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Close(d) Reading and the "Potential Space" of the Literature Classroom after Apartheid

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This article explores psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's ideas about play and "transitional space" or "potential space" in relation to reading, pedagogy, and the legacy of apartheid in South African universities. Following the work of Carol Long, who argues that "apartheid institutions can be understood as the opposite of transitional spaces," the author draws on her experiences of teaching in the English Department of the University of the Western Cape to reflect on how pedagogy is shaped by institutional culture. The article focuses particularly on "close reading" in the South African university classroom and how a rigid understanding of it has sometimes closed and constrained the experience of reading for students in order to argue for a more open model of "close reading" that values the immersive and creative aspects of reading as well as the analytic, following Winnicott's understanding of meaningful cultural experience as rooted in play.

Keywords: D. W. Winnicott, play, potential space, transitional space, pedagogy, aesthetic education, partheid, close reading, University of the Western Cape, Zoë Wicomb

> Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play.
>
> —D. W. Winnicott[1]

> Apartheid institutions can be understood as the opposite of transitional spaces. Rather than opening up potential spaces to play, apartheid structured space, creating rigid rules about where and where not to play, who could play with whom and what was serious and thereby unavailable for creativity. Apartheid structures offered no creative tension between differences; rather, they proclaimed untranscendable divisions between me and you; black and white; my space and your space.
>
> —Carol Long[2]

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1 Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 135.

2 Carol Long, "Transitioning Racialised Spaces," in *Race, Memory and the Apartheid Archive: Towards a Transformative Psychosocial Praxis* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 63.

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Introduction

In this article I want to think about literary pedagogy confronting a particularly extreme form of colonization—apartheid—while drawing on theories of how reading literary texts can enable an experience of what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott calls "transitional space" or "potential space" and how texts can be "transitional objects."[3]

In his chapter "The Location of Cultural Experience," Winnicott meditates on some lines from Tagore about play that had stayed with him for many years—"On the seashores of endless worlds/ children play"—and led him to pose the curiously phrased question "where is play?"[4] He realizes that the experience of "*play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality.*"[5] The same, of course, could be said of the experience of reading; hence the question "Where is Literature?" the title of a 1975 article by Murray Schwarz in which he extends Winnicott's reflections on cultural experience to the experience of reading literary texts. As Schwarz and later Mary Jacobsen and other critics have argued, the experience of reading is neither simply a matter of, or reducible to, inner psychic reality or external reality. Yes, there are the words, outside of us, but they become meaningful only through our imaginative and linguistic investment. And we don't just dream up the words when we read—the text operates as a transitional object, facilitating the creation of "transitional" or "potential" space (the terms *transitional* and *potential* tend to be used interchangeably by Winnicott). This space is for Winnicott the space of *play*, fundamental to the child's healthy development, "creative living," and also to cultural experience. What transitional space allows for is a particular experience of self, or perhaps rather suspension of the sense of a clearly bounded self (an immersive state akin to being in love or suspending disbelief). In Jacobsen's words: "A reader inhabiting play space suspends awareness of himself or herself as finder of a pre-existing world (or text), and enters into creative construction of, rather than perception of, the story world."[6] It is also a space that allows for a creative construction or development, "*bildung*" even, of the self. When one moves out of this space, the contours of the self are shifted, much like Shakespeare's characters often appear in fresh garments after a time of tumult, transition, or disarray. This process, and remaking of the self, is also fundamentally bound to the ethical, adult task of recognizing the reality and alterity of the other, while engaging symbolically with that other. As Winnicott puts it, play facilitates "the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated."[7]

For many students, I would hazard, the appeal of studying literature is precisely a personal one, understanding and remaking the self and its place in the world—just as

3 The idea was taken up by Murray Schwartz in the 1975 article "Where Is Literature?" (*College English* 36.7 [1975]: 756–65) and also by Mary Jacobsen ("Looking for Literary Space: The Willing Suspension of Disbelief Revisited" [1982]), and has since been taken up by others, notably by Cristina Bruns in various articles and her book *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (London: Continuum, 2011) and in a collection of essays, *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of DW Winnicott*, edited by Peter L. Rudnytsky (1994).

