

“The Quickening Virtue”: Reiterating the Work of the Literary Text

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This article pursues the reiteration of reading as a practice that circumscribes the work of the literary text. In doing so, it responds to particular assertions made in Kate Highman’s “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom.” More pertinently, though, it seeks to reposition the value of reading as a vital attribute in engaging with the humanities and emphasizes that analyzing and the interpreting of the text is the practice indisputably central to the humanistic endeavor. The discussion reiterates that any ways in and through the text are available only by reading, making it necessary to encourage and inculcate it as a central objective so that the work of the text, in accordance with Attridge’s qualification of it, remains productive. Finally, it argues that situating this critical practice as a deliberate objective within the teaching of literature must be reprioritized as a matter of urgency.

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This article pursues the reiteration of reading as a practice that circumscribes the work of the literary text. Understood as occurring within the context of literary studies within the South African university as it presently exists, it applies the concept of “work” as defined by Derek Attridge, who stipulates that it “names both the textual object and also the labor that went into its creation.”¹ He clarifies this by differentiating between work and text, stating that “I want to save *text*, then, for the inert symbols of a language, seen or heard, and use *work* for the literary object these symbols constitute when a reader or listener skilled in that language and its literary conventions engages with it. The work doesn’t exist, then, as an object separate from the event of reception that brings it into being—and it is therefore as much an event as an object.”² In seeking the reconfirmation of a critical reading practice, this article is, simultaneously, a form of a response to particular assertions made in Kate Highman’s “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential

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1 Derek Attridge, with David Jonathan Y. Bayot and Francisco Roman Guevara, *In Conversation* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 48

2 Attridge, *In Conversation*, 48, italics in the original.

Space' of the Literature Classroom,"³ published in a special issue on the subject of literature pedagogy confronting colonialism in the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*. Although it does not wish to serve as a direct rebuttal of certain views that she expresses, it is intended that parts of this discussion must also be read as a riposte to aspects of the claims that she makes. More pertinently, the propositions that are set out are, where relevant, attempts to contest the projection of a reading practice that, she argues, inhibits and constrains rather than liberates. This article is, instead, premised upon an understanding of reading as a vital attribute in engaging with the humanities, a position propagated by Edward W. Said in his statement that "a trained openness to what a text says (and with that openness, a certain amount of resistance) is the royal road to humanistic understanding in the widest and best sense of the phrase."⁴ Said's role in reconfiguring the humanities is unprecedented, and he was called upon to offer his special perspectives in respect of the state of the humanities in post-apartheid South Africa on more than one occasion. In 2001, he was invited to deliver the keynote address at a conference organized by the National Ministry of Education. John Higgins's *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities* includes an interview with Said conducted around the time of the conference and includes the following telling response:

The fact is that students are simply no longer taught how to read and write. I keep coming back to that. Whatever I've done politically has been *entirely* dependent on the ability to read critically, to be able to understand the uses to which language can be put. And here I mean to refer to the truly vast range of possibilities that language has. I think the only place you can get a sense of this range, and a feeling for these possibilities, is through the study of literature.⁵

Moreover, his book of essays, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, remains one of the most crucial contributions to the revisioning of the humanities in the contemporary world. This is most emphatically evident in the following statement included in the closing paragraphs of the essay "Humanism's Sphere," necessarily reproduced in comprehensive terms here:

Humanism is the exertion of one's faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret, and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages and histories. In my understanding of its relevance today, humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what "we" have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged,

3 Kate Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 7.3 (2020): 274–85.

4 Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xvii.

5 Edward W. Said, "Criticism and Democracy: Interview with Edward W. Said," in *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities*, ed. John Higgins (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), 214, italics in the original.

uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of the "the classics."⁶

Higgins's book continues to be a succinct delineation of the issues most pertinent to the humanities in South African higher education, and although it is, largely, a series of responses to formal policy directives and proposed legislation, several injunctions included in it must be reemphasized. The following assertions related to what Higgins defines as "the disciplines of Narrative, Analysis and Interpretation, and Literacies" are important to set out in the context of this discussion:

It is common ground that in the "information age," a key defining feature of competitive economies lies in the distinction between generic labour and self-programmable labour. Within this, the skills of analysis and interpretation are paramount—and form the bedrock of graduateness across all disciplines, as well as the core of many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.⁷

