

“Pedagogical Reading”

The Aesthetics of Attending in Reading Student Work

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A teacher at my first school loved grading student papers. “It’s where I really practice my craft,” he maintained. Long after the rest of us had finished—content to make a few cursory corrections and assign a letter grade, we were out the door by four—he would sit in a pool of light in his dark office, attentively reading and typing. Every student received a page of single-spaced comments and suggestions, in 10-point font and finished with his signature. He was the very model of what we aspired to be: never bored, never impatient, never anything but enthralled with his students’ work and completely consecrated to it.

Why did he work so long and write so much, when he must have known so little of it would be read and acted upon? It seemed a miserable life, even to us, the first-year teachers who had (tentatively) chosen it. We discussed it at Friday happy hour: spending one’s life immersed in juvenile work seemed to feed the durable “those who can’t do, teach” meme. Maybe those who were committed to attending to half-done, beginner’s work were somehow malformed. If they were not, after all, wouldn’t they be doing something more gratifying, or at least have found a better “work / life balance”? There must be something arrested, some shortcoming in such people. Maybe they (we?) were not smart enough to get past the preliminaries and basics they (we?) now teach year in and year out. Maybe we are afraid to reach for more, afraid to be judged by any but the immature, who have no perspective to know any better.

Our culture’s ideal teacher spends enormous time with his students’ work, lovingly celebrating and perfecting it. A student paper marked up in red with a dense note in crabbed handwriting at the end says first,

whatever else it says, that this student has been attended to. She has not been left behind.

What compels such teachers to attend so closely—so lovingly—to student work? Work, remember, that is usually immature by definition: poorly-formed and cursory, often written on deadline with scant emotional investment. Work that offers few, if any, of the rewards of the carefully crafted texts we choose to read when we have the opportunity. Student work is incomplete. It lacks the mechanical and stylistic components of mature work that we have come to seek, but primarily it lacks the developed sensibility that comes through the long experience that makes connoisseurs out of consumers and gourmets out of gourmands (Eisner, 1991). And work of limited sensibility will invariably offer limited aesthetic gratification. How could it be otherwise?

Maybe some of us tolerate student work and are holding out for the occasional prodigy—the precociously articulate student who shows up every couple of years and gives us the uncanny thrill of fully realized prose from an unlikely source. We can't live for these satisfactions, though: prodigies are few and far between. Besides, the idea of enduring the mediocre many to celebrate and nurture the brilliant few offends the deep values of equity and access that underpin the unwritten Hippocratic Oath a teacher takes. Enduring mediocrity while waiting for brilliance is not what we do, not really.

Or perhaps the answer is that we read student work closely because we are supposed to: because we *should*. The social and institutional role of requires two motivations of teachers for what I will here style “teacherly reading”: an altruistic pull to help each student improve, nested within a larger dedication to the betterment of society. First, we expect of teachers a personal, selfless dedication to the individual, one that transcends differences and personal prejudices. We might understand the last decade's accountability measures as institutional efforts to ensure that no individual student is elided from these attentions—an effort, it has been noted, that tacitly ascribes maleficent intent to teachers by implying that they probably *would* leave some behind, if they were not watched to make sure they didn't (Taubman, 2009). Second, the common sense invoked by politicians and policy makers maintains a bright line between our teacherly work with individual students and the wellbeing of the larger polity. If we work well to bring out the excellence within each individual, goes this reasoning, the next generation will be smarter, quicker, and better prepared for the national and global marketplace, where educational attainment has become a rhetorical surrogate for international competitiveness. This is the logic that conflates “success in college and the workplace” with the capacity to “compete in the global

economy” (USDOE, 2009) and rolls the nation’s security and economic concerns back around to the schoolhouse door.