4 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 130.

5 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 129, emphasis added.

6 Mary Jacobsen, "Looking for Literary Space: The Willing Suspension of Disbelief Revisited " *Research in the Teaching of English* 16.1 (1982): 32.

7 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.

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psychology has huge appeal for undergraduate students. To return the self to literary criticism is not to discount the political, social, and so forth, but to undo the pseudo-objectivity that marked the teaching of English under apartheid, where strict impersonality was stressed, and the "autonomy" of the text fetishized (as if it were not composed of the changing human material of language, which is inherently intertextual and intersubjective, in Kristeva's terms), and its "correct" reading/interpretation handed down to the student as it were. The self here was disbarred from myriad ways and texts through which it could be remade. Crucially, Winnicott's conception of "potential space" depends on an understanding of the emergent self and its relationship with the other (whether text or human) that is not dichotomized, as Jacobsen points out.[8] This is a relational understanding of the self that is not tenable under the madness of apartheid thinking, which would keep selves strictly separate and haunts our teaching, departments, and institutions.

The University of the Western Cape as Apartheid Institution: Zoë Wicomb and Arthur Nortje

The transitional text on which this foray will hinge is Zoë Wicomb's story "A Clearing in the Bush"[9] (1987), and, dimly glimpsed through it, Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'urbervilles*[10] (1891). *Tess* I read as a teenager in the early 1990s in a suburban Cape Town that was so White and strictured it felt Victorian itself. The novel made little sense to me but left an impression—chiefly of confusion, of something beyond the bland sunlit living room of my family home in Rondebosch, where I remember reading it. Though there was confusion, there was also some dim stirring of recognition. The story stayed with me. Wicomb's story, which is set in the Cape Flats, on the (violent) outskirts of the comfortable Cape Town that homed me, I have clung to since I discovered it while teaching at the University of the Western Cape, where the story is set and where I have repeatedly found myself asking what quite I am trying to do teaching English literature (rather than literature more contingently *in* English) to a largely Black, largely second-language English student body in what seems to be a not quite postcolonial country.[11]

8 Jacobsen, "Looking for Literary Space," 37.

9 Zoë Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (London: Virago, 1987).

10 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

11 The English Department's curriculum, largely unchanged while I taught there from 2012 to 2019, still adheres implicitly to a notion of "English literature" as a canonical body of work centered in Britain, with the departmental website describing the department as offering "traditional literary studies with new courses in media, theatre, creative writing and practical training in various modes of cultural critique." After a wide-ranging introductory first-year course (including texts from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Sri Lanka, as well as one Shakespeare play and one Dickens novel), in second-year students are introduced to romantic literature (comprising poetry by Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats, and sometimes also Byron and Coleridge, and *Frankenstein*) and then nineteenth-century literature (comprising *Wuthering Heights*, Victorian short fiction and poetry, and *Huckleberry Finn*). In third-year, students do courses on Renaissance studies (*Utopia*, *The Prince* and *Hamlet*), modernism (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Sound and the Fury, Heart of Darkness*) and postcolonial literature and postmodern fiction (*Their Eyes Were Watching God, The God of Small Things, Foe, The English Patient*, and *Beloved*). There is also a second-year course on Africa and the world (|Xam texts, *The River Between*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *We Need New Names* and