What is clear then is that reading, that which involves the analyzing and the interpreting of the text, is the practice indisputably central to the humanistic endeavor. It may also be instructive to recall the closing remarks made by Said in the keynote address delivered at the conference convened by the South African National Ministry of Education in 2001.⁸ These comments can now be considered as being extraordinarily prescient considering the current state of circumstances in South African society. Setting out the many challenges that confronted a relatively recently installed government at the time, Said insisted that a "special role therefore attaches to the very basic role of reading in education" and cautioned that an overwhelmingly utilitarian thrust to educational imperatives may very well result in "the absence of a viable and lively intellectual community able to deal sceptically and perhaps even subversively with injustice, dogmatic authority, corruption and all the blandishments of power," adding the salient point that "Even after apartheid, these *can* reappear."⁹ He stated, furthermore, that the inculcation of a "critical reading" practice is a vital antidote that will ensure there is an "awakened understanding of how texts are constructed and how they function at the highest levels of imagination and originality, which in turn quickly furnishes the engaged mind with an alertness to the lazy rhetoric, automatic language, and distorted ideological discourses that have so often covered up abuses of power as well as pacifying citizens into a quasi-somnolent acceptance of what is presented as reality."¹⁰

The form of this critical reading that Said espouses is given further elaboration in his essay "The Return to Philology," where he describes it as "a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by

6 Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 28.

7 Higgins, *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities*, 143, 176.

8 Edward W. Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education," *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2001): 9–19.

9 Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education," 17, italics in the original.

10 Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education," 17, italics in the original.

human beings who exist in history.”¹¹ Similar sentiments such as these form the basis of a more recent exchange between Attridge and Henry Staten. In the first of these conversations, “Reading for the Obvious in Poetry: A Conversation,”¹² Attridge sets out the terms of the interaction by remarking on what he regards as unwelcome developments in literary studies and makes the point that in his view, “The most basic norms of careful reading are sometimes ignored in the rush to say what is ingenious or different” and that, consequently, “We may be teaching our students to write clever interpretations without teaching them how to read.”¹³

Set on a South African university campus bearing strong resemblances with the University of the Western Cape in the 1960s, Zoë Wicomb’s story, “A Clearing in the Bush,”¹⁴ describes the experiences of an unnamed female student who struggles to cope with the demands made on her, illustrated by her difficulties with completing a first-year English essay. Apart from conveying her own experiences, she also focalizes the experiences of a female canteen worker, Tamieta. The subject of the student’s essay is the novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy.¹⁵ It is, more than anything else, a novel that sets up questions about morality against questions about justice. The student is, initially, very keen to pursue her own opinions about the characterization of Tess and wants to put the approach taken by the lecturer, Retief, into question. These intentions are expressed in the following narration, where some measure of a counter-opinion is under formulation, even if it is relatively tentative at this point:

I read through Retief’s notes once more ... I uncap my pen and read through Retief’s dictated lecture ... The novel, he says, is about Fate. Alarmingly simple, but not quite how it strikes me, although I cannot offer an alternative. The truth is that I do not always understand the complicated language, though of course I got the gist of the story, the interesting bits where things happen. But even then, I cannot be sure of what actually happens in *The Chase*.¹⁶

What parts of this passage reveal is that Retief, the English lecturer, has a very distinct method of teaching. The references to the “dictated lecture” point to a procedure where the students write out his dictation with the understanding that everything he says is not to be questioned. This conveys the impression that there is an aspect of the dictatorial in the manner in which he conducts his classes. The student’s will to devise a set of differing arguments in her essay is eventually dissipated despite a promising beginning, and it becomes apparent that it has become much more difficult for her to respond to the story

11 Said, “Criticism and Democracy,” 61.

12 Derek Attridge and Henry Staten, “Reading for the Obvious in Poetry: A Conversation,” *World Picture Journal* (Autumn 2008) (http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_2/PDF%20Docs/Attridge%20&%20StatenPDF.pdf).

13 Attridge and Staten, “Reading for the Obvious in Poetry.”

14 Zoë Wicomb, “A Clearing in the Bush,” in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Umuzi, [1987] 2008), 47–70. Although this is a volume of individual stories, a character who is often the first-person narrator in the stories recurs throughout. This character, named Frieda Shenton in the other stories, is the unnamed female student in the story cited here.

15 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (London: Penguin Books, [1891] 2003).

