

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Becoming Sensitive: Literary Study and Learning to Notice

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Literary scholars promise that readers who slow down and pay closer attention will notice more in a text. Yet it is not uncommon for students to perceive a difference between what they see when they look at a poem or a novel and what their instructor or even an outstanding peer is able to discern. If knowing what to look for and where to find it is evidence of the critical abilities that literature students should develop, how does one learn to notice significant features of a text in the first place? This essay presents a starting point for making this tacit process more explicit, offering a fresh perspective on literary study and literature as means of “knowing with,” a form of knowledge that serves as preparation for noticing. In doing so, it also brings attention to how critics might move beyond certain disciplinary blind spots.

By neglecting to consider how readers learn to perceive new forms of literary significance, our discipline retains exclusionary pedagogical assumptions at odds with its emancipatory scholarly commitments. In *How to Read a Poem*, Terry Eagleton laments that “students today” are no longer being taught to be sensitive to literary language, and then proceeds to demonstrate such sensitivity by submitting an array of poems to close analysis (2). What Eagleton offers as pedagogy, however, is indistinguishable from a virtuosic performance of critical expertise. This time-honored approach to instruction presumes that students who lack critical acuity can develop it by observing what skilled critics, using acuity they already possess, are able to perceive in literary texts. In the field of education, however, the psychologist John D. Bransford and his colleagues observe that whereas many theories of learning tend to presume that significant features will be apparent to learners, how one learns to notice relevant

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information in the first place is what needs to be explained (Bransford et al. 482). Literature instructors who declare that a novel will teach you how to read it, or that readers must discover the unique questions each poem wants to be asked, elide the fact that knowing how to discern such information must also be learned.

Our discipline's habit of conflating knowledge of how to practice literary criticism with knowledge of how learning works has been overdetermined by higher education's exclusionary history. Historians and sociologists of education have traced how late-nineteenth-century American universities and professional schools sought to differentiate themselves from secondary education, which carried the stigma of its predominantly female teaching corps (Lagemann; Mehta). Professors presented themselves as experts associated with the prestigious, masculine realms of scholarship, knowledge, and theory, as opposed to the feminine, supposedly intellectually inferior realms of pedagogy, learning, and practice. In literary studies, however, John Guillory notes a historical irony: the methodologies that have come to underpin scholarly expertise were originally introduced as pedagogies for teaching literature more effectively, often in service of an ambitious social vision ("Very Idea" 167–68). But once these protocols became fundamental to the specialized methods of professional critics, the subject of pedagogy was consigned to the realm of tacit knowledge. Although, in theory, critics no longer subscribe to biases that motivated the neglect of practice, the discipline has never fully worked out how its professional protocols might lead to the pedagogical and political outcomes it desires, even as it invokes these projects to justify its value.

If learning remains undertheorized because of its subordinate professional relation to knowledge, literary critics can paradoxically also feel that teaching is too personal to analyze. In the classroom, the discipline's belletristic commitment to literary study as the cultivation of sensibility has thrived.¹ Here it is not out of place for students to respond to the sensory, affective, and aesthetic qualities that literature evokes or represents. Although instructors might be less forthcoming about their own sentiments, they may display intensely personal attachments to

their idiosyncratic syllabi, lesson plans, in-class activities, paper topics, instructions for close reading, and rationales for literary study. How one teaches is an expression of one's individual sensibility. And because one's individual sensibility cannot be taught but must be cultivated in an intuitive, often insensible way, our discipline's belletristic commitments have preserved a sense that teaching and learning would be diminished by demystification.²

Many teachers of literature are, indeed, exceptional. Yet becoming more intentional about reducing barriers to learning means taking seriously the question of how one learns to notice literary significance. Doing so necessitates some acquaintance with psychological perspectives on learning despite literary critics' wariness of the social sciences. To speak of tuning one's ear to poetic rhythm or developing an eye for literary form, of cultivating critical competencies or aesthetic capacities, after all, is to speak of mental processes. And critics willing to consider psychological approaches to learning may be pleasantly surprised to discover scholarship that seeks to move beyond learning outcomes that can be immediately observed and assessed. Because of education's own struggle to gain disciplinary legitimacy, researchers have long focused on measuring students' ability to display two forms of knowledge: declarative knowledge, or information that can be retrieved from memory, such as the first law of thermodynamics or historical facts about China's Cultural Revolution, and procedural knowledge, or the ability to perform specific skills, such as playing a D major scale or titrating a compound in a chemistry lab. Whereas declarative and procedural knowledge correspond to Gilbert Ryle's epistemological distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how," the philosopher of education H. S. Broudy introduced the concept of "knowing with" in the 1970s to account for another way in which knowledge is used.³ "Knowing with" refers to how past knowledge and experience prepare learners to notice and interpret relevant information in the future (Bransford and Schwartz 68–74). This form of knowledge illuminates what is distinctive about the arts and humanities and why it eludes traditional assessments of learning: humanistic knowledge

structures our perception and guides our attention, preparing us to approach novel problems and experiences in increasingly discriminating and flexible ways.

