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Book Reviews

THIS ISSUE DOES NOT INCLUDE ANY BOOK REVIEWS.

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Editorial

Introduction: Reading, Spiritual Engagement, and the Shape of Teaching

David I. Smith & John Shortt

The various essays included in this volume all rest on two basic premises, both implied in its title. The first is that reading (not just *what* we read, but for present purposes more particularly *how* we read) has something to do with spiritual growth. The second is that the ways in which we teach the art of reading in classrooms across various subject areas have some bearing on how this relationship between reading and spiritual growth takes shape. These two premises invite the conclusion that it is possible to teach with the goal of spiritually engaged reading in mind (and, conversely, that it is possible to teach in ways that make such reading less likely). The essays gathered here work to tease out these basic matters in a more nuanced manner and in both theoretical and practical terms.

Spirituality and Readers

Again, the first premise concerns reading and spiritual growth. The relationships between reading, faith, and spirituality are multiple and complex. There is a long history of Christian concern *that* learners should read – for a faith so bound up with the interpretation of Scripture, the promotion of literacy has commonly been both a by-product of Christian belief and practice and an intentional element of Christian mission and Christian education. Equally longstanding is Christian concern with *what* learners should read – once mastered, reading becomes a core way of sustaining and nurturing faith through the ongoing reading of Scripture and of theological and devotional literature; it also becomes a common way of encountering challenges to that same faith and temptations of varying kinds.

In addition to concern *that* learners read and concern for *what* they read, a third strand in the connection between spirituality and reading – the one foregrounded in this collection of essays – concerns *how* learners read. Believers grow in, clarify, inform, and correct their faith through acts of reading, whether of Scripture or of other texts in which orientation is sought or found, and the qualities that characterize those acts of reading (hurried, reflective, nuanced, careless, self-serving) can both result from and contribute to the shape of a person's faith. Here again, complexities and possibilities multiply; there is a massive literature attempting to define or explain responsible practices of interpretation, or to elucidate the underlying nature of textual encounter. There are books offering guidance, Christian or otherwise, on how to read books intelligently – how to analyze arguments, locate key ideas, and reflect critically on underlying assumptions (e.g., Adler, 1972; Sire, 1978). The particular focus in the present volume, however, is on the area of overlap or intersection between the “how” of reading in educational settings and the “how” of Christian living: How do the ways in which we teach and learn textual encounter both flow from and contribute to lived faith?

This intersection becomes apparent when one reflects on some of the ways in which the act of reading can vary. Reading is not simply reading – it is practiced differently in different times and places as well as by different individuals (Boyarin, 1992). That reading is more than decoding is obvious as soon as we begin to consider some of the ways in which texts may be read. A text may be read in a cursory or a thorough manner. It may be skimmed and scanned or meditated upon, digested, and obeyed. It may be read once only or returned to for repeated readings. It may be studied sequentially, browsed haphazardly, or used selectively as a reference. It may be read silently or aloud, individually or communally, privately or publicly, for the sake of the reading experience itself or as preparation for a further task, with or without deliberate effort to retain what is read (or to decide what should be retained). Reading may be attentive or inattentive, may do justice or injustice to the text and/or its author, and may be guided into fruitful paths or thrown way off course by a world of prior assumptions, experiences, frames of reference, intentions, and affective states. A reader may approach a text in a manner that displays humility, charity, patience, and submission to its presumed wisdom, or in a manner that displays scorn, haste, or the intent to proudly tear down.

This brief catalog of ways of reading already implies possible intersections between the practice of reading and the practice of the life of faith, intersections that go not only beyond reading as decoding, but also beyond the kinds of tips for reading critically and methodically that form the bulk of how-to-study manuals. The above list illustrates how easily descriptions of how to read well can slip from technique language into virtue language. Qualities such as humility, charity, patience, and justice are goals of Christian maturation, basic ways of approaching the world whose scope and validity extend to how we approach the written words of others (Schwehn, 1993; Jacobs, 2001). Encounter with texts can therefore be a place where such virtues are practiced, and perhaps also where they can be developed. Reading itself can be a form of spiritual discipline, as reflected above in references to meditation, submission, and obedience (Griffiths, 2002).