16 Wicomb, “A Clearing in the Bush,” 50.

and the complex moral questions that it provokes, an aspect Retief and the notes have pointedly dismissed:

Along the top of my page enclosing the essay title, "Fate in Tess," I have now drawn an infantile line of train carriages. I cannot start writing. I have always been able to distinguish good from bad, but the story confuses me, and the lecture notes offer no help. Murder is a sin which should outrage all decent and civilised people, say the notes ... It is the distant sound of the nine o'clock siren that makes my courage fountain and the opening sentence spill onto the page in fluent English: "Before we can assess the role of fate in the novel we must consider the question of whether Tess is guilty or not, whether she has erred in losing her virginity, deceiving her husband, and killing her lover." ... Exhausted by my bold effort I can go no further.¹⁷

The conclusion we draw from the directives the lecturer conveys to the students is that he insists on justice being effected in the case against Tess, that there can be no mitigating factors that would secure a reprieve for her, and that she must suffer the ultimate punishment. It is apparent too that the student's ambivalence about the story is not consistent with the firm conclusions drawn by the lecturer and that some substantial challenge for her will ensue. This is made all the more inevitable by the interpretations contained in the reformulated notes provided to her. Now motivated by the more pragmatic need to conform to the imperatives determined by the academic institution, she reveals this change of plan as follows: "I read Retief's notes and start afresh. This will have to be my final copy since there is no time to develop ideas, let alone rephrase clumsy language ... My attempt to understand the morality of the novel has to be abandoned. Retief will get what he wants, a reworking of his notes, and I will earn a mark qualifying for the examination."¹⁸ Although the student has wished to write an essay opposing these views, in the end, she relents and, having complied, observes that she has also become complicit in the persecution of Tess. She goes on to confirm that in her essay, Tess has been "branded guilty and betrayed once more on this page," a suggestion she believes that not only is Tess a victim of injustice in the novel itself but that the view of Tess communicated by Retief and the lecture notes have reinforced her victimization in much the same way as she has been forced to do in her essay.¹⁹ The line from the notes that "Murder is a sin which should outrage all decent and civilized people" is a categorical statement bereft of any measure of nuance. It shows that there can be no ambiguity or difficulty and that the form of justice applied to Tess is beyond question. No extenuating circumstances need be taken into account. The point is made that this is not merely subjective opinion but is the understanding of "all decent and civilized people." The immediate deduction to be made here is that any views that run counter to this are not that of "decent and civilized people." These views have broader implications when subsequent events that involve a memorial for the murdered prime minister are considered. Hendrik Verwoerd, a key figure in the Nationalist Party, which set about implementing the policies of apartheid, was assassinated in the Parliament at the time

17 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 52.

18 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 64.

19 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 65.

when the story is set. In the story, the university authorities decide to commemorate his death formally but are not aware that the students have decided to boycott this event. After it becomes clear that the students will not be present, the rector makes a particular reference to the students' actions in his speech detailed in this extract from the story:

The rector strides across from the Administration block in his grand cloak. He bellows like a bull preparing to storm the empty chairs. "Ladies and gentlemen, let those of us who abhor violence, those of us who have a vision beyond darkness and savagery, weep today for the tragic death of our Prime Minister ... these empty chairs are a sign of the barbarism, the immense task that lies ahead of the educator."²⁰

The rector's response cited previously is a clear indication of his stance in relation to the assassination and he, consequently, regards the actions of the students who boycotted the service as a sanctioning of the violence perpetrated against the prime minister. He, therefore, seeks to establish a link with their actions and the university's overall mission of "civilizing" the population through education, implying that the gravity of this task is probably greater than it was first envisaged.²¹ It is thus clear that concerns about justice and morality are indeed troubled or put into question by the assassination of Verwoerd. The rector's views as expressed in his speech at the memorial event can be aligned with the stance taken by Retief, the English lecturer, who appears sure that Tess must be punished for committing a similar act of murder. In each case, though, the murder of Verwoerd in the one instance and the murder of Tess's tormentor, Alec, in the novel, there is a complicated moral problem at play, one that calls for a much more sophisticated and considered understanding. Neither the rector nor Retief appear to be willing or able to acknowledge this, though.