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UWC, or the University College of the Western Cape, as it was then known, was founded in 1960, in Bellville, and, with depressing aptness given the apartheid government's views on education for "Coloured" people, in a disused primary school—Goedehoop, or "good hope."[12] It was founded under the Extension of Universities Act, which saw the apartheid government embark on a bizarre and quixotic attempt to restrict university access according to "ethnicity." The government did not see fit to provide "Coloured" people with an aesthetic education, but one designed rather "to offer low-level clerical or support labour to whites."[13] But it did have a Department of English Literature, among whose students in its early years was the poet Arthur Nortje, who graduated with a BA in English and psychology in 1963. Nortje has been a significant influence on Wicomb, who was born in 1948, when the National Party took power, and who studied at UWC a few years after him, later teaching at the institution too. In their writings, both Nortje and Wicomb lament the institution's bland functionalism, the lack of imagination and beauty, as reflected in both its architecture and pedagogy. Wicomb has her protagonist, Frieda, think of her English lecturer, the dull Retief, parroting preformulated lecture notes to his students and seated in a "functional cubicle of new uncluttered design."[14] For Nortje the institution was immeasurably depressing, a "dead end." In a letter written as an undergraduate student, he laments: "Unfortunately, and now I quote GB Shaw in Doctor's Dilemma: 'My plans for the season are simple; I am going to die.' Well, not literally, but one can call Bellville Coloured bush college a sort of educational dead-end—and that's putting it mildly."[15] He commented also on the implicit racism that haunted the instruction on offer: "The pattern of lecturing seems to be something in the nature of high school teaching," adding that "the reason for this can only be attributed to the every so often expressed idea that the intelligence of a non-white student is lower than that of a white student."[16] This pattern of teaching, I would argue, to some degree persists, at least in the overly prescriptive ways (detailed further toward the end of this article) in which the faculty sometimes "teach down" to our students as it were, rather than participating in a more collaborative act of meaning-making. Elsewhere, Nortje would write: "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."[17] He continues "by

South African poetry), which precedes the course on romantic and Victorian writing, but the core of the degree is geared toward coverage of a largely British canon.

12 It only moved to its current site in February 1963; the first intake of students was very small—60 ("Stepping into the Future").

13 Felix Banda and Amiena Peck, "Diversity and Contested Social Identities in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts of the University of the Western Cape, South Africa," in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 37.6 (2016): 577.

14 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 40.

15 Arthur Nortje, letter to Mrs. Gregory, January 27, 1961. *Arthur Nortje: Letters and Postcards 1960–1970.* UNISA Archives. Accession number 61, File 3.

16 Arthur Nortje, "Down at Bush: Two Essays," in *Finding Freedom in the Bush of Books: The UWC Experience and Spirit*, ed. Cornelius Thomas (London: Wendy's Book Lounge, 2010), 13.

17 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: University of South Africa Press, 2004), 10.

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POETIC I mean the Greek sense of—able to produce something from the spirit."[18] Something of this he gleaned from literature it seems, even while the institution itself appeared to militate against it, offering instead a "dead end."

A similar sense of the act of reading literary texts as poetic—an act of making, of creation and *poesis*, as life-giving, recalling the dynamism of Winnicott's "potential space"—yet as circumscribed by institutional context emerges in Wicomb's short story. Her protagonist, Frieda, is an English literature student writing an essay on *Tess of the D'urbervilles.* The text compels Frieda in ways that she cannot quite grasp, though she "essays" to do so in the essay she has to write for assessment purposes. In the end, she reproduces the reading of the text Retief has already offered in the lectures, in a performative act of dutiful compliance with what is expected of her. Notably, she does this under coercive conditions—being compelled to echo Retief in order to pass. There is little room here for the pursuit of a more "playful" exploration of the text that would engage Frieda's own curiosity. The coercive power of the university to pass/fail students, together with Retief's fixed interpretation of the text, prohibits this. As Adam Phillips writes in his study of Winnicott, "the opposite of play is not work but coercion."[19]

