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Risking Aesthetic Reading

Patricia E. Calderwood
Fairfield University, pcalderwood@fairfield.edu

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Risking Aesthetic Reading

Patricia E. Calderwood

Fairfield University

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Abstract

This reflective article explores a tension between private and public expression of deep aesthetic response to reading, with specific reference to the play of this tension in the public space of the classroom. Implications for teaching are included, most specifically the need to understand the sensitivities and emotional vulnerability of students, the teacher's challenge of modeling open and deep responses to texts, and the creation of a supportive environment in which it is safe to take the risks needed for including deep aesthetic response in the classroom.

Somewhere along my way, the simplicity of reading for pleasure got complicated. There has always been reading: as asylum, as anesthetic, for entertainment, as a barometer of my uncertain cultural capital, to create a distance from others, and as a way to understand myself, others, and the world. Each of these brings its own satisfactions and pleasures, but so seldom has there been reading simply and purely for the sensuous delight of the act itself.

This essay is, most deeply, an attempt to understand the place of the act of reading in my own life, a question that until recently I never thought to ask. As a child, I read avidly but uneasily, and on borrowed time. It was a determinedly defiant and resourceful act on my part. When I was reading, I was transported away from the crowded, dirty, and chaotic environs of my childhood to the safer, more predictable worlds of happy endings depicted in books. Although my mother thought that my infatuation with reading boded ill for my social development, my obsessions were good-naturedly accepted by classmates and friends, and

were social currency for her in the neighborhood parental kvelling sessions. So, I carved an identity as reader, and the most fundamental elements of my life as a reader were established: escape and display. Safety and vulnerability, twisted and knotted together, became embedded in my reading of any text, both at home and at school. My readings resonated with childish authenticity, shimmered with naïve interpretation. Yet, it became ever more impossible to stand so transparent before my parents, teachers, siblings, classmates – impossible to bear to be transparent to the world. Deeply moving aesthetic experience, both in the response to the text and, indeed, in the very act of reading, was soon exiled to the hidden, private corners of my life, though my love affair with reading, any kind of reading, has not been extinguished.

It is risky business to unravel one's soul in a public arena, especially in a scholarly journal, for rejection of the value of the essay implies not only a dismissal of its scholarly or practical value, but also implies a rejection of the person who has pulled out the threads, both coarse and fine, of the knitted bag of her most uncertain self. But, I have learned something of value from this effort that has helped me care for my students, and their students, and to understand their struggles with a deeper resonance. In this essay, then, I attempt to capture a fascination with and dread of public displays of deep emotional and sensual engagement with the variety of texts we encounter. Using my own experience as a student struggling to reconcile this tension as illustration, I argue for a more compassionate understanding of similar struggles our students may engage in as they are asked to risk reading in our classrooms.

A Seminar on Reading for Pleasure

As the impetus for this reflection was a seminar in which I participated recently, I will use a few examples from that experience to think about the nature of reading for/as pleasure, and about the difficulty of creating a classroom space in which deep aesthetic response is possible. (Note 1) I audited the course as a guest of the professor, a mentor and friend of long standing. The seminar was billed as

... an exploration, an extended meditation, on the nature of the reading experience and of ways of reading the various literary genres and the arts (music, dance, theater, visual arts) which address the following issues: Reading (listening, seeing, moving) for pleasure as a subversive act; the role(s) of reading in everyday life; the reader and the nature of beauty and the beautiful; the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life versus the aesthetic appreciation of works of art (Blot, 2001).