Highman makes the Wicomb story a central feature of her article, and it is evident that she seeks to establish linkages between the student's experiences of the English Department during the mid-1960s with that of her own, more recent interactions at the same institution. She thus marshals the story to underscore her own arguments premised upon the contention that a particularly dogmatic approach to the reading of the literary text cannot be countenanced. It becomes clear that she advocates a much more accommodating and eclectic perspective as opposed to one that is determined by procedures emanating from what she defines as "unexamined articles of faith."²² A much less convincing aspect of the propositions that she makes is her characterization of the current English Department at the University of the Western Cape. In this respect she conveys an impression of it that is decidedly one-dimensional and perfunctory and, though acknowledging that fifty years have since elapsed, insinuates that many if not all within the department are not unlike the fictional Retief, who is distinguished by an unremittingly utilitarian attitude toward literature. In the story, the lecturer appears to

20 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 67–68.

21 The title of the story can be read as a striking allusion to the idea that the "bush" has been cleared to enable the "cultivation" of those deemed wild, primitive, and unsophisticated (see the rector's reference to "barbarism") in accordance with the racist and supremacist ideologies that formed the rationale for apartheid.

22 Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," 283.

be almost exclusively concerned with the blunt employment of the Hardy novel as an instrument that can be made to validate the existence of the apartheid regime. His reading, to be sure, is hardly exemplary of the vaguely stipulated principles associated with the more traditional conceptions of close reading but relies much more on a crude Arnoldian take on a morally inspired cultural practice. In addition to references to the Wicomb story, Highman also cites the comments made by the poet Arthur Nortje, who attended the then University College of the Western Cape as a member of its very first cohort of students. She responds to Nortje's comments by claiming that the mode of authoritarian teaching that he had encountered decades earlier has still not been eradicated and alleges that elements of this mode remain in the manner in which, she contends, "the faculty sometimes "teach down" to our students as it were, rather than in participating in a more collaborative act of meaning-making."²³ Reflecting on Nortje's views expressed in a letter to a close friend in which he stated that "The more I think about it, the more I consider that the miserable world needs every living and deceased man or woman who has something poetic to contribute ... something from the spirit,"²⁴ she concludes that this is a position he would have developed from his engagement with literature, "even while the institution itself appeared to militate against it."²⁵

An even more conclusive indictment of the current English Department is, however, reserved for her concluding remarks, where it is stated that "something of the apartheid logic that marked it then persists," which for her is evident in what she describes as "the occasional fetishization of the 'literary' as inherently not 'political' or 'sociological,' defined instead by what it excludes; but is also evident in a demand for a 'close analysis' that is not properly theorized, and in a sometimes rigid and overly prescriptive approach to the set texts and essays."²⁶ A further difficulty is encountered with her view that "what is often parroted in our department at UWC as at the core of what we do and teach is not close 'reading,' but close 'analysis,' suggesting a particular, dichotomized relationship between reader (subject) and text (object)."²⁷ If the use of the decidedly prejudicial verb in this description is ignored, then the distinction that is drawn between reading and analysis in this formulation can be scrutinized more carefully. It is unfortunate that this distinction is not explained in greater detail as it can be argued that it may not be able to be upheld for too long. Furthermore, it may be said that an element of all attempts at critical reading involves the concomitant procedures of analysis and interpretation working, more often than not, in concert with each other. In his *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jeremy Hawthorn explains this in the following manner: "Analysis is conventionally distinguished from interpretation on the ground that it involves a separation of that which is to be studied into its component parts—literary analysis would involve the dividing of a literary work into the separate elements by which it is constituted."²⁸ For his part, Higgins makes this

23 Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," 277.

24 Arthur Nortje, quoted in Dirk Klopper, "Arthur Nortje: A Life Story," in *Arthur Nortje: Poet and South African: New Critical and Contextual Essays*, eds. Craig McLuckie and Ross Tyner (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2004), 10.

25 Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," 278.

26 Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," 284.

27 Highman, "Close(d) Reading and the 'Potential Space' of the Literature Classroom," 283.

28 Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2001), 12.

point even more lucidly: “These two modes of critical attention are of course linked, and they are perhaps best understood as the two ends of a spectrum of techniques and skills in advanced or critical literacy that run from the (apparently) simple act of paraphrase through to the often considerable complexities of interpretation.”²⁹

