theories and methodologies

Reading Knowledge

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CONCERNS ABOUT DECLINING COMPETENCE IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION ARE HARDLY NEW. IN 1385 JOHN OF TREVISA COMPLAINED THAT NEW teaching methods were disadvantaging children "in alle þe gramere scoles of Engelond" ("in all the grammar schools of England") since they once learned Latin and French but now "conneþ na more Frensche þan can hir lift heele" ("know no more French than does their left heel" [Higden 2: 161]).[1] This concern was clearly widespread because William Langland also complains, at roughly the same time, that "naught oon among an hundred" ("not one among a hundred") can read "a lettre" ("a letter") of French (15.371–75).[2] According to Langland, not only did schools no longer produce well-educated adults ("noon . . . kan versifie fair ne formaliche enditen" ["none can versify well nor write according to the rules" (15.372–73)]), but they were failing in even the most basic literacy training (grammar itself, he said, now "bigileth [perplexes] all children" [15.371]). The decline was so real—or the panic so great—that it seemed Johnny already couldn't read in 1357 (schoolchildren chanted basic prayers in Latin "without knowing how to construe or understand them" ["absque eo . . . construere sciant vel intellegere"], and "when they are grown up they do not understand what they. . . read every day" ["in etate adulta, cotidiana que . . . legunt non intelligant" (Leach 316–17; see also Zieman 73)]).

Such concerns are probably so constant because they are a rhetoric rather than a metric, not so much a reflection of schoolroom realities as a means for insisting on the urgency of elementary language training by those such training has served well. This is why the basic grammars used in the classrooms Trevisa and Langland are complaining about also begin by lamenting the deficiencies they have come to put right. Évrard of Béthune, for example, presents his *Graecismus* as a back-to-basics retrenchment in the face of too much theory, "treating the noun first, then the pronoun, then the rest" ("primo de nomine, secundo de pronomine tractans et sic deinceps") rather than "fishing for boars and lions in the waters, using dogs" ("in undis apros piscantur cum canibus et leones" [Évrard 1–2]).[3]

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Alexander Villa-Dei says his grammar, the *Doctrinale*, will reverse a decline in morals, drilling boys on "which word is to be combined with which article" and "past tenses and the supine verb forms" ("cui sit articulo quae vox socianda . . . de praeteritis . . . atque supinis") rather than leaving them free for the "nonsense of Maximianus" ("nugae Maximiani" [lines 3, 15–16]), a set of elegies, common in medieval schoolbooks, in which an old man reminisces about the love affairs of his youth (Hunt 67–79; Orme 97–101; Mann 48–50; Cannon, "Middle English Writer's Schoolroom" 23–24).

Such grandstanding about standards did not mean, however, that there actually were any in the Middle Ages. To be sure, certain texts (including the *Elegies* of Maximianus) were used so regularly that it is often said that the grammar schools had a "textbook" (Clogan). In the thirteenth century, Alexander Neckam felt able to describe a normative course of study:

> After [the student] has learned the alphabet and has taken in other rudiments suitable for children, let him go on to learn Donatus and that useful compendium of manners which is commonly attributed to Cato, and, from the *Eclogue* of Theodulus . . . let him go on to the *Bucolics* . . . from the delightful *Thebaid* let him move on to the divine *Aeneid*. (Copeland and Sluiter 536)[4]

This curriculum and its contents were nevertheless more like the "imaginary totality" of a literary canon, a set of expectations produced by convergences in what were, in fact, highly variable classroom selections (Guillory 31). The contents of surviving schoolbooks are so different from one another that what tends to mark a book as a medieval schoolbook is the ad hoc nature of its contents (Cannon, "Middle English Writer's Schoolroom" 23–25). Even Neckam's curriculum includes texts that appear regularly in schoolbooks ("Cato," the *Eclogue* of Theodulus, the *Thebaid*) alongside texts that were rare at the elementary level (the *Bucolics* and the *Aeneid* [Hunt 1: 65–72]).

But perhaps modern schools are only able to set firm standards because they define reading in a way that makes it possible to measure competence. If the Common Core can serve for the modern here, K–5 students can be said to read well when they can "describe" and "identify" elements in a text, "ask questions about [its] key details," "determine the meaning of words and phrases," "refer to details and examples," and "make connections" and "explain the differences" between versions of a story, along with a variety of other testable "skills" (13–14). Such parsing answers neatly to Jeffrey Dolven's observation that elementary instruction is always "shaped by the epistemological problem, the question *how do I know you understand?*" (18), but it does not really address the question of how such skills constitute reading.[5] The Common Core standards might be understood above all as the articulation of an anxiety. As Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have observed, there can be so much "wastage" in the processes of pedagogy that, at times, "the quantity of information transmitted tends to zero" (107–08). To the extent the Common Core standards elaborate rather than confound this specter, they could be seen as an admission that even the most careful teaching of reading might not teach students to read at all.