One of the persistent entanglements of questions we examined during the seminar had to do with the multifaceted nature of reading. This word, "reading", a label for a process of interpreting and making meaning of a text, was something I had considered to be a primarily intellectual enterprise, and secondarily a sensory, and occasionally emotive process. During the seminar, an erratic movement between clarity and confusion about the nature of reading literature, music, and other art forms brought an electric thrill of discovery of a sense of reading, hearing, seeing, and feeling that was primarily sensory and emotive, and only secondarily intellectual. Yet an enriched intellectual/sensory experience is elusive. I cannot hold it in open space. It renders me transparent

How is reading a sensory experience? In the experience of catching one's breath in surprise, the transfer of textual suspense into physical tightness in our muscles, emotional release in our tears, or when we shake our heads at cognitive disequilibrium brought on by an unexpected element in the composition, we know that our bodies and senses are part of the act of reading. Unconsciously or deliberately, we filter out distractions – background noise, temperature, the sniffles. Sometimes, a reader takes up the materials of a composer's text and deeply works these together with those of her own life into a unique composition, creating an aesthetic moment, an *experience*, in John Dewey's terms, an intense, self-aware, immersion in meaningful experience that flows purposefully toward conclusion (see: Broudy, 1972; Connell, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Maxcy, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978)? Are such aesthetic moments certain sources of pleasure?

Pleasure

Scientists measure changes in physiological factors as indicators of the experiencing of pleasure: brain wave and respiration patterns, blood pressure and heart rate changes, pupil dilation, rising or falling neurotransmitter levels, and so on. In addition to quantifiable factors, there are subjective descriptions that may or may not be in sync with the physiological indicators as measured by science. Subjectively, pleasure is a physical, emotional, and/or cognitive feeling of well being that can range from mild to overwhelming in intensity. It may be experienced frequently or rarely, weakly or powerfully. Pleasure can be threaded with other feelings, such as dissatisfaction, sorrow, or pain, and can be stimulated by conditions that also lead to pain, anger, sorrow, or other sensations often thought of as antithetical to pleasure. Oddly enough, the expressing of pleasurable feelings can often look or sound exactly like the expressions of pain or sorrow – thus, tears of joy. Activities that support pleasure in one context can work against it in another. For example, a residue of guilt associated with the idea that pleasure is sinful might linger, tainting, or interrupting a full experience. Having an experience that is deeply pleasurable may include magnified sensation and a heightened awareness, or it can be a transcendence and abandonment of mundane bodily sensation, perhaps momentarily absent of cognitive activity, marked by a loss of control. Being swept up into pleasure can be delightfully dangerous, as an abandonment of control implies a potential vulnerability dependent on the kindness of others. Who among us dares to risk this delight?

In the presence of others who can and may read us in our deepest aesthetic moments, we are open pages, our selves illuminated as texts to be read. If we become as text, can we keep nothing hidden and safe? How can we know that we can trust our readers?

Text

Text is social in nature. It demands interaction from a reader, even if the reader's only interaction is to ignore it. As text is inherently social, any reading is a social experience, whether it is private or public, and regardless of which components of a reading are hidden or on view to the gaze and interpretations of others. Additionally, the potential chaining characteristics of social experiences and expressions are surely factors taken into consideration by readers. For example, no matter how aesthetically thin or thick a reading might be, a reader can use discretion in going public with her experience. She may choose to express her experience of reading along with her interpretation of a text, but she might also

cancel or shield some of that experience from her own consciousness or from the gaze of others. This discretion may be compounded by misrecognition of the experience of reading, or, more intriguingly, by a desire to deliberately misrepresent an interpretation: a furtively wiped tear explained as a response to an environmental irritant, rather than disclosed as an emotional response to some text. I think this intentional misrepresentation is an acknowledgement of the risk of the social interaction, when "text-ness descends" and one is seen complexly by another (anonymous reviewer, personal communication, August 31, 2004). When the eyes are loving, it can be an affirming experience; when the eyes are not, one might be destroyed.

There are commonly accepted parameters of what constitutes an appropriate (public or private) reading of text (or of self-as-text), and these are context specific. For example, it is appropriate to shed tears to express one's aesthetic experience of listening to music in a concert hall, but less appropriate to sob over a poem that is under study in a classroom. However, these general parameters bend and twist depending on which aspect(s) of an individual's socio/cultural position (teacher or student, player or audience, and so on) are most relevant at the time.