For her claims to be sustained as anything resembling the credible, it must be the case that the indisputably instrumentalist mission pursued at the time of the institution’s founding has endured despite decades of scrutiny and challenge, whether from pressures imposed by an ever-evolving sociopolitical environment or from many cohorts of students intent on bringing the university in line with incremental political changes over the same period. No less significant would be the highly consequential developments in theory that have forced literature and language departments worldwide to reflect critically on their work as a matter of course. Highman’s discussion in relation to what she cites as having “marked literary debates in South Africa” is highly selective with an inordinately unbalanced focus on the “fantasist rantings” of one academic at the expense of other, more progressive developments.³⁰ One has only to cite a volume of literary theory published in 1982 to acknowledge that any major privileging of what she terms “American new criticism” is misplaced.³¹ This volume consisted of essays from ten scholars, many then teaching in language and literature departments across the country at the time; it covered a range of theoretical approaches, including Russian formalism, semiotics, Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and feminism.³² Highman’s presiding rationale implies that the many individuals who have constituted the department over the intervening years must have upheld a stubborn adherence to what can be defined only as a selective confection of discredited and outdated theoretical stances and, consequently, wilfully neglected any forays into critical work that would have put these positions into question. It is difficult to respond to the phrase “fetishization of the ‘literary’” without some measure of exasperation, implying as it does that any insistence on the distinct existence of what can be constituted as the literary should be deemed as an unhealthy preoccupation. Circumscribing the literary, as the title of this article suggests, is vital for the preservation of literary studies as an academic pursuit. That the sociopolitical makes significant impacts upon the literary is undoubted but sustaining that which distinguishes the literary remains a significant task for those committed to the retention of its place in society. During a time when a state of emergency governed the South African state and resistance to apartheid was at its height, the novelist J. M. Coetzee felt it necessary to make an appeal for the recognition of the literary by his avowal of the separation between history and fiction. In his talk published as “The Novel Today,”³³ he argued that the story, generically speaking, is capable of surviving all manner of threats to its continued existence and sets out an argument that maintains that fiction is not subservient to history, stating that:

29 Higgins, *Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa: Essays and Interviews on Higher Education and the Humanities*, 176.

30 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 280.

31 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 280.

32 Rory Ryan and Susan van Zyl, ed., *An Introduction to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1982).

33 J. M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today,” *Upstream* 6.1 (1988): 2–5.

History is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other.³⁴

In what serves as the presumptive theoretical framing for her reading of Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Lucy*, but published under the title "Reading with Stuart Hall in 'Pure' Literary Terms,"³⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers an even more eloquent and careful rationale for the importance of the distinction, stating:

What happens in literature *as* literature is the peculiarity or singularity of its language. Paradoxically, it is through attentive practicing of the singular rhetoricity of language that the imagination is trained for flexible epistemological performance ... By looking at the singularity of language happening on the page, we do not ignore the story line. Language cannot happen without content. It is just that focusing on the singularity of the language allows us to notice that the literariness of literature makes the language itself part of the content.³⁶

If the spurious assertions about the English Department at UWC are set aside and further attention is devoted to Highman's call for more innovative strategies in our work with literary texts, then it is possible that a constructive outcome from her intervention may yet be secured. The caricature of the department incited by the comments in her article, in fact, borders on the gratuitous if the primary objective is considered to be a critical reexamination of pedagogical approaches for the reading of literary texts. Furthermore, there should be no doubt about the latter being a decisive objective for literary studies as designated by Chakravorty Spivak when she affirms that:

You have to learn to read, by way of aesthetic educations of diversified provenance. If the critic and teacher is able to produce readers who can receive the power of language, the power of parataxis (the power in language to withhold its own power of making connections) need not perish. That is why reading is taught.³⁷

The crucial assertion most relevant to the scope of this discussion is the final one; that reading, as a critical practice, must be a central aspect of teaching; that this, by Attridge's important qualification, must involve imparting the skills of reading and interpretation and forays into the literary conventions with which these practices are associated. The nature of the pedagogical approach is, consequently, as important as the assertion itself. The overriding perspective of reading that Highman describes is one in which it appears

34 Coetzee, "The Novel Today," 4.

35 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Reading with Stuart Hall in 'Pure' Literary Terms," in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 351–71.

36 Chakravorty Spivak, "Reading with Stuart Hall in 'Pure' Literary Terms," 353–54, italics in the original.

37 Chakravorty Spivak, "Reading with Stuart Hall in 'Pure' Literary Terms," 354–55.

to be harnessed as an instrument of institutional and societal control. This unambiguously pessimistic attitude toward reading is qualified in the following statement:

My point here is not to discount “close” and immersive reading, but to show how “close reading,” when tied to “practical criticism” and the “literary” as unexamined articles of faith, threatens to become closed and enclosing, a type of stifling or claustrophobic reading that prohibits (or seeks to prohibit) that with which the student/self might engage.³⁸

This, it must be said, is a comparatively idiosyncratic schematic, relying as it does on particular presumptions about what acts of reading will produce and on an understanding of language as compliant with set intentions. She eventually explains her reason for her tone of caution by stating, “What I am describing as ‘closed reading,’ or rather a classroom that enjoins such reading, runs the risk ... of eliciting from the student a defensive ‘false’ self within or beneath which a more authentic self is not recognized and must be hidden.”³⁹ An immediate response to this claim is who or what determines the distinction between the two apparently separate selves as indicated here and whether this, too, is not dependent on a set of presumptions taken as a given?