Encounter with texts can also be a place where the lack of and need for such virtues are brought into the open. When (as happened recently in one of our classes) a student who is achieving a modest grade in a German literature course reads an anthologized poem by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, widely regarded as Germany's most important living poet and one of its most important living intellectuals, and responds in a journal entry with the comment "this poem is pretty sophomoric," it seems plausible to suspect that the problem is more with the character of the student than with the profundity of the poem. Perhaps a little more humility would not be out of place.

Talk of reading silently or aloud, privately or publicly, points to a further dimension of reading as a practice calling upon spiritual and moral resources – as we read, we may enter into relationships not only with the author and the creatures represented in his or her words, but also with other readers and their readings of the text that we have in front of us. We become listeners, co-interpreters, dialogue partners, objectors, judges, encouragers, mockers. Such relationships stretch further our capacities for humility, charity, and justice. Reading is thus not merely an ancillary skill to be first mastered and then pressed into the service of faith-inflected learning; it is itself a practice in which the presence or absence of the fruits of the Spirit may be clearly manifest.

Spirituality and Teachers of Reading

This set of connections, all too briefly sketched here but explored in a more fine-grained manner in the chapters that follow, raises the question implicit in our second basic premise: What bearing does teaching have on all of this? Can we teach in a way that both models

Christian forms of engagement with texts and fosters the growth of these in students? How would we go about teaching students not only to read systematically and critically (often enough of a challenge in itself) but also to practice charity, humility, and justice as readers, and to approach texts in a spiritually engaged manner?

To approach such questions may require in the first place an expansion of everyday assumptions about what it means to teach students to read, and about the ways in which such teaching happens in courses that do not have the teaching of reading as their overt agenda. One book on the art of reading opens with the following representative anecdote:

A few months ago I happened to be present at a dinner where a chance question led to an interesting talk. Some phase of primary education was under discussion; and in the course of it the host, turning to one of the guests, asked, "When did you learn to read?"

"At three," was the prompt reply, given with a touch of pride.

"And you?" said the host to the next guest.

"Oh, I don't know. About five I suppose."

"And you?" to a lady beyond.

There was a moment's embarrassed hesitation. And then, with something about scarlet fever, came the confession that she had not learned her letters till she was nine. (Kerfoot, 1916, p. 1)

We tend to associate the idea of "learning to read" with early childhood and with the gradual mastery of the skills of decoding and interpreting text, and the association is strong enough to make the admission that one did not learn to read until the ripe old age of nine embarrassing. When learning to read is thus thought of primarily in terms of learning to decode, the connection with faith easily becomes framed primarily in terms of learning to decode faith-related texts, and the connection with teaching amounts to providing such texts in the classroom. The assumption sometimes appears to be that if the text in use is Christian, or better yet directly biblical, then something edifying must be going on regardless of the kinds of reading activity applied – one thus finds, for instance, learning tasks that have students underlining examples of nouns in a Gospel passage or diagramming sentences from the King James translation of the book of Joshua (Ebner, 1998). While such examples may be extreme in their disjunction between text and task, they differ mainly in degree from more widespread educational instances of classrooms where students are asked to read religiously significant material but the process of reading itself is taken for granted as an unproblematic tool to be applied without significant variation to the texts at hand.