Tactile and visual art

During the seminar we viewed two art exhibitions at the college. Our explorations of the first, titled *Informed by Nature*, were guided by the artist, Edith DeChiara, a retired art educator. Her abstract compositions were not interesting to me at first. They were drab in color, unexciting in form, and didn't seem to be about anything – certainly not anything I could connect to Nature. Ms. DeChiara spoke about her process of creating the drawings. She spoke of form, of intention, and accident. As she explained how she prepared her canvasses, how she worked with her materials, how she used a number of techniques to create a composition that seemed right to her, the pictures that were in the exhibit became more than I had seen at first glance. I became intrigued by the weaving and sewing in a number of the compositions. As a girl and young woman, I had spent many industrious and pleasant hours sewing, knitting, crocheting and doing needlepoint. My aesthetic entry point into the art thus was grounded in an appreciation of craft rather than artistry. I could feel the grainy rough texture of the coarser threads and the slip of the silken ones, could feel in my fingers the tensions in stretched threads, the surprise of the gathering, the sudden snap of a thread pulled too fast, and the languorous looping of yielding fibers stretching like soft taffy.

There is more than an appreciation of craft here, though. To my surprise, the sensations described above are not merely about working with threads, but just as easily describe sexual sensuality. How is it possible that these are connected, and how unexpected that the initially uninteresting exhibit of someone else's interpretations of the natural world would evoke them? This surely is more pleasure from a reading than I would comfortably admit to experiencing in public, particularly the public space of a classroom.

Music

Also, as part of the seminar, I attended my first opera, *La Boheme*. I enjoyed the work, but was not much moved by it. When the seminar participants discussed the opera, I was abashed to hear several describe being not only moved by the beautiful music, but, absent recourse to the written word, also being able to understand the story and feel the

emotions carried by the music. Words got in the way for them. I did not sense the meaning of the music, and, in order to understand, needed to read the words as I listened to the music and watched the action. I found the experience charming, the music beautiful, but it was not more than entertainment. Yet, there was something alluring about the opera. What would it be like to hear and see more than just a few notes? Could I transcend my reliance on visual images and on language, and find meaning solely through the music? Do I really know how to listen? Will I ever fully hear?

I wonder if, as Peter Kivy suggests, there is an absence in my experience that keeps me from a deep engagement with music (see: Kivey, 1993)? He writes that music appreciation needs to include the opportunity to make music, as well as to sing or dance it, not merely to hear and dissect its elements. When I was a child, I loved to sing and dance. I had no idea that I was tone deaf and clumsy. People were kind to me, indulging my enjoyment at the cost of their own ears. I only learned in adulthood that I made terrible noise instead of music, and that my sense of rhythm was, at best, idiosyncratic. I never sing now, and seldom dance.

There is more. I often experience the pain of earaches and headaches instead of pleasure when listening to music. It can be overwhelming, and I long for quiet. I like simplicity and clarity in music – no sharp edges, sudden changes, or unfamiliar journeys. I need a melody, a pattern, something to hold me in the music. During one concert that we attended for the seminar, I learned that a cello, the instrument whose sounds I most enjoy, could be made to produce vibrations that hurt. A cello could be played as a weapon in a duel. I was horrified. I didn't want to know that cellos could make such sounds.

It seems that there is a precarious balance between unselfconsciousness and consciousness in the listening, making, and experiencing of music. It is true that once I became aware of the discordance and ineptitude of my own music and dance I was overwhelmed by embarrassment at my naïve assessment of the beauty of my musical self; today I grieve for the loss of my expressiveness, but cannot escape the binding cords of my inhibition.

Poetry

During the seminar, we read a clutch of poems by Billy Collins, a distinguished professor of English at the college and Poet Laureate of the United States (see: Collins, 1991, 2001a & b). Before class, I earnestly prepared, taking to heart Pinsky's exhortation to read poetry aloud, not merely hearing but feeling its rhythm and sense (see: Pinsky, 1998). Still, I approached Collins' poetry as an assignment, as another opportunity to perform a task well. I would be sure to shake out not only the music of the poems, but also thread out what they really meant. I felt confident intellectually, sure that my interpretations would be sound.