The most compelling articulation in Highman’s discussion, however, is that which advocates for an approach to reading that encourages what may already be implicit in the nature of language if we are to accept Jacques Derrida’s conceptualization of play.⁴⁰ Should this be the case, then her call for “reading as *opening space*” is a preexisting possibility and not one that has to be established in a deliberate and distinctly separate sense.⁴¹ This direction to her arguments is motivated by an effort to “return the self to literary criticism”⁴² and informed by the proposition that reading “can enable an experience,” which Highman, citing psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott refers to as “‘transitional space’ or ‘potential space’ and how texts can be ‘transitional objects.’”⁴³ She seeks to explain this premise by evoking Winnicott once again, stating that “potential space is a space of *play*, where, in his words, ‘paradox is to be accepted and tolerated and respected and not to be resolved.’”⁴⁴ This can be read as an attitude toward reading that regards the text as an instrument of psychosocial transformation. A concern is whether the discipline of literary studies, as it is currently constituted, can, in fact, sustain this as a defined objective.

Derrida’s exposition of play may, however, not be precisely what she envisages if it is regarded as merely a cue for a form of broadly creative expression that she elaborates upon in the more anecdotal passages of her arguments. The point here is that the

38 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 283.

39 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 283.

40 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, [1978] 2006), 351–70.

41 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 285, italics in the original.

42 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 276.

43 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 275.

44 Highman, “Close(d) Reading and the ‘Potential Space’ of the Literature Classroom,” 279, italics in the original.

potential for a productive approach is already inherent in the work of reading if Derrida's account of it is accepted; that paradox and ambiguity are implicit in the nature of language and, thus, in acts of reading. He explains this in the following manner:

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence.⁴⁵

He proposes that this "disruption of presence" must be taken as "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation."⁴⁶ The concept of play as it is defined here is, of course, more substantial, and it may be useful to cite Niall Lucy's clarification "that 'play' means something like 'give' or 'tolerance' which works against ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion" and that "Before there is presence or absence, in other words, there is play. There is always already some play or movement—a little give or tolerance—within the opposition of presence and absence, such that the opposition depends on this play as the condition of its possibility."⁴⁷ This should counter the notion that what Derrida had sanctioned was an unrestricted and wholly improvised interpretation of meaning but, instead, point out the considerable degree of openness that is a tacit element in language. It is crucial that this concept of play should be taken together with the reading practice Derrida had circumscribed in as much as he was willing to do in his *Of Grammatology*. In a section headed "The Exorbitant. Question of Method," he states that "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*."⁴⁸ Here he describes the reading of a text as being constituted of what could be termed as an initial reconstructive reading that maintains some fidelity to broadly discernible intentions of the author and to the assumed original context. A second or corresponding reading of the same text is much less compliant and pursues what may be outside the parameters of the original context and the author's apparent intentions, and, as such, can be characterized as deconstructive. The first is as necessary as the second so as to ensure that a random improvisation of meaning is not countenanced; that it must mitigate the possibility of developing a reading "in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything."⁴⁹ He makes the point, though, that the first, reconstructive reading "has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading."⁵⁰ The second reading is, thus, premised upon an acknowledgment of the "absence of the referent or the transcendental

45 Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 369.

46 Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 369.

47 Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 95.

48 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, [1974] 1997), 158, italics in the original.