Phillips is discussing the psychoanalytic encounter and the need for the therapist to be "playful"—able to work with the patient's interpretations rather than imposing his or her own. For such imposition is "indoctrination and produces compliance."[20] The pedagogic encounter—in which there is a similar asymmetry of power between teacher and student(s) as between therapist and patient—is analogous in its potential production of either compliance or illumination. In the literature classroom, as in the psychoanalytic encounter, collaborative interpretative work is at play, so to speak. Both (or all) parties need to be "playful," open to other and changing interpretations rather than attached to a fixed narrative. Phillips writes that "[p]laying stops when one of the participants becomes dogmatic." [21] For Phillips, a "good interpretation" is not *the* interpretation, to be dutifully reproduced, but "something the patient can entertain is his mind."[22] It is emphatically "not a password."[23] Rather, it can be "used"/entertained/played with in the manner of a "transitional object," its "destination unknowable."[24] Again, this seems to me a useful way of thinking of a literary pedagogy that would seek to engage the student in her own journey of self-transformation, or *bildung*: this would be a pedagogy in the service of an "aesthetic education." Significantly, for both Schiller—who most famously argued for the value of such education (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*)—and Spivak (*Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalisation*), in her reformulation of him, play is essential to such education. For Schiller, the notion of a *spieltrieb*, or "play drive," was fundamental to his idea of aesthetic education[25]. For Spivak, who draws also on Gregory

18 Klopper, "Arthur Nortje: A Life Story," 10.
19 Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (London: Penguin, 2007), 142.
20 Winnicott quoted in Phillips, *Winnicott*, 142.
21 Phillips, *Winnicott*, 142.
22 Phillips, *Winnicott*, 143.
23 Phillips, *Winnicott*, 143.
24 Phillips, *Winnicott*, 143.
25 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters* ed. Edited, trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

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Bateson's work on play, "aesthetic education" is "a training of the imagination that can teach a subject to play."[26]

For my purposes here, Winnicott's work on play is particularly useful for its concept of play as occupying a particular type of "space." Space is foregrounded in Wicomb's story, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere, arguing that Wicomb overlays the "space" of UWC, described as a "clearing in the bush" with that of the "Chase," the center of violation in Hardy's novel, so that the scene of education comes to be figured as a type of intimate violation[27]. Aesthetic education, I argued, can act as a particularly insidious vehicle of disciplinary power, even while it is potentially disruptive of it. But my sketching of "place"—that which we render imaginatively from space—was somewhat vague, and I did not know then about Winnicott's theory of potential space. This is a space from which one might, even if fleetingly, grasp a sense of "place," of being at home —of a more positive intimate relation, or "closeness." Here I want to propose "potential space" not only as useful for understanding the experience of reading, but as a useful concept for thinking about what space we create in the literature classroom, about what has been shut out of it, and about how we refigure and open that "space"—itself perhaps "transitional" in the remaking of a more just social dispensation.

It is notable here that the Rhodes Must Fall protests were sparked by an act that foregrounded and upended the University of Cape Town's spatial politics (Chumani Maxwele's throwing of feces, brought from the Cape Flats townships, onto the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, which stood at the helm of UCT's upper campus). Moreover, during the protests that followed, students called again and again for "safe spaces" and invoked the idea of—or desire for—the university as "home," a place of belonging and relation. They demanded also the "decolonization" and radical reimagining of universities understood to be stuck in a past that would deny most South African students their humanity, even two decades after the formal end of apartheid.

As noted, Winnicott's 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." Carol Long's discussion, cited in the epigraph, of play and its occlusion, suppression, marginalization, and distortion—perversion, perhaps—under apartheid is apposite here. As Long notes in her essay "Transitioning Racialised Spaces," both apartheid thinking and the physical structures of the era were marked by rigidity: "Apartheid structures offered no creative tension between differences; rather, they proclaimed untranscendable divisions between me and you; black and white; my space and your space."[28] UWC's own rather cheerless architecture reflects something of this—and is something that Wicomb points us to in her story, not only through the reference to the little cubicle that houses Retief, but through the idea, articulated by the character Charlie, that "Verwoerd is the architect of this place."[29] Verwoerd was known metaphorically as the "architect of apartheid," and clearly Charlie has overheard and misunderstood this, presuming him to

26 Gayatri Spivak, *Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalisation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.