How was I to know these poems would sneak up behind me and whisper "I've got your number?" How could I know my dutiful habits of analysis and critique would be crowded out for a while by the surprise of delight? My studious efforts did not suffer from the interruptions and reveries brought on by the images, the sounds, or the meanings of the poems. I began to feel as if I would never exhaust the poems, nor would they exhaust me. They were restful and exhilarating, familiar and strange, a neat trick pulled off by Collins.

There is an openness and authenticity to the poems we read that encouraged me to open to them. Exactly like life, the poems were tapestries of meaning, some with silken threads, others with faded colors. How did he know just what words to use, that I could see

so many pictures at once? As Dewey asks “How is it that our everyday enjoyment of scenes and situations develops into the peculiar satisfaction that attends the experience which is emphatically esthetic” (1934, p. 12)? In the case of the poetry, language as art captured my imagination, feelings, and lived experiences as a totality. Once I had abandoned my role as diligent student, I allowed myself to re-experience my own history of reading in the poems. I moved between sensory experience and its analysis. Reading the poem, *First Reader*, I was again in a classroom dusty with chalk, redolent of new shoes and sharp pencils, a six year old with pounding heart and fluttering stomach. The wonder and melancholy of discovery emerged as my memory entered the lines of the poem. I was washed with a sense of loss, wondering if I indeed had forgotten to look as I learned to read:

They wanted us to look but we had looked already
and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman.
We had seen the dog, walked, watered and fed the animal,
And now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking
permutations of the alphabet’s small and capital letters.
Alphabetical ourselves in the rows of classroom desks,
we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read (Collins, 1991, p. 7).

I had a turn at reading the poem aloud in class, and I read with my heart, just barely suppressing my tears of sorrow for my own loss of innocence and wonder. Through a haze, I heard students commenting that they didn’t think that this was supposed to be a sad poem. My inner child was slapped for its peculiar voice, again.

I suppose that my fellow students thought that I had crossed a border between reading and lunacy as I tried to express my reading of the poems. We all agreed, for example, that the experience of reading in bed, the manifest story of the poem *Reading Myself to Sleep* was indeed as Collins portrayed (see: Collins, 1991). Some agreed that falling asleep can feel like drifting off in a gently rocking boat on the ocean. But as I struggled to explain how I saw that the poem was also about birth, how “an endless rope of sentences” reminded me of an umbilical cord, and “narrow channels of print” might evoke a birth canal, and the “dark waters beyond language” could describe a womb, I lost my credibility. Those meanings are there for me, no matter what Collins crafted the poem to mean, and no matter what my classmates read. I was enchanted by the notion that ordinary life is a poem, or a series of poems, if only we could see it so. It seemed to me that Collins has discovered not only how to see, but also how to tell. The poems are so quiet that I can hear their music. Perhaps, though, it is best to keep my readings to myself.

Literature

When I was a schoolgirl of about 15, my English teacher required my class to read the novel *Look Homeward, Angel* (see: Wolfe, 1929). Until that moment, book reading had always been an escape into anesthesia, or an accomplishment that reassured me that I was smart. But now I was swept up by a coursing river of words that would take me I knew not where. The plot of the novel, its juxtaposition of pathos and comedy, its gargantuan characters all intoxicated me, but even headier was the artistry of the language. I was drunk and dizzy with words, and I liked that. But, I didn’t get it. I needed so badly to believe that you *could* go home again that I misunderstood the most poignant truths that Wolfe could

show. I'm an adult now, and although I still sometimes engage in the wishful thinking of uncertain adolescence, I cannot bear to read through the novel. I find it overblown, too transparently full of earnest pain, too melodramatic, and too long. Even so, a phrase or two will capture my imagination and send me into reverie. If I would dare to be more honest, I would confess that the poignancy of coming of age truth pierces deeply now in my middle years, and that is why I cannot bear to return to this novel. How much safer it is to declare the novel undisciplined than to go public about its connection to my yearnings.