The medieval teacher could never have had worries like those lodged in the Common Core standards because he understood reading to be a singular and irreducible activity. This common view is given dramatic representation—and its deep roots in ancient learning are well documented—on a red-figure vase, attributed to Douris (active c. 500–460 BCE), depicting a "school scene" (Immerwahr 18). Its sides depict four distinct pairs of students demonstrating their learning in music or letters to a teacher; in the rightmost pair of figure 1, the student is showing that he has learned to read (a spectator or parent is seated

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Fig. 1
Side B of a red-figured drinking cup (kylix), from Cerveteri, 480 BCE. BPK, Berlin / Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Art Resource, NY.

to his right). Since the text on the papyrus roll faces neither teacher nor student and is held by the teacher rather than the student, Eric Havelock thought that this was not a demonstration of reading at all (202–03). But the papyrus provides a recognizable text (the lines in the image scan as a hexameter conflating two lines from Homer, "Muse to me" and "I begin to sing of wide-flowing Scamander" [Immerwahr 19; Havelock 203]), and, as even Havelock granted, the point of the image is to show that this student can accurately reproduce the contents of the text on the papyrus we can see. It is equally true that were the text facing the student in this image, it might not have represented reading to the ancient or medieval viewer, since, as Mary Carruthers has observed, in this period "merely running one's eyes over the written pages is not reading at all" (10). To read was "to familiarize and domesticate" a text, ensuring that it was "fully internalized" in an almost "physiological way" (222). The boy on the vase has met this standard precisely because he does not need to see the text he is reading; he proves his competence not by means of a variety of subsidiary activities (or skills) but by the complete reproduction that shows this text to be reading he wholly *knows*.

The Common Core does understand reading as a means for acquiring "knowledge" (3, 5), and it wants students to "know" things about texts (13), but to know a text in this ancient and medieval sense was not just to be able to rehearse it by rote but to be able to carry it through life—to be able to read it again and again—ever afterward. Chaucer gives us a glimpse of this view in the last stanza of the *Parliament of Fowls*, after its narrator has described a dream inspired by his reading of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*:

> I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
> To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
> I hope, ywis, to rede so some day
> That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
> The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.
> (695–99)

> I awoke, and gathered together other books to read, and I read always still. I hope, indeed, that by reading I shall encounter something that will help me fare the better, and thus I will never cease from reading.

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Because reading is understood to be perpetual (one book always leads to another), it cannot be distinguished from "experience" (Carruthers 165). Chaucer also makes clear that an absorption so thorough has an ethical component, helping a reader "fare the better," but it is fundamentally cognitive, ever after mediating the relation between the self and the perceptual world. This is why Langland understands the failure of fourteenth-century learning not as a decline in skills but as a failure to "know" (15.368, 15.380). It is why his dreamer, Will, dedicates himself to a life of reading, vowing to be Dame Study's "man" for as long as he lives, so long as she will teach him "kyndely to knowe" ("to know truly" [10.145, 148]). Such reading is an increasingly "dynamic" process "whereby reader and text interact" (Simpson 232), and the "kynde knowynge" it imparts is therefore never only the learning that can be acquired in books but is also "experiential knowledge" (Davlin 7), truths known as they are carried through the world and are complicated and enriched by the "experience of years" (14). This is why the search for "Truth" that governs the poem's allegory puts encounters with Study (10.1–220), Scripture (10.331–11.316), and Book (18.236–59) next to conversations with an "actif man" ("active man" [14.1–332]) and the "Samaritan" (17.85–352) and why, too, Will perceives everything he encounters after reading the pardon sent from Truth through the pardon's language. (Because the pardon says to "do well" [7.112], Will wants "kynde knowynge" of "Do well" [8.110–11].)

Such a remit for reading means that there is no end to the learning that reading can provide, but it also means that when a text is fully known, when students can show they have learned it, when it might finally be possible to satisfy the anxieties articulated by the Common Core, success cannot be observed, by definition, since a text absorbed completely vanishes from view. One example will have to stand for all here, but *The Canterbury Tales* provides a helpfully rich instance of the phenomenon in the story told by the Pardoner, when the three "rioters" encounter an old man in such despair that he longs for death:

> Ne Deeth, allas, ne wold nat han my lyf.
> Thus walke I, lyk a restelees kaityf,
> And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
> I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
> And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!
> Lo how I vanysshe, flessh and blood and skyn!
> Allas, whan shul my bones been at reste?
> Mooder, with yow wolde I chaunge my cheste
> That in my chambre longe tyme hath be,
> Ye, for an heyre clowt to wrappe me!"
> But yet to me she wol nat do that grace,
> For which ful pale and welked is my face.
> (727–38)

> Death, alas, will not take my life, and so I walk, like a restless wretch, and on the ground, which is my mother's gate, I knock with my staff, early and late, and say, "Dear mother, let me in! Look how I vanish, flesh and blood and skin! Alas, when will my bones be at rest? Mother, I would exchange all the treasure I have long had in my chamber for a haircloth to wrap myself in." But still she will not do me that favor, and therefore I am so pale with such a withered face.

