theories and methodologies

Sedimental Education; or, Reading As We Age

PETER J. RABINOWITZ

DISCUSSIONS OF READING AS WE AGE ARE USUALLY TANGLED UP IN DISCUSSIONS OF REREADING, FOR GOOD REASON. RECOGNIZING CHANGE requires some point of orientation. Yes, there are things we can learn about the impact of aging when we read a new text (we may recognize, for example, that we don't read with the same speed and concentration that we once did). But, for the most part, the effects of the aging process emerge with greater clarity and with more nuance when we have an old reading (or a memory of an old reading) to hold up against our present perceptions. So imagine that you've read a work, on and off, over forty years (an act of imagination that will be easier for some readers than for others). What sorts of differences in your reactions are liable to emerge? There are lots of them, which run along several axes and often conflict.

In many cases, for instance, the experience of getting on in years—in particular, our changing age relationship to characters—produces the kinds of differences that I've elsewhere called the "Young Mme. de Rênal" syndrome (Rabinowitz and Smith 90). When I first read Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* as a beginning college student, the thirtysomething Madame de Rênal appeared to me, as she appeared to Julien Sorel, as an enigmatically attractive older woman; now I see her as a young woman who needs to grow up. Similarly, when I reread Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse's father no longer seems quite as aged as he once appeared to be. At the same time, just as we can become older than characters who were once older than we were, we can become older than a text's authorial audience. Several years ago, I was asked to assess an article on J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. In preparation, I reread the novel, which I hadn't touched in decades. Or, to be more honest, I tried to reread it but found I simply couldn't get through it. It's not so much that I had lost the ability to identify with (dangerous term) Holden Caulfield—after all, I often can't identify, or even sympathize, with the main character of a book (Lise in Muriel Spark's

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The Driver's Seat, for one). Rather, it's that I found that Salinger's intended audience, well, needed to grow up.

More often than not, though, our changing temporal position is complicated by changes in our cultural or intellectual situation, including shifts in what, in this feature of *PMLA*, Susan Lanser calls the "zeitgeist" and Barbara Hochman calls "interpretive technologies." Those shifts can be large (say, changes in attitudes toward the complexities of race and sexuality) or small (changes in linguistic usage); they can involve the culture at large or the subcultures we inhabit. Thus, for instance, my condescension to Madame de Rênal as I grow older is more than compensated for by what I hope is an increased sensitivity to subtler forms of oppression, a sensitivity that gives me a greater appreciation of the forces that keep her from growing up. Now, Holden's high-minded battle against "fuck you" seems quaint in a way it didn't when I read *Catcher* in high school. Then, too, to the extent that we continue to absorb new theory and criticism (whether we actually read it or not), our experiences with texts change with shifts in professional currents. We may drift with the flow or row against it, but it has an impact either way. Once I'd read Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*, how could theory of mind not influence the way I thought about Philip Marlowe's despair at the end of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*?[1] Once I'd read Alan Palmer's *Social Minds*, how could I not think about the collective thoughts operating to oppress (and perhaps finally to liberate) Gurov and Anna in Anton Chekhov's "Lady with a Dog"? Reading old marginal comments in the books I teach from, I'm generally struck less by the textual details I'd overlooked than by the critical naïveté of my former selves.

Our interpretations of familiar texts are changed not only when our stock of theory and criticism is expanded but also when we encounter new literary works. Every literary text takes on its meaning at least partly in terms of the other texts we read it against, the intertextual grid that serves as its background. Thus, as we age, our changing repertoire of texts—new and old—also shifts our interpretations and reading practices. Many of us talk more about the modern texts we've discovered, perhaps because we'd be embarrassed to say, for example, "Hey, now that I've finally read *Jane Eyre*, my reading of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* has changed." But in fact we all have major gaps in our reading, and whenever one of those gaps is filled in, everything else changes, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

All these effects of aging contribute to changes in interests—but they don't determine them. Even without a new critical perspective or a new intertextual background, what strikes you the second or forty-second time through a book is rarely what strikes you the first time. You notice new elements, for instance, be they subtleties of language or neat formal tricks or hidden psychological insights. In particular, as Hochman points out, you're apt to pay less attention to the working out of plot. As a consequence, signification and coherence become more important than configuration. Not all these changes stem from aging, of course. To echo Lanser, if I happen to be teaching Nawal el Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* three times in five semesters, I "am aging only a little, but I am certainly reading over time." But if such changes don't always come *from* aging, they certainly always come *with* aging.