49 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

50 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158, italics in the original.

signified” and of the recognition of the operation of difference already implicit in language and its effects on the production of signification.⁵¹ Derrida described this as the operation of “two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play”⁵² and clarifies this point by asserting that the

One seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.⁵³

He makes another reference to this doubling aspect of interpretation in his essay “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” where he points out that the “original opening of interpretation essentially signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation.”⁵⁴ The distinction between the two elements of interpretation as he describes it in these direct references to it is given a further degree of clarity in an end note to the latter quotation. This clarification states that the “‘rabbinical’ interpretation of interpretation is the one which seeks a final truth, which sees interpretation as an unfortunately necessary road back to an original truth” and goes on to say that the “‘poetical’ interpretation of interpretation does not seek truth or origin, but affirms the play of interpretation.”⁵⁵ The consequence of this distinction drawn between the two elements of interpretation is that the one is a reproductive reading in which an attempt is made to reconstruct the text by some measure of fidelity to it, whereas the other interpretation is premised upon a productive reading in which the pursuit of meaning is less constrained by the impositions of authorial intention or original context.

This doubling procedure affirms reading and interpretation as even more dynamic and intricate than is commonly acknowledged. It ensures too that the work of reading, as envisaged by Attridge in the definition cited in the opening paragraph of this discussion, must be attended by an attitude that recognizes the critical role it should still play in society. I have very little doubt that no essay sets out the merits of this point with greater conviction than Barbara Johnson’s “Teaching Deconstructively,”⁵⁶ and it is essential that her first paragraph be quoted in full so as to transmit the force of its persuasiveness:

Teaching literature is teaching how to read. How to notice things in a text that a speed-reading culture is trained to disregard, overcome, edit out, or explain away; how to read

51 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

52 Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 369.

53 Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 369–70.

54 Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, [1978] 2006), 81.

55 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 395, fn3.

56 Barbara Johnson, “Teaching Deconstructively,” *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness*, eds. Melissa Feuerstein, Bill Johnson González, Lili Porten, and Keja Valens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 347–56.

what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking; how to take in evidence from a page, not seek a reality to substitute for it. This is the only teaching that can properly be called literary; anything else is history of ideas, biography, psychology, ethics, or bad philosophy. Anything else does not measure up to the rigorous perversity and seductiveness of literary language.⁵⁷

Patrick Cullinan's poem "The Passion. Western Cape. 1985"⁵⁸ dramatizes a situation of severe difficulty for the speaker who finds himself preparing a class on a John Donne poem in the midst of violent unrest that has erupted on a university campus.⁵⁹ This difficulty is a consequence of a complex series of relations between the speaker as a teacher committed to his duty and, by extension, to literature and the impact of the overtly political on these commitments. The nature of this dilemma depicts an involved and astringent predicament for the speaker, one in which no easy resolution is possible. He persists in his preparations until the fumes from teargas set off by the state's forces of law and order make it unbearable for him to continue and he is forced to abandon the relative sanctuary of his office. Distinct temporal and spatial shifts are apparent between stanza one and stanza two, with the move from the "South of England," the setting of the Donne poem, to where the speaker is situated; a place markedly different where, "Outside my window, students rioting/ Threw stones at teargas."⁶⁰ He demonstrates a strong commitment to teaching, notwithstanding the deteriorating circumstances: "I could understand/ Their passion well: but kept on writing/ Notes upon the poem which I would teach/ To these same students, should God so will."⁶¹ This indicates that, much like the speaker in the Donne poem, he too relies on divine intervention to resolve the worldly conflict to which he is a witness. In the closing three stanzas, the speaker declares that it was not "faith nor ideology" that made him "keep on writing words."⁶² He reveals that it was what he describes, firstly, as "some grace" and, later, as "the virtue quickening, held/ Within his verse" that continued to inspire and motivate him.⁶³ He makes this revelation even when he considers whether "John Donne's art was awkward, out of place," implying that Donne's poem may be considered as irrelevant or inappropriate within the context of the student protests occurring on the university campus.⁶⁴ The speaker, however, makes it clear that he is convinced that the "virtue" or "grace" he detects is present in the Donne poem and is vital "since art outside was cheap."⁶⁵ Applying what Attridge describes as "some kind of minimal reading as a critical virtue" to the poem, it may be possible to interpret the speaker's persistence in completing his

57 Johnson, "Teaching Deconstructively," 347.

58 Patrick Cullinan, "The Passion: Western Cape. 1985," in *Escarpmets: Poems 1973–2007* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008), 86–87.

59 The original context of this poem is more relevant to this discussion than it would be under more general circumstances. The poet was, at the time, a member of the staff of the Department of English at University of the Western Cape and the author of this article, one of the students referred to in the poem. The setting is thus the same as in the Wicomb story, only twenty years later.