We read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* for the seminar (see: Woolf, 1925). I once again strove to be a diligent and successful student as I approached the novel. Since I first engaged with the work as if it were merely a diversion, it took a couple of botched attempts before I could latch onto the book. Finally, on a third try, I was able to pull the threads of descriptions, reveries, and such together as I recognized the character of Clarissa. Abandoning linearity as a measure of coherence, I trusted Woolf to work on my own emotions, senses, and memories. As I gave up the pose of literary critic, something else interesting happened (see: Gass, 1993; Stolnitz, 1998). I began to feel, see, hear, smell and taste the novel. I thought about it at odd moments, discovering a mesh of meanings and connections that were not visible during the hours my eyes swept the pages. Oddly, I found that I could only critique the book after I had entered the text and became an element in the composition of the self that was Clarissa Dalloway. When I shared my thoughts with the seminar participants, I found it very difficult to explain the experiencing of reading this book, and fell quickly back into the pose of facile literary critic. Yet, I could not have found these strata of meaning, nor could I have noticed the techniques or the powerful language unless I had flown in free fall through those pages. Although I found too clear a reflection of my own vulnerabilities in *Mrs. Dalloway*, I found that I could hide behind measured commentary with the seminar participants, and thus guard against too much revelation of the thoughts and feelings stirred by an aesthetically open reading of the book. Was I successful in this ruse?

Soon after our class discussion, we viewed the film version of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The complex array of emotions that had earlier swept me away was subtly and eloquently conveyed by the actors. Sounds, language, images and connections were exquisitely brought together in the film. Now, seminar members spoke with passion about the vulnerable Clarissa, and I was a bit sorry that I had hidden the intensity of my encounter with the written text beneath a dispassionate critical analysis. One of the pleasures of reading, I see, is found when there is emotional resonance among the readers.

Resisting Aesthetic Reading

I fear that I have undergone extensive and rigorous training to guard against being slightly moved, or, more dangerously, deeply moved during reading, especially during a reading that takes place in public space. One becomes a text that might be read by others. Their readings might enrich, but also might violate or diminish. If one's feelings are one's vulnerabilities, then perhaps this is the deepest danger of reading aesthetically. One can be harmed when others know what moves her. Beauty and pleasure can be stolen, and even worse, transformed into ugliness and pain. It seems best to keep these delights secret, safe, hidden away.

One of the most effective defenses against an aesthetic reading is the intellectualization of the process.

Consider the reading as an exercise in analysis, as the gathering of information, as not connected deeply to you at all.

Another is avoidance of engaging with text that one knows will evoke the senses, memory, and imagination.

Keep it superficial, a way to pass the time. Read only books about velveteen rabbits, dead presidents, wizards and pirates. Be wary of poetry. Read maps. Don't listen to cellos.

Yet, even the most rigorous defenses are leaky, because we are much more than our defenses. For example, in just one penetrating look into the composition of my home, beyond the jumble of serenity and chaos, I could become an open book to a discerning reader. My pleasures/treasures are carefully, artfully hidden among the landscapes on the wall. The books on the shelves, the lace at the windows, the threads of the carpet are there to tell my tales, if one would read carefully. I have been careful to mislead, to conceal, and to hold back in this composition of my home to prevent the deepest of readings, but still, it might be possible.

The pages of the book of myself that are my home are composed in a private space, one well guarded by loving sentinels who intertwine their own compositions into the pages. This private space is accessible to others only by invitation. Compared to the public space of a classroom, concert hall, or art gallery, it is safe. Yet, it is not always possible to reserve our aesthetic readings to private or carefully guarded spaces.

Risking aesthetic reading

It is likely that I haven't achieved much clarity in this essay, but hopefully the vagueness is not too transparent a defense. Although determined to strike an authentic note, I find that I cover my tracks whenever possible, my voice moving from first to third person, from uncertain aesthete to academic. I do from time to time have deeply aesthetic experiences in reading, listening, and viewing that bring me great pleasure, and I sometimes desire to share this pleasure with others, for the sharing itself might be delightful. Yet, sharing a reading of deepest pleasures is fraught with risk, as it requires rupture of the public-private membrane that compartmentalizes our behavior. This most tenacious and delicate membrane is not one that curtains my home from the world, rather it is one that safeguards the frayed patchwork of band-aids that keep my self whole.