Finally, with age comes confidence. As Lanser suggests, we can take certain approaches to reading more readily once we're older. Attitudes that we may have been afraid or embarrassed to assume suddenly become possible. These attitudes include—and we should not minimize them—increased readiness to shut out trendy criticism that bores us and openness to emotional positions we had once guarded against. Such openness allowed Faye Halpern, as she explains in her contribution to this feature, to escape from the

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grip of—or at least come to terms with—her contempt for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

To repeat: discussions of reading as we age are usually tangled up in discussions of rereading, for good reason. What is less often considered, though, is that discussions of rereading, in turn, are often tangled up—at least for those who teach literature—in discussions of rereading for class, also for good reason. I suspect that most people reading this essay watch favorite movies over and over simply for the pleasures they provide (what's a year without *Casablanca*?). But I also suspect that, one or two favorite works aside (often books we've been rereading compulsively since our adolescence—for instance, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or Chandler's *The Big Sleep*), most teachers' rereadings of novels and plays are tied to classroom activities. Those of us who teach may assign books because we enjoy rereading them, but we reread them because we've assigned them. (And unless you're one of those rare teachers who are always ahead in the syllabus, late-night rereading for class often merges reading over time with reading overtime.)

Each of the axes I've mentioned above intersects, in a slightly more complicated way, with practices and experiences in the classroom. For instance, besides our changing temporal positions with respect to characters and authorial audiences, those of us who teach also have a changing age relationship to our students. Students may view some younger teachers as surrogate older siblings; but as we age, we run the risk of seeming like surrogate parents. The good news here is that, eventually, the parental stage becomes a thing of the past. Indeed, the prime teaching years may be the later ones, since lots of students have more open relationships with their grandparents than with their parents.

Changes in the zeitgeist also complicate the classroom, for as we age, the cultural milieu in which we grew up is likely to be more and more distant from that of the students. We can try to keep up with students' culture, but it's no easy task and often has the counterproductive effect of making us look quaint, creaky, and apologetic. Then, too, the pedagogical zeitgeist, whether in the profession at large or at particular academic institutions, can powerfully affect how we read in preparation for teaching. The types of writing that we ask students to produce, in particular, have an impact on how we reread.

As for changes in interest: this may well be why those of us who teach sometimes find it harder or less effective to teach texts we know well than to teach something new. Encountering the cynical antiromantic strain in Marcel Proust's *Swann in Love* for the first time can be a shocking experience, as can encountering the graphic racial violence in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. As a teacher, I know I need to help my students navigate those jolts. But at this stage of my career, there are, frankly, subtler aspects of the texts that I'd rather talk about. My guess is that such conflicts are increasingly common for all teachers as they age.

Finally, as we grow older (especially if we are fortunate enough to have the security of tenure), the confidence associated with our reading spills over into our teaching as well—sometimes juicing up the classroom, sometimes threatening to drown the endeavor completely. Increasing expertise and decreasing need to be up-to-date may well allow us to be more honest with our students, but it may also encourage us to be more sweeping in our generalizations, more unyielding in our convictions. That doubleness takes on an especially vexing cast in the current political situation, which makes interpreting anything but the most banal texts potentially explosive, as faculty members at Knox College recently found out when there was a campus firestorm over (and cancellation of) a production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan*. In a world where you can be attacked as a

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neo-Nazi for defending Brecht in the name of free speech, older tenured faculty members may well have the self-assurance that allows them to charge into the minefields, reading texts that others shy away from and interpreting them without fear. Having the historical experience that allows you to recognize the current echoes of the 1960s, and even the McCarthy period, also has an impact on what you read and how you read it. At the same time, however, older faculty members may be less sensitive to the needs of current students—and, in any case, may well be dismissed as representatives of a fortunately distant past.

All these ideas, nourished and clarified by the work of my colleagues in this feature, were at the back of my mind when we proposed it. But the more I thought about reading over time, the more I had the sense that I was missing something crucial. And the missing piece came to me accidentally, in a situation that, oddly, had little to do with rereading. As part of an event last spring at Hamilton College to celebrate the final year of its comparative literature department (a long story there!), I taught Chekhov's "Anna on the Neck" to a group of my former students, representing class years ranging from at least 1983 to 2017. None of them had ever studied this story with me, and all of them found themselves in a room largely filled with strangers. It was a big class, too, larger than most of them had ever had with me. Yet in minutes, they were comfortable enough with each other to be vocal and argumentative, and I found myself in a multitemporal classroom where different strata of my past were simultaneously present and interacting.

At first, the experience seemed eerie, even dizzying, like some kind of ghostly resurrection of *This Is Your Life* (and you probably have to be of a certain age to remember that show). But when it was all over (or, at least, when the class ended—the conversation hardly reached closure), I realized that what I had gone through was only an amplification of my normal teaching experience. When I'm reteaching a text, I not only sense the presence of my former readings (especially if I'm using a copy of the book that I've used before) but also hear (usually faintly, sometimes loudly) the voices of former students, who manage to nudge the conversation in a particular direction or provide an eerie counterpoint. Am I teaching Chekhov's "Lady with a Dog" (a story I've taught more than any other)? Then student resistance to Gurov's sincerity (summed up by one former student's loud proclamation that Gurov is "delusional") hangs in the room even before the class begins and even if no current student brings it up. Am I teaching Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (a novel, I'm surprised to realize, that I've taught, in whole or in part, more often than any other)? Then a former student's observations about accent and identity hang in the room, even before class begins and even if no current student brings it up. The interpretive insights themselves are not crucial here; in and of themselves, they do not shift paradigms. But the presence of the voice or voices behind those insights matters. The experience is closely tied to the experience of "traces of older reading practices" that Halpern talks about in her essay. But they are not identical, for the traces, in this case, are social rather than individual.