The trump card of mobilization before international economic failure effectively ends the inquiry I am proposing here and sends teachers back to work, for country. It is our duty to teach; questions of why are deferred, presumably, for peacetime consideration, when we have time. But the problem with a duty-limited accounting of teacherly reading is that it cannot explain my friend’s passion. The institutional account of an employee’s duty ends, after all, with her work’s measurable effects (Scott, 1998). From this perspective, grading student papers is essentially a quantitative reckoning of what value can be seen and registered and what flaws can be identified and corrected. It is an accounting of presence and absence, a tallying up of debits against assets and the assignment of a corresponding rating. This description fails to explain those who find absorption and genuine satisfaction in the task, except perhaps as a Sadean fetish of discipline. We need look further to explain the source of teacher pleasure in this reading, and to find its justification.

The overdetermined cultural norms of teacherly reading define a seamless and atheoretical *what* for teachers at the moment of engaging student writing: attend fully and evenly, correct fairly and productively, and move your students along toward defined and measurable outcomes. To find a language for *how* teachers are to do so—let alone *why*—is to articulate an alternate calculus, one that admits a narrative of pleasure that haunts the narrative of duty. It is to find a space for *eros* prior to, or within, *agape*—or, perhaps, to claim the possibility of *jouissance* prior to, or within, the expectations of *plaisir* (Fink, 2002). Such work is an assertion that teachers occupy subject positions prior to, or within, their roles as agents of the educational institution. Ultimately, it “displace(s) questions of responsibility with questions about rights,” as Bell (1995) has it, figuring “a libidinal economy of pleasure” that has the teacher “stealing the text...starting with this permission one gives oneself to seek and own one’s own satisfactions” (p. 110).

This article works to articulate an understanding of “pedagogical reading” that admits both teacherly duty and aesthetic pleasure. After exploring the interface of pedagogy and arts experience, Ingarden’s phenomenology is mined for insight into the unique qualities of incomplete work, especially the ways that “attending” engendered by appetite helps explain the nature of our persistence. The limits of teacherly reading are further illuminated through consideration of our subjective investments in student work (“what lack in me does my students’ work call out?”), and it becomes clear that the pedagogic impulse is ultimately dissatisfied with incompleteness (the call to cocreation arouses the strongest appetite

and affords the greatest satisfaction). The teacher role itself, despite its institutional and political overdeterminations, offers opportunity for satiety – inasmuch as the teacher responds to her appetite not for the anemic example at hand, but for what it might become.

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How is teacherly reading different from the private reading we do on our own recognizance? For one thing, when reading privately we reckon freely whether a text will yield us pleasures; we make such judgments with barely an intention to. After all, the risk of reading is low initially, the investment negligible. Some texts are harder than others to penetrate, but all reading has a hedged bet, an escape clause as easy to invoke as flipping a page or slamming a cover. We follow the text where it might lead as our whim suits us; we can certainly come back out if we decide we don't like where we are heading. Barthes (1975) captures the energies of such reading well:

Arhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the integrity of the text: our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages (anticipated as "boring") in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote...we boldly skip (no one is watching)... (p. 10)

The reading Barthes describes is one of creation, not one of decoding. It seems indebted to the "aesthetic reading" notions of Rosenblatt (1938) as well as Dewey's (1934) working-through of the qualities of aesthetic experience. Both describe a generative cycle of doing and undergoing through which we make assay into the media of the text with our own intentions, then pause to regard how pleasing the effects of those intentions are, then make our next assay in response to the results of the last. The resultant understanding we compose maintains a unity which is more than the sum of its parts, what Langer (1957) described as "dynamic form." Like her waterfall, it is materially comprised of innumerable components shaped to a pleasing end by the concomitant investments of intention and outcome. Aesthetic reading is a constantly evolving thing, and "what gives any shape at all to the water is the motion" (p. 48).

The dynamic form of aesthetic reading stands in contrast to the institutional form of teacherly reading, constrained as it is by templates and rubrics that denote acceptable forms and qualities. We cannot just choose to put a student paper down. We are there to correct and evaluate, or at least to assign an appraisal that can read and acted upon. Such reading is far from Barthes' engagement. In such work the teacher is technician, not creator, ably ensuring that the product moving by before

us remains within acceptable tolerances of error while taking measures to “add value” where possible.