27 Kate Highman, "The Place of English Literature in the South African University: Zoë Wicomb's 'A Clearing in the Bush," *English in Africa* 46.3 (2019): 85 –102.

28 Long, "Transitioning Racialised Spaces," 63.

29 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 43.

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be the literal architect of the new buildings. But the joke encourages us to consider how the physical structures symbolize and manifest apartheid thinking. In the world of the story, the university is a site of enclosure, rather than transition; like a laager,[30] it is inward looking, its back to its environment, the menacing "bush," beyond which the supposedly dangerous "skollies" idle. On the university's outskirts, the blue gum trees are "raggle-taggle sentinels,"[31] soldiers guarding the "clearing."

Close(d) Readings

Such defensive, hermetic inwardness is paralleled in a fetishization of the purely "literary"—as autonomous, self-enclosed, mystical—and of "close," or rather what I would distinguish from it as "*closed*," reading that in ways recalls American new criticism, but seems to have perversely marked literary debates in South Africa to a quite extraordinary degree. We see this registered particularly in debates about the literary and what can be *defined* as such, and ergo what should be included in the curriculum. Witness for instance the fantasist rantings of C. J. D. Harvey, a professor of English literature at the University of Stellenbosch (1962–1984) and also an apartheid censor;[32] these are worth quoting at length to get a sense of the strength of feeling animating them:

> How much time, if any, should we give in our English Departments to the criticism and teaching of South African and African English Literature… there is absolutely no reason why literary criticism should or should not concern itself… with such works, provided, of course, that they are written in English and that they are literature…. Many books by African writers have a great deal of political, psychological, sociological or anthropological interest—and, judged by those criteria, are "good," or at least interesting—but are lacking in language skill of the highest order i.e. are mediocre, or even failures, as works of literature… In my purist view, there can be no serious doubt: our concern is with literature, not with politics or anthropology or what-have-you, and if the works are inferior or negligible as literature they have no place in our curricula. The same applies to inferior works by local authors, black and white, whom patriotic sentiment or neighbourly partisanship might urge us to consider… Too often, when works are prescribed for study… they are chosen on… irrelevant criteria: political or anthropological interest, or merely for the, perhaps praise-worthy, but non-literary and irrelevant, reason, that it is right for students to take an interest in all aspects of life on the continent on which they live… "relevance,"—what a loathsome word!—is political not literary… one of the most infuriating of all the false, non-literary

30 The Rand Afrikaans University, established in 1955, was built in the shape of a laager. The BJ Vorster building at Stellenbosch University, housing the Arts Faculty, and built in the 1970s is similarly inward looking, with many of the teaching rooms being windowless.

31 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 41.

32 Peter McDonald, *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

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> criteria that bedevil the study of literature… Commitment! What a word! Personally I would like to see all its users "committed" to purgatory—or worse.[33]

Notable here is Harvey's urge to fix, define, and delimit the "literary," which he does negatively and tautologically, in relationship to the "non-literary," cursorily adumbrated as "politics or anthropology or what have you." The "literary" and the "political" are cast here as oppositional, with little room for interrelation, and no sense of what Derek Attridge, following Derrida, describes as the *institutional* nature of literature, that it is "brought into being by processes that are social, legal, and political, and that can be mapped historically and geographically."[34] For Harvey, "language skill of the highest order" can be adjudged as if it occurred in a vacuum, ignoring language's messy materiality and referentiality, factors that ensure, in Attridge's words, that "a verbal artifact can never close upon itself."[35] But for Harvey the "literary" and the "political" are emphatically discrete. Users of the word *committed* (presumably commending "committed literature"), Harvey wishes, significantly, to consign to "purgatory"—itself arguably a type of "potential space," but figured here as hellish, intolerable. For Harvey, one suspects, difference and paradox are not to be tolerated: his is a purist view. Here the relationship of play to definition warrants attention. As Stephen Nachmanovitch notes, following Bateson, play eludes definition because of its "meta" nature: it is *about* definition, always complicating and shifting the definitions of things.[36] Harvey, mired in impossible debates concerned to fix and define the objects of the "literary," retreats into dogmatism, unable or unwilling to reflect on—adopt a "meta" relationship to—the contradictions of his own position.