For illustrations of how past learning structures future perception, we can turn to well-established psychological research on expertise. Psychologists use this concept in a discipline-specific way to describe how deliberate training and practice transform a learner's ability to perceive and interpret information in a particular domain. In this context, a child can be an expert on dinosaurs and a home cook can be an expert at baking bread. Experts in domains such as chess, bird-watching, music, radiology, and literary criticism have acquired vast mental libraries of structures, concepts, and patterns that guide their attention (see National Research Council 31–50). Whereas a novice chess player might examine the position of individual pieces one by one, an expert instantly perceives higher order patterns like double pins or discovered checks. Knowledge and experience prepare the chess master not only to discriminate between many tactical patterns but also to consider a wider range of possibilities when weighing the next move. Similarly, whereas a layperson may spot a bird on a branch but find further observation uninformative, an expert birder might instantly recognize the bird as a warbler and look for specific field marks in hopes of determining its species: Does it have an eyeline or an eye-ring? A cap on the head or barring on the wings? As novices gain knowledge and experience, birds that once seemed indistinguishable or nondescript resolve into stunning arrays of informative features: flashes of color on the rump, chest, throat, or crown; telltale bill thickness or tail length; characteristic body posture or wing beat; and inimitable songs, calls, and behaviors. Birders' well-differentiated knowledge prepares them to be more discriminating when deciding where to look, what to look for, how to interpret what they find, and when they do not know enough to be certain.

Experienced critics have similarly acquired specialized knowledge that prepares them to notice how literary texts carry meaning.⁴ Whereas first-year college students might experience James

Joyce's *Dubliners* as a sequence of short stories that differ in how interesting or impenetrable they seem, their instructors have acquired knowledge about narrative techniques, Irish history, Joyce's biography, and theoretical frameworks that prepare them to notice shifts from psychological narration to free indirect speech and from summary to scene, shifts in tone and style of narration, details that implicitly critique British colonization or the Roman Catholic Church, and attitudes that reflect orientalism or patriarchal ideology. For readers with specialized knowledge, a poem similarly resolves into a well-differentiated landscape of meaningful features: intricate patterns of sound, stress, and rhyme; a distinctive linguistic register, style, or tone; a politically charged image or word; the subversion of generic expectations; or the echo of a traditional form. Experience prepares critics to assess when an interpretive possibility seems like a stretch and when it is likely to be significant, as when Stephanie Burt infers that Terrance Hayes alludes to Dante's journey through hell and purgatory by setting his 2006 version of "The Blue Terrance" in terza rima (130).

Critics have also learned to notice abstract relationships between sound and sense or form and meaning, long regarded as a deep organizing principle of literary texts. Although it is routine to speak of perceiving form with the eye, doing so involves learning to think about language at a certain level of abstraction. Take, for example, Andrew Hodgson's introductory analysis of form in the first stanza of W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (108). Whereas sensitivity to rhyme, or the phonological similarity between different words, is a competency that typically develops at an early age (Whitehurst and Lonigan 856), literary critics abstract the degree of phonological similarity between words into a set of higher order relationships: full rhyme expresses order and harmony, while no rhyme suggests disorder and dissonance. Familiarity with these associations prepares Hodgson to perceive that, in Yeats's opening octave, the progression from half rhyme to no rhyme results in a stanza that barely hangs together before falling apart at the end.

Specifying some of what skilled critics have learned to notice raises the question of how experience facilitates noticing. Here is where research on learning at once demystifies and corroborates Romantic intuitions about the insensible influence of experience. Eleanor J. Gibson's groundbreaking work on perceptual learning highlights the value of experiencing perceptual contrasts. Side-by-side comparisons of wines, apple cultivars, cotton fabrics, perfumes, paint colors, or lexical tones enable perceivers to detect subtle, previously indistinguishable differences in sensation.⁵ Perceptual contrasts enable the aspiring apple connoisseur not just to notice variations in two cultivars' aroma or astringency but also to learn that aroma and astringency are features of apples worth noticing. Experiencing contrasts is effective for conceptual learning as well (Bransford et al. 483). For example, when literature instructors invite students to compare several ways in which a sonnet can be structured around its volta, a strategically chosen selection of sonnets enables students not only to notice different possibilities for handling a poetic turn but also to learn that a turn is a structural feature of poems to consider in the future. Over time, students who deliberately attend to a wide variety of experiential contrasts may internalize knowledge of possible ways in which literary texts can carry significance (although this also depends on interest, motivation, and existing skills).