I propose a third category between “teacherly” and “aesthetic” reading that opens space for both pleasure and duty: *pedagogical reading*. “Pedagogical” is a well-worn but carefully chosen word here, carrying as it does traces of its history in the *paidagogos*, the “child-leading” Greek slave who took his masters’ children along the familiar road to school each day. Broader reading of the word’s etymology finds reference to instruction and guidance, but also to discipline (Shakespeare gives us “the rectifier of all, by title Pedagogus, that let fall The Birch upon the breeches of the small ones”) (OED, 2010). I find echoes of all three roles—instructor, guide, disciplinarian—in the historical usage “attendant”: “the one responsible for the discipline and daily instruction of a child or youth.” The pedagogue is the one who attends to the children as we attend to our aesthetic reading, with engrossment and full focus.

So the pedagogue *attends*; she *brings her attention to bear* upon the object at hand. If we could only find some way as teachers to train our voluptuous reading eye toward the limited pleasures of the uninspired student paper as voraciously as we do to our pleasure reading. Would that not make an effective professional development seminar? Perkins (1994) does something of the sort as he details the desirable capacities that are developed by deep looking at hard-to-look-at objects. He notes that a pedagogical result of looking at difficult art is the cultivation of the capacity to attend fully. He exhorts us to:

Give looking time!
Make your looking broad and adventurous!
Make your looking clear and deep!
Make your looking organized! (p. 54)

In Perkins’ hands, these are all salubrious capacities to strengthen, as well as useful skills that transfer readily to other tasks and responsibilities. Aesthetic experience here becomes a way to learn how to examine; through our disciplined looking we might become better seers, better associators, better decoders and synthesizers. Perhaps if we are disciplined in our reading of student work, we will become better teachers and better child-leaders—even better people.

My own relationship to the texts I love to attend to is more like Barthes’ description—or Winterson’s (1996), who was ravished in the street by the beauty of a painting in a gallery window “that had more power to stop me than I had power to walk on”:

What was I to do, standing hesitant, my heart flooded away?
I fled across a road into a bookshop. There I would be safe, surrounded

by the things I understood, unchallenged, except by my own discipline. Books I know, endlessly, intimately. Their power over me is profound, but I do know them. I confess that until that day I had not much interest in the visual arts, although I realize now, that my lack of interest was the result of a kind of ignorance I despair of in others. I knew nothing about painting and so I got very little from it. I had never given a picture my full attention even for one hour. (p. 3-4)

Winterson is galvanized by aesthetic experience; she wishes to look longer, but does not know how. Her pleasure, importantly, and the appetite it has aroused for greater pleasure, compels her to buy her painting and get it home, where she can be alone with it. She wants to learn how to attend in order to develop the capacities that lead to satisfaction. Both Perkins and Winterson seek similar results—the capacity to attend fully—but the first looks at art because of its unique capacity to develop looking skills, while the other looks at art because her appetite for aesthetic pleasure demands that she learn how to. The first is a public, communal, inclusive, unimpeachably productive act, the other private, selfish, capricious. The first teacherly, the second aesthetic. Perkins might be right, but he is never ravished.

Should we look at art because it improves us? Because it makes us better at looking? With respect to Perkins, that perspective seems to risk slighting the object of delectation, rendering the Venus de Milo a barbell to strengthen us by its lifting. I look at the things I want to look at because I am enthralled, sneaking peeks through the day when I should be doing something else. And therein lies the twinned power of pleasure and pedagogy. In this light, the progressivist perseveration toward a curriculum born of experience (Dewey, 1938) has much in common with McLuhan's (1960) quip that "anyone who tries to makes a distinction between entertainment and education doesn't know a thing about either." Both describe a quest to bring what we *need* our students to do into dialogue with what they *want* to do. Understanding the difference asks us to explore the origins of aesthetic appetite and the nature of how we work to sate it.