Although I have striven to work on these questions simply for the pleasure of feeling, thinking and writing about reading, there is more to this exercise than scratching the itch of curiosity or the lonely gratification of self-indulgence. My profession as an educator pulls me into the risky location of classroom, a public space where not only the expression of aesthetic sensibility is muted, but also one where there is scant space for such experience to occur. Oddly enough, however, the classroom is also a space touted as one in which such experience and expression are welcome. The contradiction is understandable, given the contrary purposes to which schooling is directed.

My students, most of whom are studying to be classroom teachers, tell me that they want to be the teacher who is remembered, the one who touched the life of even one child. These are inspiring yet intimidating goals, for to achieve them calls for more than technique, deft skill, knowledge, or the wisdom of experience (see: Author, 2003; Freire, 1998). It requires a willingness to be vulnerable in our openness to others. It calls for authenticity. Authenticity demands courage.

Maybe one way we educators might find our courage and accomplish these dreams is to stop quieting down our senses and emotions and to reconnect them to our work as educators (see: Connell, 2001; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1998; Greene, 1995; Maxcy, 2001; Thayer-Bacon, 2001). Unfortunately, we routinely expect or demand such readings from students, while protecting ourselves with the cloak of academic detachment. Consequently, we may not be well prepared to receive the contents of the Pandora's box this opens (see: Berman, 2002).

A recent moment during a curriculum development class illustrates the dilemma. A group of my most hopeful graduate students were presenting a curriculum unit they had been working on during the semester. Its theme was the Holocaust, and its intended audience was a fifth grade class. Our hearts were broken as we struggled with the knowledge of what human beings can do to each other. There was no compartment secure enough to contain their grief; all four had been suffering through nightmares and other signs of great stress. We honestly didn't know if what they had prepared could be taught. Claudine began to talk about a lesson she had designed that would, she hoped, help the fifth graders wrestle with ethical issues in scientific research, leading to an examination of the Hippocratic oath as a model for social justice. She had chosen the notorious experiments done with hypothermia as catalyst. Although her own distress was evident in the tears welling in her eyes, she explained her proposed lesson calmly, and asked for advice from her classmates. Michelle, who had not been a member of the group, spoke quietly. Her great aunt had been strapped to a block of ice in the camps. Her voice trailed off, as she whispered "they wanted to see if she could still get pregnant after that." We wept.

After we had composed ourselves once again into the roles of teacher and students, we awkwardly spoke together about how to be teachers who might weep with grief, or with great joy. What do our students learn from us in our vulnerability, when we are the fragile texts to be read? How might we respond to a child who deeply experiences the texts of all kinds we read in our classrooms? How might we love the text that child becomes, as we see her complexly? Where is our courage, our compassion, and our trust?

Note

1. The seminar, called "The Forbidden Art Of Reading For Pleasure: Literature, The Arts, And Aesthetics" was conducted from September to December 2001, at Lehman College (CUNY), by Dr. Richard Blot. There were several unusual elements to the seminar, only some of which I will describe. First, the class included as regular participants five professors in addition to the course instructor, which certainly startled the graduate students who enrolled in the course. Second, although the course was offered in a teacher education program in literacy, the professor is a cultural anthropologist at least as much devoted to the study of music as to the study of literacy. The seminar was carefully designed to take advantage of the many campus performances and exhibitions, in addition to the New York City Opera, and thus required flexibility and commitment from the participants, who needed to adjust their lives to include times outside of class to attend performances. Third, the course also extensively incorporated the creative work and expertise of at six additional Lehman College professors, as we listened to their musical compositions and performances, attended their plays, read their poetry and viewed their art. There was a wide range of enthusiasm and

willingness to embark on this exploration among the participants, many of whom had no prior knowledge that this would be such an unusually structured class. As an exploration, the seminar was, and continues to be, a surprising, perplexing journey.

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About the Author

Patricia Calderwood is an associate professor of curriculum and instruction at Fairfield University, and director of the graduate program in elementary education. She writes about the nature and challenges of constructing community in educational settings, and of the intersections of professional community and social justice. She is the author of *Learning Community: Finding Common Ground in Difference* (Teachers College Press, 2000).

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