A very different approach to the study of literature to Harvey's, one that rejects the "category of pure aesthetic cultural objects," was taken by Jakes Gerwel, a professor of Afrikaans and Dutch literature, and the esteemed former vice chancellor of UWC who led its transition away from apartheid institution to what he proclaimed to be "the intellectual *home* of the left" (my emphasis—the word is resonant given the call of recent student protestors for a university as such). In his 1983 inaugural address, Gerwel rejected the idea of a "transhistorical or universal function of criticism," arguing instead that "a particular mode of literary criticism comes about under specific historical conditions and for specific historical ends."[37] He noted how Afrikaans literary criticism had become increasingly formalistic and saw this, ironically, as symptomatic of its political moment, writing that "apartheid with its total disregard for people and for human content, with its subjection of human beings to principles, is quintessentially formalistic."[38] His account of the empty, fetishized formalism of apartheid accords with Long's account of its po-faced rigidity, an inability to tolerate difference.

33 C. J. D. Harvey, "Inappropriate Critical Criteria," *UCT Studies in English* (1977): 54–55. Quoted in Derek Barker and Leon De Kock, "How South African Literature Got Squeezed Out, and Then Slipped In: English Academic Literary Discourse in South Africa 1946–1996," *English Studies in Africa* 51.1 (2008): 30.
34 Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
35 Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 20.
36 Stephen Nachmanovitch, "This Is Play," *New Literary History* 40.1 (2009): 15.
37 Jakes Gerwel, *Inaugural Address* (Belville: University of the Western Cape, 1983), 7.
38 Gerwel, *Inaugural Address*, 9.

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Under apartheid, the dominant approach to literature in South African English Departments was "practical criticism," which held sway well into the 1970s. As Christo Doherty has noted in his genealogical account of English literature as discipline in South Africa, the appeal of practical criticism was partly because it helped to provide the rather amorphous subject of English literature with a *disciplinary* identity, cohering as it did around a *practice*—that of "close reading"—rather than simply a body of knowledge.[39] This practice also circumscribed what could be admitted as a valid disciplinary "object," excluding texts that did not meet formalist criteria. Practical criticism is mostly closely associated with I. A. Richards, who gave it that name and whose work Doherty revisits. As Doherty notes, Richards, who came to English literature with a background in psychology, experimented with giving students decontextualized literary texts, ostensibly stripped of their historical referents, which operated to test, and correct, and thus "order" (his term) the student's taste and mind. The student was placed in the position of disciple, as it were, before the literary work and teacher, with Richards holding that the student could be guided to the "correct" or "accurate" reading of the work. Similar thinking is illustrated in a set of essay-writing guidelines included among J. M. Coetzee's lecture materials from his time teaching in the University of Cape Town's English Department, from 1972 to 1999.[40] The guidelines are not reflective of Coetzee's own approach (he was very much at odds with the department) but were given to him to dispense to students.[41] They read:

> Although there is only one correct "interpretation" of a passage, it requires your utmost originality to achieve it. If you allow them to, the passage and the play are capable of directing you to see which of your "original" interpretations is the right one.[42]

Compare Richards, for whom "the experience communicated by a poem may be experienced by many different minds with only slight variations" and an accurate reading "must preserve it [the experience encoded in the poem] from contamination, from the irruptions of personal particularities."[43] The personal here is seen as out of place, a type of "contamination" and "irruption" to be quelled in favor of preserving the purity of the text. This language of purity echoes apartheid discourse; here the self is to be disciplined, even effaced, or rendered what Coetzee describes elsewhere as an undesiring subject,[44] "deprived of desire."[45]

In his study of English literature as a discipline in South Africa, Doherty links practical criticism with the practice of "confession" as described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*: "one of the most important devices by which institutions like the

39 Christo Doherty, *A Genealogical History of English Studies in South Africa, with Special Reference to the Responses by South African Academic Literary Criticism to the Emergence of an Indigenous South African Literature* (master's thesis, University of Natal, 1989).