Ingarden (1961) offers a frame to understand the interplay of appetite and engagement. He notes that in aesthetic experience, our interest is first engaged not by an object's finished form, but rather by a fleeting quality of an object that "strikes us"—"imposes itself upon us from without"—even before we identify what the object is, or what other merits it might possess:

We feel only that it has allured us to itself, impelled us to give attention to it, to possess it in a direct, intuitive contact. In this moment there is also included a moment of a usually pleasant astonishment on account of the appearance of the preliminary exciting quality, or

rather of astonishment that it is “such a one,” though we have not yet even had time to attain a distinct, intended, and conscious grasp of this quality. (p. 296)

We are “hooked,” in Barthes’ language—“flooded away,” in Winter-son’s—not by something gorgeous, but by a whiff of gorgeousness that suggests more is to come, a suspicion that may or not be warranted by this shred of evidence. Ingarden notes that the evidence might include a “peculiar quality,” or perhaps a “multiplicity of qualities,” or even “a gestalt quality (e.g., a color or a harmony of colors, the quality of a melody, a rhythm, a shape, etc.)”. A phenomenologist reduced to “etc.” suggests a net cast almost too wide for his discipline to admit. And yet he allows this vagueness, I think, in order to keep the gate as wide as possible through which the first, crucial noticing may enter.

Because it doesn’t matter what you notice first. The noticing itself doesn’t have value; what’s valuable is how it sets in motion a cycle of “dynamism and eagerness for satiation,” as the potential it adumbrates dawns across the dim light of our daily interaction with the world and transforms the moment’s *intention* to one of *attention*:

In the further phase of preliminary emotion it changes into a composite emotional experience in which there may be distinguished the following moments: (a) an *emotional, and as yet still in germ, direct intercourse* with the quality experienced, (b) a *sort of desire* to possess this quality and to augment the delight promised by an intuitive possession of it, (c) a *tendency to satiate oneself* with the quality in question, to *consolidate the possession* of it (emphasis mine).

Thus is our quotidian interaction with our environment hijacked by the possibility of more sublime experience, if only we are capable of attending to it. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) notices how a process of engrossment removes us from our daily surroundings, how we enter a “flow” state when our engagement satisfies us intellectually and emotionally. Ingarden offers us the aesthetic equivalent. It stops us dead in the street.

There is likewise uncertainty in the moment of possibility, the uncertainty and risk that always dogs the potential of hitherto unknown experience.

There may appear in it also a peculiar “displeasure” (if we are by no means to dispense with the use of such vague expressions). This is so because the preliminary aesthetic emotion is full of dynamism—eagerness for satiation, which occurs where and only where we have already been stirred up, excited with a quality, but not yet succeeded in the attainment of such a direct, intuitive intercourse with it, that we could be “ravished” by it. This want of satiation (“desire”) may be considered by some a moment of “disagreeableness.” (p. 297)

So does the shadow of possible disappointment haunt the pursuit of pleasure, echoing the *plaisir / jouissance* dynamic. Potential consummations may be more satisfying than certain ones, but extravagant pleasures bring with them commensurately extravagant risks of disappointment (Fink, 2002).

It is appetite, then, with its commensurate uncertainty and trepidation, that leads us to perform the sleight of mind that Iser (1978) finds so evocative in his Ingarden-inspired exploration of reading: the creation of an “aesthetic object” within ourselves that limns the potential represented by the actual object while completing the object’s “gaps of indeterminacy” toward a more satisfying rendering. In other words, the shortcomings and incompleteness within the object at hand are cognitively repaired by the appetite that wishes to see them so. In viewing a statue, we project what we would have it be, willing it to completion in our desire for our own satisfaction and eliding, as it were, the pits in the marble.