Examining how readers learn to perceive a text as a finely differentiated landscape not only enables a more intentional approach to literary pedagogy but also reminds us why literature is worth attending to in the first place. Poems, short stories, novels, and life writing offer readers possibilities for perceiving and understanding features of lived experience, of other persons, of some aspect of the world with greater nuance and discrimination. Jhumpa Lahiri bestows narrative attention on ordinary sensory and affective details that engage her readers' embodied knowledge with minute precision. Virginia Woolf brings the scale of novelistic representation closer to the moment-by-moment experience of consciousness. Claudia Rankine pinpoints the second when solidarity can suddenly, unexpectedly

materialize or, just as instantly, disappear. By recovering the sensation of things that readers habitually overlook, by pointing out what readers have not yet learned to notice, by creating experiences that cannot exist without the mediation of literary language, literature prepares readers to resolve the "great blooming, buzzing confusion" of experience into an increasingly distinct constellation of features (James 488). Conversely, readers' personal histories or theoretical training may prepare them to notice when a text omits something significant or is at odds with what they know. There are also limits to what we can learn from verbal representation alone, which is why rereading a poem or novel later in life can feel so different from our first attempt: the knowledge and experience we have acquired in the intervening years prepare us to notice and respond to what escaped our attention earlier. As means of knowing with, literature, lived experience, and literary study inform one another in ways that cannot be determined in advance, in ways that seem recursive rather than mutually exclusive, reciprocal rather than hierarchical (see, e.g., Felski).

If perspectives from learning clarify how literary study transforms our perception, they also alert us to the limits of our expertise. Acknowledging these limits in turn prepares us to revisit assumptions about how our discipline might "intervene in the social order" (North 173). Although perceptual transformation can be effortlessly united with social transformation in theory, the relationship between what one perceives and how one decides to act is more complex in practice. Critics have developed finely differentiated ways of perceiving and interpreting features of literary texts, but they lack a similarly nuanced understanding of how different situational and relational contexts influence behavior. In literary studies, it is routine to approach context on the scale of historical moments and cultural conditions; yet within a given historical moment and even within a single day, individuals move between a variety of situational and relational contexts that mediate their goals, attention, emotions, judgments, and actions (see Rauthmann et al.).

In education, by contrast, a learner's sensitivity to situational context has long been recognized as a pedagogical challenge. Writing in 1929, Alfred

North Whitehead noted the problem of “inert knowledge,” in which students fail to transfer what they have learned in the classroom to situations outside it, especially when those situations look and feel different from the scene of instruction (8). When students (and their instructors) move between the classroom and other situational contexts, they might perceive a difference between how it feels to prioritize certain aims and attitudes from a safe critical distance, especially when doing so aligns with institutional incentives, and how it feels to do so on the ground, when it may come with real or imagined personal costs. In practice, it may be difficult to ignore the affective pull of additional goals and values that were easy to discount in theory. Indeed, robust evidence from studies of behavioral change in domains such as reducing health risks, helping others, and protecting the environment indicate that our professed values do not reliably predict our behavior.⁶ It is commonplace for gaps to emerge between our values and our intentions, as well as between our intentions and our actions. These discontinuities present a challenge that scholars committed to effecting social change need to address.

Literary scholars lack well-differentiated knowledge of the factors that mediate behavior not just because behavioral change is not their area of expertise, but also because of the exclusionary attitudes that have long subordinated practice to theory (Lagemann 60–61, 234). Masculinist professional norms have made it possible for scholars simultaneously to believe that they have little to learn from the less prestigious realm of practice and to assume that they know how to intervene in it effectively. For instance, interpretive claims about how literary texts influence their readers often rely on mistaken beliefs about how reading works.⁷ It is not uncommon for critics to argue that nonprofessional readers are influenced by abstract structures and forms of significance that, in actuality, are unlikely to be detected by anyone without specialized knowledge and training. Fredric Jameson displays this form of hindsight bias in his interpretation of Gustave Flaubert’s description of the uneven floor (“différences de niveau”) in “Un coeur simple.” By asserting that Flaubert’s description “subliminally inscribes . . . on