40 "Department of English: Written Work on the Drama," J. M.Coetzee Collection (Makhanda: Amazwi Museum of South African Literature), Folder 2002.13.2.21.

41 On them is a handwritten note, initialed DG, which I assume stands for David Gillham.

42 "Department of English: Written Work on the Drama," no page number.

43 Quoted in Doherty, *A Genealogical History*, 59.

44 J. M. Coetzee, "The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907–)," *Social Dynamics* 17.1 (1991): 1–35.

45 Mark Sanders, "Undesirable Publications," *Law & Literature* 18.1 (2006): 112.

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church bring the private inner life under the public scrutiny of 'experts.'"[46] Doherty observes that "Practical criticism was like an examination in that students were ranked according to their responses to texts; whereas it mimicked the form of the confession in that the students' souls were subject to detailed inspection."[47] In this context, practical criticism, with its insistence on "ordering" the student's mind and treating the text, or "work" rather, in isolation from its historical and political context, comes to be seen, ironically, as complicit with its historical moment, a means of disciplinary power.

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. It seems pertinent here that in fact 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) that Winnicott's account of cultural experience complicates. For Winnicott such experience is synthetic and creative as well as analytic and "objective." The idea of the experience of reading as opening "potential space," following Winnicott, allows for a different model of "close" reading that is less closed and restrictive, while still immersive and attentive. Here what a reader might bring to a text is not foreclosed as "inappropriate" as in Harvey's worldview (and classroom, one imagines).

What I am describing as "closed" reading, or rather a classroom that enjoins such reading, runs the risk, in Winnicott's terms, of eliciting from the student a defensive "false" self within or beneath which a more authentic self is not recognized and must be hidden. In Wicomb's story we see Frieda's awareness of her potential misrecognition by Retief and that the reading of *Tess* that she is required to produce for him in her essay is merely a reflection of his own notes. Perhaps suitably, she initially wishes to "capture" his "likeness" on the page of notes she is trying to put together toward an essay, writing an essay in his image as it were and reconstituting him as an addressee to whom she might "address the wormy tangle of questions that wriggle out of reach each time I pick up my pen."[48] Having "no talent for likenesses," though, she draws instead "triangles and parallelograms, clean geometrical lines."[49] In lieu of an interlocutor/addressee to whom she might address her tangle of questions, she has rigid geometric shapes. Later, she will doodle "an infantile line of train carriages"[50] along the margins, marking a desire to escape from the strictures imposed on the space of the page by Retief's schematic and reductive account of the book.[51] Frieda, wondering whether to present Retief with an excuse for the late submission of her assignment, reflects: "I could say anything to him

46 Doherty, *A Genealogical History*, 59.
47 Doherty, *A Genealogical History*, 59.
48 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 40.
49 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 40.
50 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 42.
51 The significance of what Frieda doodles—the "infantile line of train carriages"—was pointed out to me by a student, Zahier Abrahams, whose honors thesis on Wicomb, titled "'Wasted Education': Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* as Post-colonial Bildungsroman," I supervised in 2019 at the University of the Western Cape.

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and it is a relief to know that it does not matter in the slightest how I deliver my lie, for he does not know me, does not know any of us, and will not recognise me the next day."[52] Luckily for her, Frieda has the confidence to be clear that what she eventually "submits" to Retief, namely what "he wants, a reworking of his notes"[53] (themselves copied from elsewhere), does not represent her true engagement with the text, but rather "betrays"[54] Tess (and implicitly, herself). Frieda has the self-awareness not to be "seduced" (a figure the story foregrounds) by the education on offer to her. One might even say that she has what the pious, working-class Tamieta is so often deprived of, "the unknown luxury of irreverence,"[55] the luxury that is, of playfulness in the face of authority.