... we overlook these particular qualities of the stone and behave as if we didn’t see them; on the contrary, we behave as if we saw the shape of the nose uniformly colored, as if the surface of the breast were smooth, with the cavities filled up, with a regularly formed nipple (without the damage actually to be found in the stone), etc. We supplement “in thought,” or even in a peculiar perceptive representation, such details of the object as play a positive role in the attainment of the optimum of aesthetic “impression” possible in the given case; more exactly—details that give such a shape of the object of our aesthetic experience as distinguishes itself most fully by aesthetic values, which may appear, in the given conditions, in concreto. (p. 293)

Well and good, comes the critique—for the unaccountable personal pleasures of art and text. But such conjectural work begins to offend the teacherly duty to correction and improvement. After all: if we are responding to what might be, and not what is, do we not fail in our duty to correction and improvement because our heads are swimming with our own construction of what we wish there? Or, as Fish (1980) might have it, have we lost “the text in this class” by allowing ourselves too free a rein in constructing it for our own pleasure? Ingarden does note the challenges to perception of the “thing itself” once swept up in aesthetic connection to it, and concedes a discontinuity between the real and the virtual (“this kind of procedure would be most improper in the cognition, in an investigating attitude, of the properties of a real stone. Here, in an aesthetic perception, it “fits well”).

The question, I suggest, is rather how our educative ends are served by pedagogical interaction with the “aesthetic” object rather than the “real” one. A useful response to that end can be found in exploration

of how an aesthetic reading might augment the capacity to discern value—and thereby, justify judgments of quality—in ways that a “concrete” reading cannot. Gallagher (2006) considers the possibility that such judgments grow not only from that which can be observed and verified, but also from that which can be perceived as not yet finished. Observing a mother and her five year-old daughter as they regard the sculpture *Laocoön and his Sons* in the Vatican Museums,¹ he notes the following exchange:

“My dear,” the mother asked, “isn’t this statue beautiful?”

The girl pondered the question for a moment before replying, “I guess so. But mommy, where are the arms?”

“They’re lost, that’s all.”

Unsatisfied though she seemed, the girl accepted her mother’s authoritative judgment and tagged along behind her toward the Sistine Chapel.

Gallagher thus introduces the notion that while incomplete work may not satisfy Thomistic notions of *unitas* (“wholeness”), it might still fulfill the requirements of Aquinas’ *integritas*, which he lists as one of the three characteristics of essentially beautiful things (with *proportio* and *claritas*). Where the daughter concretely sees only a lack of wholeness, the mother sees the harmony, internal proportion, and clarity of what is not there that is implied by what *is*. Therefore, the lack does not trouble her appreciation of the work’s enduring qualities. The first approach—like a teacherly reading—is essentially an act of accounting, while the second—like an “aesthetic” reading—allows the reader to perceive and respond to incipient completion. Furthermore, the capacity of a work to provoke such reading is, in itself, an index of the probability of that that work’s eventual shapeliness:

In particular, we may say that the extraordinary proportion inherent in the work, along with its clarity of form, was precisely what allowed Michelangelo to deduce the correct size, shape, and position of the missing arm. A work of considerably inferior proportion and clarity would have prevented even a genius like Michelangelo from visualizing and executing a replacement arm that would restore the work’s original integrity (ibid).

This projective work then—of seeing where an incomplete project is heading, and positing its satisfying completion—is also an evaluative act. It judges the incompleteness at hand not by wholeness (a quality accessed quantitatively), but rather by unity (a quality accessed aesthetically), and the aesthetic component permits evaluative perception that is otherwise inaccessible. Transcending quantitative zero/sum ac-

countings, aesthetic perception both helps us reckon quality and—by linking our looking to our appetite for completion—lets us *want* to.

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Ingarden's phenomenology of aesthetic experience, then, gives language for the initial satisfactions of engaging unfinished work: of finding potential in the promise of satiation that compels attending and concomitantly greater investment, unto the creation and evaluation of the aesthetic object. But it seems his willingness to attribute fluidity to the object assumes a commensurate stability in the viewer. In his account, the viewer seems to be an intact *flaneur* wandering in a garden of potential pleasures, untroubled until a potentially beautiful object "hooks" him.

