positions children, as avatars of international economic competition: in a promotional cartoon, children race or stumble up staircases, success marked as much by dollar bills as by diplomas (*Three-Minute Video*).[8] It's worth considering, at the same time, the degree to which one's deep psychological engagement with books and reading conjures a child reader (who may embody oneself in the past or be an emblem of some virtuous idea of the future of reading) and, by thus effacing actual children, follows the same logic.

Notes

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1. See Maurer for the history of *Longman's Magazine*, particularly Andrew Lang's influence over its contents.

2. For some of the stakes of their debate, see Dekker (sympathetic to James) and Lyon (sympathetic to Stevenson).

3. James would adopt this child-centered focalization in *What Maisie Knew* (1897). Tellingly, for James, as he explains in that novel's preface, "little boys are never so 'present'" as little girls ("*What*" 1159). He typically approaches boys from a temporal remove, as if their attraction could only be realized—and then dispensed with—belatedly.

4. The Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number for James's copy of *Treasure Island* is *AC85.J2335.Zz884s2.

5. Others might have used this book after James's death in 1916. Smudges inside suggest child readers. For the fate of James's library, including his copies of Stevenson, see Edel and Tintner.

6. The plus sign appears on page 144, next to the passage describing Tom Redruth's character as he nears death.

7. Gary Frost describes how to think about the haptic qualities of the codex. I owe to Martin Brückner the insight that the codex form models the fort-da game (158).

8. Money is, of course, at stake in educational policy. Jonathan Zimmerman's review article handily critiques current teacher training and the impossible demands on schools to "overcome the crippling effects of poverty"; Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* offers a classic account of devastating funding inequality in American schooling.

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