Thinking of, say, college students as still engaged in learning to read does not come naturally; we usually take it for granted that such students already can read, and proceed to assign at least as much reading as can reasonably be expected to fit into the time between classes. Course syllabi and assignment lists routinely detail all manner of things that are to be read but far less commonly specify the manner in which they will be read. Rarely do we inquire into the precise contours of the acts of reading engaged in by students, or make intentional efforts (except sometimes remedially) to shape reading practices. As a result, a great deal of the reading that takes place (perhaps especially, but not only, in higher education) is characterized by students reading at high speed in order to cover the ground in the midst of the obligations of multiple classes; reading superficially, with the aim of avoiding embarrassment in class; reading each work, however complex, once only and accepting that to be a sufficient basis for offering informed opinions about it in class; in sum, reading as hurried consumers of text. If the goal is spiritual growth, then these do not seem the most promising means. If we do not find them particularly promising, the first thing we

need to examine is the ways in which teacher behaviors – the ways in which reading activities are framed and structured – are influencing student reading practices.

To be sure, teacher choices are not the sole determinant of students' identities as readers, but they remain centrally important for two reasons. First, it is usually the teacher who determines how reading is practiced in the classroom – what reading practices are modeled to students, whether texts are read aloud or silently, together or alone, sympathetically or critically, once or repeatedly, swiftly or patiently, attentively or at all. Whether intentionally or by default, the teacher leads the shaping of classroom reading practices over time. Second, the particular learning tasks assigned by the teacher, from individual questions assigned in a comprehension exercise to more complex pedagogical activities designed to mediate students' engagement with a text, imply and foster particular reading stances both in and out of class. In a famous example, reader response theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1980) probed the stances toward a poem that were fostered by the accompanying classroom question, What facts does this poem teach you? The student trying to answer this question, even if doing homework alone, away from the classroom's direct influence, is invited into a stance focused on transfer of factual information, and has been made less likely to meditate, for instance, on the personal import of a particular metaphor. This combination of direct power over the shape of shared reading acts and indirect power over a wider range of reading acts through the design of pedagogical tasks places the teacher in the position of significantly influencing the kinds of reading practiced by students. If reading practices do indeed intertwine with matters such as justice, humility, and charity, this is a significant responsibility indeed.

What if our specific choices as teachers can positively influence students' reading practices and experiences in ways that make spiritual growth more likely as an outcome? What concrete choices and design decisions should we be making? Each essay in this volume explores some aspect of how our teaching might better foster the spiritual engagement and spiritual growth of our students through the ways in which reading is practiced in our courses and classrooms.

Alan Jacobs's essay, "On Charitable Teaching," is an exploration of what it could mean to teach in the light of Christian love. He takes up two of the themes he introduced in his earlier work on charitable reading: attentiveness and playfulness. Christian love requires us as teachers to be attentive to our students' desires somewhat in the way that landscape architects are attentive to the desires of the daily users of a space and allow these to play a part in their plans for that space. It is not that these desires must always be accommodated, but that they be given deliberate and careful attentiveness. For teachers for whom the course syllabus has the status of laws set in stone, this is asking too much, but Jacobs argues that what a syllabus really consists of is "an amateurish attempt to scribble down what one can remember of the rules of a children's game" (p. 20). This leads him into discussion of the idea of education as play, and he goes on to suggest that we should see it as leisure, as a gift of God, in which teachers become masters of ceremonies rather than taskmasters.

In his essay on religious reading in historical perspective, John Sullivan argues that what we see as "understanding" is often "overstanding" and that reading is approached in a self-centered and consumerist way that extracts data for the purposes of the individual reader. Religious approaches to reading, on the other hand, require that we stand *under* the text and open ourselves out, in the company of others, to a journey that may change us intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Reading for overstanding is the way of the wandering and detached tourist, whereas reading for understanding is that of the committed and purposeful pilgrim. Sullivan draws upon Augustine and some medieval writers to set forth characteristics and effects of this latter, more holistic approach and how it is linked to religious commitment. He

concludes his essay with a section on what he terms the “ecology of reading” in which he lists some of the multiple interacting factors that bear upon students’ approaches to reading.