Conclusion

UWC today is very different from the institution Wicomb and Nortjie studied at more than half a century ago, yet something of the apartheid logic that marked it then persists, even in a department as seemingly open-minded as the English Department. This is seen partly in 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. Often in class, students exhibit such anxiety about ascertaining the "correct" answer and what are perceived as "rules" and how to comply with them that it can be difficult to enable a classroom space where they can become absorbed in conversational play or in the text should we read it together (as, for example, with poems). The anxiety that disrupts this potential play is typified by the question "Can I do x/y/z?," that is, "Is this allowed?." A classic question—apposite here— is "Can I use "I"?" from students who have been taught not to use personal pronouns, to efface the textual traces of themselves in their own writing. Similarly, the rules of citation styles are endlessly fretted over. At the same time, plagiarism is fairly common. I can only account for this on the understanding that authority is seen to reside outside of the student and that students lack confidence in their writing—hence the extravagant care invested in getting the technical details of citation correct, even while the text under discussion is not attended to with the same care. Perhaps this is unsurprising, though, when the online assessment rubric for English 1 essays assigns 20 percent for formatting and referencing correctly. In classes, I have imposed a rule of my own (an obviously inadequate solution!)—that technical and administrative queries come in the first or last ten minutes of class; for the rest we absorb ourselves in the text and conversation about it, with students encouraged to address and engage one another working to grapple with what seems inarticulable rather than presenting me with polished "answers." Another rewarding practice has been to have students do five minutes of private, free writing in response to a text we have read together before approaching it jointly. Students tend to enjoy this, free of the pressures of providing "correct answers," and the conversations that follow generally open the text at hand in

52 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 40.
53 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 55.
54 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 62.
55 Wicomb, "A Clearing in the Bush," 61.

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new ways for us all, including me. In doing this, I have been going off-script from the *Course Reader*, which all English 1 tutors use when teaching and which scripts how each tutorial should function. The *Reader* tends to be very focused on essay preparation, providing extensive instruction to students regarding exactly how they should approach their set essays. During my time teaching at UWC (2012–2019), students have occasionally been told not only that an essay should have exactly five paragraphs, but what should go into each paragraph (being instructed which section of a poem, novel or short story should be discussed at what point). More recently, these guidelines have become less rigidly prescriptive (students no longer have to write essays of exactly five paragraphs), but students are still encouraged to follow a highly formulaic approach to essay writing; the *2019 English Course Reader*, for instance, exhorts students to follow the "PEA" (point, evidence, analysis of evidence) method. In my experience, students become very anxious following this guidance—always a bit confusing because ultimately somewhat arbitrary—and lose sight of their own engagement with the text, concerned instead to comply with what is expected of them. There is little room for a playful engagement with the text, and the investment of the self, and one's own curiosity and desire, in the text. Indeed, even at the honors level (the first year of postgraduate study), students have routinely been given a choice of topics to write their mini "research" dissertations on, rather than being required to formulate their own questions (although this is also an option). Perhaps this is unsurprising given that research capabilities are not fostered in undergrad through an elicitation of the student's own curiosity and critical thinking skills. What I am proposing as a more open, and less closed, approach to the text—a (playful) immersion in its (manifold) possibilities rather than a prescription of a preconceived reading stamped as the "correct" one—might help to shift this.

The anxiety about rules and what is "correct" that I have been describing among students is not necessarily all attributable to a particular institutional culture—students bring to the class their home and schooling backgrounds, among other things, but it is partially shaped by the way we teach and have been taught. And part of the work of confronting the colonial legacy of pedagogy is to reflect critically on our institutional cultures and to question the language of discipline and disciplinarity and the way it is used to rule and exclude, to fix rigid borders. This is as important as curriculum review, though the two are inextricable. The idea of the experience of reading as *opening* space, potentiality, for reworking boundaries and borders, rather than closing them, I hope is a useful one for working to confront our apartheid legacy.

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