the reading body” a “feeling for the inequality of adjacent co-ordinates,” Jameson makes the improbable claim that nineteenth-century readers not only retained this minute detail but also did so at a level of abstraction that requires disciplinary expertise to understand (377). Moreover, disciplinary orthodoxies about how literature and literary study participate in subject formation neglect to contextualize their supposed effects in relation to the array of other, often more powerful influences on individual subjectivity, such as the emotional environment and interpersonal dynamics within one’s family of origin, circumstances that vary widely even among those who share the same socioeconomic status and cultural identity.

A serious concern with the social effects of literary study entails willingness to revisit theories that insufficiently account for how influence works in practice. Attending to practice offers the further benefit of illuminating values, capacities, and ethical commitments that scholarly norms tend to occlude.⁸ When producing literary scholarship, it is not uncommon for critics to operate under a sense that there is room for only a single authoritative claim, in part because organic unity is an organizing principle that skilled critics apply not just to literary texts but also to interpretations of them. One occupational hazard of such sustained selective attention is that it can invite zero-sum argumentative structures in which one value necessarily comes at the expense of another. In the classroom, by contrast, critics routinely exercise the capaciousness and flexibility to retain multiple values and pursue multiple goals: they hold students accountable and treat them with compassion; they present challenging content and encourage students to find their voices; they attend to what a text discloses and to what it obscures. As teachers, critics know that one can have multiple coexisting attitudes toward a single text.

In the classroom, critics may also be guided by ethical considerations that continue to meet with resistance as legitimate motives for literary scholarship. At many public universities and community colleges, coursework is not students’ only priority. Degree seekers may also be caregivers, essential

workers, and translators for non-English-speaking members of their extended families. For students struggling to survive in a world they also hope to change, the temporary experiences of belonging, connection, wonder, or joy that literary texts sometimes create can feel qualitatively distinct from other moments in their lives. In this context, a literature instructor's approach to aesthetic pleasure carries ethical stakes. Instead of dismissing students' responses for being insufficiently critical, instructors might consider how literature can have value for readers who lack a simple or immediate means of altering their relation to a matrix of familial, socioeconomic, cultural, and physical constraints. Instead of assuming that nonprofessional reading practices cannot be the object of disciplined attention, instructors might offer students a more intricate conceptual vocabulary for specifying the distinctiveness of literary experience.⁹

The ethics of taking seriously how and why literary texts can have value for students whose perspectives are informed by knowledge and experience that differ from our own aligns with a broader institutional trend. Research universities that historically defined themselves against the supposedly inferior spheres of teaching, learning, and practice have increasingly sought to acknowledge that feelings of safety, trust, and belonging are essential for learning. Yet even as instructors strive to create inclusive classroom environments and individualized learning accommodations, this affirmative work continues to be subordinate to scholarship, while scholarship that seeks to understand the affirmative possibilities of literary experience continues to be vulnerable to charges of being naive, complacent, sentimental, or banal.

Here we find a familiar double bind: affirmative experiences are essential; and we cannot afford to take them seriously. How might our discipline confer greater legitimacy on values, experiences, and emotions that the professional sphere has always depended on in practice but discounts in theory? How might we challenge the gendered hierarchy in which certain forms of labor and experience are routinely taken for granted because they distract us from more important work? One step would be to

credit ourselves and others with the capacity to retain multiple values at once: to value practice and theory, learning and knowledge, the affirmative and the critical.¹⁰ Doing so might enable us to recognize the realm of practice as a resource for knowing with, for fostering reciprocity between disciplinary orthodoxies and lived experience, and for developing a well-differentiated understanding of the varied situational contexts in which literature can have value for readers capable of pursuing multiple reading goals.

NOTES

1. See Guillory on belletrism as appreciation ("Literary Study" 34).
2. See Atherton 68–81. For an account of this attitude across disciplines, see Zimmerman.
3. For a different approach to Ryle, see Kramnick.
4. For a converging account of expertise, see Clune.
5. See Kellman. Compare with Hume 217–21; and James 483–549.
6. See Schultz and Kaiser; Poulin; and Schwarzer.
7. See Elfenbein on the reading process.
8. For example, see Ben-Yishai; and Buurma and Heffernan.
9. For such a vocabulary, see Auyoung.
10. See Lynch on the "the boundary confusions" already "endemic to literary study."

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