I know I am not that *flaneur*: I am not a static, complete, benign eye. As teacher, my own incompleteness compels me to compose myself in the work of being with my students' writing. I recognize my experience in Gatto's (1993) frank declaration:

The kids I had the most profound effect upon as a teacher were invariably those who were incomplete in the same way I had been at their age, and those who lacked certain strengths I myself was struggling to learn as an adult. I taught these kids best because I was really teaching myself.

I attend to my students to find my own wholeness; I am driven, in part by my own appetite to be whole. Pressing questions beyond the primary one arise: What lack in me does my students' work call out? How am I, the pedagogue, also the one being led?

To say I have always loved reading student work would be a lie. When I began teaching, I thrilled to the pleasures of reading together with my students and, as my skills developed, meeting them in small groups to discuss their shared projects. I loved them face-to-face, one-on-one or all together; it did not matter to me. I craved swimming upstream through their energy, their laughter, their anger, their closeness. I came home exhausted and hoarse every night.

But I was ashamed of how I handled their papers. I assigned them out of a sense of duty, but I could not find the wherewithal to sit and read them. I could not find my students in their prose. Fragmented, limited, indifferently punctuated, they lay on the desk like dead fish, their dull scales mocking the gleaming energy of the specimens I spent my days swimming with. And when I had finished reading them, I did not know what to say to them, how to answer into the silence they left: a silence of reproach, of finding me wanting.

I delayed reading them for weeks, telling myself this shortcoming in

teacherly role was offset by my vigor and attention in real time. Everyone has a weakness: mine was that I could not bear to read my students' work, to countenance the gap between their entrancing presence and their pale simulacra. I hoarded them in my car when they overtopped my desk, telling myself I would grade them at home but actually just craving the appearance of attending in my classroom. When the phone rang I dreaded a parent asking me why she had not seen any of Catherine's papers. I did not know what to tell her. They had been assigned and completed, but not read. I could not meet their gaze.

I needed to learn to meet the gaze of the responsibility of the role, to respond to the places it found me wanting. The teacherly call to duty is so profound that this confession of incompleteness feels like seeking absolution, revealing the bottomless capacity for attention expected by the teacher role that we are supposed to inhabit so seamlessly. Rather, I seek to understand how my students' lack called upon me to ameliorate my own. My own development as attendant has run a parallel course to my students' development as creators. I rose to meet the gaze of their texts because I was required to, yes—but also because the powerful draw to the consummations of completion compelled me to learn how to attend.

Pedagogical reading transcends aesthetic reading because that which is incomplete is not ultimately satisfying to the pedagogic gaze. The deepest pleasure of pedagogy is the cocreation of beauty; aesthetic pleasure flows from the inchoate qualities of incomplete work, but the pedagogic impulse will not leave it at that. In a purely aesthetic mode we would not think to complete the half-finished Michelangelo statue, yet we reach instinctively to bring the rest of our students' work “from the stone.” For the pedagogue, it is the call to cocreation that arouses the strongest appetite and greatest satiety. Not cocreation to a wholeness that neither I nor my students have – not yet – but rather engagement in a shared process of doing and undergoing, in a shared assay to find and cultivate dynamic form.

Seventeen years later, I sit in my own pool of light after my colleagues have gone home, raptly attending to the screen in front of me as your words race by. I chase them with the finger on my trackpad, double-clicking for a talmudic pink balloon to pop into the margin for my typed comment (smaller than your text, but yours still must shrink to accommodate it). I ask for clarification—what lynchpin sentence got lost in the final edit, without which your argument has fallen to the floor? I pick up your train of thought, dust it off, and suggest where it might have been heading before it got befuddled. I re-read with “track changes” engaged, and this time my red corrections line through your errors, leaving them in mild reproach with my suggestions of what you might have wanted to say close behind. Then to the summary statement,

where I roll what I think you meant into a ball and turn it before both our eyes. Then distillation of the whole to a letter grade, to render unto Caesar. And I do so over and over, recalling Grumet's (1995) admission of the dance of expectation and consummation deep within this most daily of teacher tasks each time I hit "send": "See how much I love you?"