After all, as I've argued often before, reading is inevitably a social activity—not only because it usually involves communication with an author or authors, not only because the rules of interpretation we rely on are inevitably social in origin, but also because it connects us to other readers of the same text. As Hochman puts it, books have "potential as a ground of community." Book groups thrive because they link us, and those of us who teach literature are linked to other readers even more. And when we teach the same books at different times, the experience is different not only because *we* have changed as readers but also because the people we are sharing the books with have changed, too.

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But for me, the new students don't simply replace their predecessors, because the former students, the older sedimentary strata of my classrooms, don't disappear. They continue to participate silently on the edges of my classrooms, and their questions and observations continue to inform the discussion, as well as my rereadings, even when I'm lucky enough to be rereading *not* for class.

To put it differently: for me rereading is sedimental, increasingly so as I age. We can put it in oft-quoted Faulknerian terms: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (80). Or we can put it in Proustian terms: we come to understand the world when we can see it four dimensionally, when parallel moments that are temporally spread out suddenly coalesce in a way that allows us, momentarily at least, to transcend time. That's why first editions are so important to Marcel in *In Search of Lost Time*—not the first published edition of a beloved book but the edition (ideally, the copy) he first encountered: that physical book strengthens the effect. And that's one reason why I have trouble giving up my old copies of books, even if the pages need to be held together with rubber bands that have themselves dried out. It's not simply that my old underlinings and comments, where they're still relevant, remind me of key moments in a text and provide a shortcut to class preparation (especially welcome when reading overtime). More important, they also remind me of other readings, other people, and other times. What's at stake, then, is not simply the contrast of new readings with old readings but even more the way that old associations with other readers remain and the way that, as I age, I am more willing to let those associations emerge.

This multitemporal experience does not happen just with high art, like works by Faulkner and Proust. It can happen with any art. I suspect it happens especially poignantly to those who reread children's books to their children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, and friends' children. It certainly happened to me when I recently reread Munro Leaf's *The Story of Ferdinand* (before the appearance of the movie) to my granddaughters. Yes, some world knowledge has changed my view of the book (when it was first read to me, I actually believed that corks grew on trees, as in the whimsical illustrations). Changes in the zeitgeist have affected me, too (I'm a little less comfortable with what might justifiably be viewed as stereotypical portrayals of Spain). But far more influential on my experience is the temporal sense of multigenerational reading. When I'm reading, superimposed on my current world is what I remember as the cozy world of my childhood (particularly, my aunt Lucille reading to me in my grandparents' house, with its delightful smell of freshly ground coffee) and the excitement that came from watching my own children as they started to navigate literary worlds and to comprehend the importance of standing up to cultural pressures.

Proust seems to argue that it's not the *content* of the associations that really matters. It's the coexistence of multiple temporal planes that's crucial. That's why so many consciousness-opening events (like tripping on uneven pavement stones) in *In Search of Lost Time* are, in and of themselves, so trivial. But, I suppose, the richer the content, the stronger the effect—which is why those of us who read and reread texts we love with different people over years or decades are especially fortunate.

The stronger the effect: but what is that effect? Obviously, this counterpoint of voices influences my interpretations. But more striking still, it influences what I've come to call the flavor of certain textual moments. Traditional narratology stresses sight (focalization) and sound (voice), but texts (or moments in texts) have flavors as well, flavors that can provide an emotional pull that can't be explained through traditional narratological analyses. In the past (for instance, in "Toward a Narratology of Cognitive Flavor"), I've

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talked about the ways that textual features—say, particular games with time or cognitive configurations—can take our breath away. So can the remembered voices of other readers.

The other readers who are evoked when we read vary from person to person and from text to text. They're not always tied to rereading or to aging, of course, but they tend to multiply when we return to familiar texts and when we get older. Sometimes, you might hear the friend who recommended a novel to you—or the friend you recommended it to. Sometimes, you might hear the teachers who first taught it to you or scholars who have written about it. For me, the readers are mainly my students, partly because of their high caliber (I've certainly been blessed to work with brilliantly independent-minded young adults), partly because the sheer volume of their voices (I encourage fairly noisy classrooms) tends to drown out everyone else. But in any case, for me, in the end, the coexistence of those sediments, the coexistence of those different moments in my relationships with other people—magnified by their depth and temporal span—gives rereading at an advanced age a special kind of frisson.

Notes

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1. Zunshine defines theory of mind, or mind reading, as "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. . . . Thus, we engage in mind-reading when we ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable actions" (6).

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