60 Cullinan, "The Passion," 86.

61 Cullinan, "The Passion," 86.

62 Cullinan, "The Passion," 87.

63 Cullinan, "The Passion," 87.

64 Cullinan, "The Passion," 87.

65 Cullinan, "The Passion," 87.

teaching notes as a sign of his strong will to uphold a paragon of the canonical English literary tradition, even under the most precarious of conditions.⁶⁶ In the end, he has to submit himself and his intentions to the much more powerful impositions wielded by the state, which prioritizes a much more instrumentalist perspective on education and appears to have become increasingly intolerant of any resistance to its dictates. In the closing lines, the speaker attempts to show that some connections, however tenuous, between the sentiments expressed in the Donne poem and his own predicament, caught between the protesting students and the security police, can be sustained. These connections rely on his reappropriation of the “angry faith” expressed by the speaker in Donne’s poem, implying that this attitude is equally relevant within an environment in which injustice is being perpetrated by the forces of state power.⁶⁷ He goes on to claim that a sense of “virtue” that is apparent in the Donne poem is the most noteworthy aspect that is as equally appropriate to his current situation.⁶⁸ This “virtue” appears to be a commitment to “art,” which the speaker declares has been sullied by the vulgarity of political violence and power.⁶⁹ In establishing a fine yet distinct alliance between the sentiments expressed in the Donne poem and the students’ resistance to state power, there is the implication that a text representing the English literary tradition can be mobilized as a form of solidarity with the students in addition to the speaker’s declaration that he “could understand/ Their passion well.”⁷⁰ The speaker in the poem thus positions the sentiments evoked by the Donne poem on the side of the students who are expressing their outrage, their righteous anger against the injustices of the apartheid state. Connections are, thus, pursued between the anger of the students and the angry faith of the speaker who, in turn, finds a strong sense of allegiance between his own angry faith and that of the speaker in Donne’s poem set in a time and a place far removed from his own location. The resonances between these facets of the poem are tenuous, and there may be the degree of the improbable in the view that a text associated with the English literary canon is meant to be reflective of protests that have a strong anti-colonialist quality to it. It would, however, be difficult to summarily dismiss a reading that invites this possibility.

Even more intriguing is the suggestion that this sense of “virtue” is in any way connected to the “poetic spirit” that Nortje had identified himself with and sought to pursue in the face of the “miserable world” in which he found himself. If so, then Highman herself appears to concede that this is something worth striving for and, consequently, must find a measure of synergy with the sentiments expressed by the speaker in Cullinan’s poem. On the basis of how Derrida’s work has required a revision of our understanding of language, it may be said that the speaker’s trust that a moral substance is an inherent presence in the Donne poem is doubtful. This does not, however, discount the possibility that a degree of the ethical cannot be gleaned or recovered; that in the manner of its use the language is able to infer or allude to what could be interpreted as the ethical or moral.

66 Attridge and Staten, “Reading for the Obvious in Poetry.”

67 Cullinan, “The Passion,” 87.

68 Cullinan, “The Passion,” 87.

69 Cullinan, “The Passion,” 87.

70 Cullinan, “The Passion,” 86.

An equally ambivalent attitude toward the English literary tradition is evident in the Wicomb story where the student expresses a sense of confusion about the Hardy novel. The student's reaction to the moral complexities conveyed in the novel is not encouraged but precipitously curtailed. The story itself, though, rather than the coincidental actuality that may be situated behind or alongside it, insists upon a potential openness that can be read into it as a work of narrative fiction. The student's resistance to the authoritarian and uniform interpretation made by the lecturer remains a vital aspect of the story notwithstanding her eventual compliance and abandonment of a more involved engagement with the novel. These ways in and through the text are available only by reading, making it necessary to encourage and inculcate it as a central objective so that the work of the text, in accordance with Attridge's qualification of it, remains productive. A semblance of openness through a reading of the text is, it seems to me, undeniable and points to what students may always encounter as the difficult yet rewarding consequence in responding to the work of text as an event, following Attridge's assertions. This openness or productive potential through interpretation is, in my view, sufficiently engaging and compelling as a practice. The manner in which individual students or groups of students may respond to literary texts and how their experience of reading may affect or transform them cannot be preempted, and any claims in relation to this may, it can be argued, be understood as presumptuous. Situating reading as a deliberate objective within the teaching of literature, though, must be reprioritized as a matter of urgency. This may yet secure the means for acknowledging that innumerable literary texts carry within them the possibilities of a "quickenning virtue"; the "critical virtue" or productive openness that reading is often able to disclose.