What do I love? I know I love the satisfaction of having held something precious and helped it find its feet. I love letting you know you are seen in the half-light of your prose. Attendants stand beside gymnasts trying dangerous maneuvers for the first time; they hold safety ropes for rock climbers, calling up suggestions of where they might find the next handhold. Your weight on the rope makes me feel my own, calls me into position and squares my feet and focuses my eyes up, strengthens my voice to be sure you hear me. Your need calls me to be clear and deliberate, compelling and compassionate. You better me as you ascend.

The mutual constitution of reader and text—of looker and art object—holds firm as it leaves the aesthetic realm and works to explicate the educational. As I read student work, my own “gaps of indeterminacy” are revealed by my students’. The exigency that both be filled are a source of the energy that compels us to completion.

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Kegan (1982) notes that psychology is literally a constitutive and evaluative practice: *psyche* and *logos* combine in a “reckoning of the spirit,” which as Hegel noted “is never at rest but always engaged in ever progressive motion, in giving itself a new form” (p. 1). So it is that human development is mutually constitutive, yet another process of “doing and undergoing” wherein assays that develop new capacities are followed by retrenching in the safety of what is already known. Kegan figures how the role of the helper in that cycle also waxes and wanes, sometimes compelling the subject to new heights and sometimes holding tight on the rope while she rests and incorporates what has been learned, in an oscillating role that forms the pedagogue as surely as it does the student.

Those of us who are professional helpers have a dual involvement with meaning-making. What we know of the way our client holds himself and his world together can help us understand what his experience means to him, including his experience of being with us in a helping relationship. We are especially helped by our awareness of the fact that the way he composes himself is at once a kind of achievement and a constraint. And yet we are unavoidably meaning-makers ourselves....How we will understand what we hear—or, better put, what we actually do hear—will be settled there where the event is made personal sense of, there where

it actually becomes an event for us...it is not about the doing which a human does; it is about the doing which a human is. (p. 3, 8)

We alternately hold and let go, push out and let back in, holding a space for our students’ assimilation and synthesis as surely as we show the next thing to try (in achievement lies constraint). The events in our students’ work become events in ours, as our wholeness co-evolves.

And part of our work toward wholeness as teachers is in the constitution of the teaching role itself. The present moment’s institutional and political overdetermination of that role (as technician rather than creator, as object rather than subject) renders the contemporary teaching role as impoverished as a student paper. And so teaching might remain—unless we regard it with generous, seeking eyes, open to a whiff of gorgeousness and willing to consider that the moment at hand might be “such a one” that holds potential for satisfaction. Only if we are equal to the challenge of attending completely to its demands will our role be held generously enough to find its own fullness. Like Winterson’s painting—like my students’ papers—the role “objects” to our inability to attend, but it waits patiently in its synchronic holding pattern for us to show up. There is urgency in teaching, but there is also time for looking. We are moved to persevere in our connection and our exploration of the teaching role by the potentials we discern in the scantest opportunity. Our appetites to be with student writing—and to be with the work that is our vocation—are both aroused and sated not by the anemic examples at hand, but by what they might become.

Note

¹ Gallagher notes that the *Laocoön* was famously missing its right arm since its discovery. It had been restored not once but twice, the first with a heroically outstretched arm (the winning entry in a papal contest among sculptors that exasperated Michelangelo with its amateurishness) and the second with a more moderate, bent arm in the mid-twentieth century inspired by (and perhaps from a fragment actually created by) Michelangelo. The second restoration removed previous fixes to other figures’ arms, rendering the piece incomplete once more, occasioning the mother / daughter conversation.

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