This "Oedipal dream of a return to the mother" (Patterson, "Chaucer's Pardoner" 657) has been understood, by turns, as a version of the Pardoner's unconscious (his despair in the face of impossible desires [Dinshaw 179–80]), a textual unconscious (a version of the "Chaucerian fascination with origins" that Chaucer never fully explained [Patterson, *Chaucer* 412]), and a political unconscious (quietly identifying "the emptiness of penitential procedures" for salvation in late-fourteenth-century England [420]). The language of the passage is not Chaucer's, however, but a close adaptation of the first of those elegies of Maximianus that Alexander Villa-Dei hoped students would never read:

> Take me, my mother, pity your child that
> suffers:

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I seek to nourish my tired limbs upon your breast.
Children abhor me, my appearance has so changed.
Why do you allow your offspring to look so horrible?
I've nothing to do with life, I've fulfilled its chores:
Restore dead limbs, I pray, to their native soil.
Why torture miserable men with added pain?
No mother's heart can allow such things.
(Lind; 1.227–34)[6]

Chaucer knew this elegy as well as the student on Douris's vase knew his Homer: were a teacher standing in front of him, holding the text facing away from him, Chaucer could have recited it word for word. He satisfied the standards for reading of his day not by such recitation, however, but by absorbing the text so fully that it is indistinguishable from new acts of cognition—transformed by such familiarity into an instrument for knowing. In other words, Chaucer shows more here than that he knows the elegies of Maximinus; he shows how those elegies know the Pardoner, containing in their words meanings that can be released (as if they are ideas this text has had) to describe not only the despair of the old man the Pardoner created but also the Pardoner's own inner life (both the desires the Pardoner reveals in the old man and, by way of the indexes embedded in those revelations, desires he cannot name). The proof of Chaucer's success in reading this text, then, is that he never names it (here or anywhere in his writing), having read it so successfully that it has become nothing other than a means of knowing.[7]

In fact, we still read in this way, acquiring texts or parts of them so deeply that they come to seem a part of ourselves (as Alberto Manguel has put it, "experience came to me first through books" [8]), and we sometimes still know the world by means of our reading (as Manguel also says, "later in life" events or circumstances that resembled what he had read seemed "already to have happened" [8]), but even if we can notice and celebrate such effects, the Common Core suggests that they are far from standard. What we may learn now from readers such as Chaucer or Langland is that standards anxious enough to define reading as so much describing, identifying, asking, determining, referring, and explaining fail, by the very means of their care, to know all that reading could and can be. We could go further and say that if it is inherent to the Common Core's "vision of what it means to be a literate person" that one should know how "close, attentive reading" has "wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace," the Common Core standards narrow, rather than widen, what it means to be literate (3). This may not be a problem if we want to set reading standards that we are sure our students can meet. But it is also to succeed in teaching by defining reading as a set of easily observable tasks rather than as a mode of cognition that increases not only the knowledge our students possess but the scope and reach of their understanding—a singular skill that enlarges their very capacity to know.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Middle English and Latin are my own.

2. "Anima" is speaking here, and his specific complaint is that only one in a hundred "new clerkes" can construe an author or "rede a lettre in any language but in Latyn or in Englissh." Since French is the one language of culture missing from this list, it must be this competence these new clerks lack.

3. For a translation of the longer passage from which these phrases are taken, see Copeland and Sluiter 586–87.

4. "Postquam alphabetum didicerit et ceteris puerilibus rudimentis imbutus fuerit, Donatum et illud utile moralitatis compendium quod Catonis esse vulgus opinatur addiscat et ab Egloga Theodoli transeat ad egglogas Bucolicorum. . . . A Thebaide iocunda transeat ad divinam Eneida" (Hunt 2: 269). Hunt's transcription (2: 258–72), from the only extant copy of the *Sacerdos ad Altare* (Cambridge, Gonville and Caius MS 385), is also the only extant edition of this text.

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5. Dolven's observations about the "scene of instruction" are couched in general terms because most of the tasks he analyzes ("repetition" [30–32], "drills" [34–36], "analysis" [36–38], "classification" [38–40], "translation" [41–42], "composition" [44–48], "disputation" [49–50]) are staples of elementary learning. His study is focused on Renaissance learning, however—in particular, the exercises in William Kempe's *Education of Children in Learning* (1588).

6. "Suscipe me, genetrix, nati miserere laborum: / membra peto / gremio fessa fovere tuo. / Horrent me pueri, nequeo velut ante videri: / horrendos partus cur sinis esse tuos? / Nil mihi cum / superis: explevi munera vitae: / Redde precor patrio mortua membra solo. / Quid miseros variis prodest extendere poenis? / Non est materni pectoris ista pati."

7. I have elsewhere described the discovery of new meanings in a well-known text as an "art of rereading" (Cannon, "Art"), one in which the reread text is usually cited so as to mark the new meanings subsequent experience has made it possible to discover there. All such forms of ancient and medieval reading are closely adjacent in a continuum of practice in which reading is a cognitive process that proceeds by means of texts.

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