In her essay, “Learning to Read with Augustine of Hippo,” Rebecca Rine looks in more detail at what she discerns as a “reading motif” in Augustine’s *Confessions* and identifies characteristics of faithful reading similar to those listed by Sullivan. As she puts it, such reading is “goal-oriented and is learned through willful pursuit over time, through a process of trial and error, in the company of other readers” (p. 42). She goes on to argue that teaching to read should echo these characteristics – it should be oriented to a goal (that of the greater love of God and neighbor), it should reflect awareness of a lifelong process of both divine activity and human effort involving trial and error with the humble attitude this requires of teachers and learners, and it should occur within a learning community in which teachers and students learn together.

Trial and error feature prominently in “Misreading Through the Eyes of Faith,” David Smith’s study of the pedagogical implications of the ways in which Christian students read and misread texts in classrooms. He outlines four models of Christian reading: allegorical reading, in which texts are appropriated as illustrations of Christian theology; perspectival reading, in which the meaning of texts is weighed against the backdrop of Christian convictions; charitable reading, which approaches a text as a neighbor whom we are called to love (a model for which Jacobs argues in his essay); and responsive reading, in which the emphasis is “not only upon the love enacted in attentiveness to the text, but on the degree to which responsiveness to the call heard through the text results in living the life of love” (p. 60). When Smith reflected upon classroom instances of the misreading of texts, he found that they could not always be simply dismissed as errors or simply accepted as valid responses because they evidenced elements of some of these models. He proposes that they be seen instead as being analogous to the interlanguage that occurs in the learning of a second language, and he calls for a pedagogical stance of attentiveness that sees them “as evidence of underlying interpretive approaches that could be nudged toward more mature forms” (p. 62).

In his essay “Who Is My Neighbor?” John Netland writes from out of his classroom experience of teaching world literature and proposes that a hermeneutic of difference be replaced with a hermeneutic of love. Instead of allowing ourselves to be irreducibly defined by those things which make us different from one another, we should see ourselves and others as having “multiple identities as both citizens of the cosmos and residents of particularized, local communities” (p. 71). This enables us as we read world literature to go beyond literary tourism and non-judgmentalism to a reconciling love that frees us from privileging either ourselves or self-discovery to regard ourselves and others, our cultures and theirs, as those we respect enough to question. This, he says, is “an indispensable part of loving our neighbor as ourselves” (p. 76).

The focus shifts from the college classrooms that are in view in other essays in this volume to the teaching of younger children in Mark Pike’s essay, “Transactional Reading and Spiritual Investment.” Pike addresses homes and schools where parents and teachers seek to teach children to read “wisely and well as citizens of God’s kingdom and an increasingly secular society” (p. 83). He suggests that focusing on reading as a transaction between reader and text rather than on the morality of texts or the maturity of readers can provide a biblical approach for Christian educators seeking to invest reading experiences with Christian faith. He also argues that reading is one of the ways Christians should invest in a secular society, and concludes that when readers sow their faith and invest their spiritual lives in their reading transactions, they will reap spiritual growth.

The final essay, “Approaching Interpretive Virtues Through Reading Aloud,” is by Cynthia Slagter. She begins by recounting an unforgettable experience she had as an eighth-grader when her class teacher read a story aloud, and she goes on to discuss the place of reading aloud in learning to read more charitably and justly. She advocates the use of carefully structured read-aloud assignments in the classroom as providing for the possibility of a “slower, more intimate connection” (p. 105) between reader and text. New avenues of exploration and interpretation of text are opened “by encouraging multiple readings of a passage, thereby increasing the possibility of understanding and discerning the author’s message” (p. 105). Nuances, inferences, and previously hidden ideas and undertones can come through as, in reading the text aloud, the reader owns it for a time.

We invite readers of this volume to explore these essays attentively, charitably, and humbly, in hope that they might shed at least some light on the possibilities and pitfalls involved in teaching spiritually engaged reading.

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