

Reading Acts: An Inquiry into Reading and Teaching

Brandon L. Sams

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Approved By:

Advisor: Madeleine Grumet

Reader: Christopher Osmond

Reader: Della Pollock

Reader: Lynda Stone

Reader: James Trier

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## Abstract

BRANDON L. SAMS: Reading Acts: An Inquiry into Reading and Teaching  
(Under the direction Madeleine Grumet)

This text performs reading for teaching in an audit culture. Two teachers, myself and Steven, read the memoir *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos and, while reading, recorded our experiences as readers and planned to teach the book to Steven's English class. This study is an inquiry into the phenomenon of *reading to teach*, particularly how this mode of reading at once deploys and departs from other modes of reading, such as aesthetic, efferent, and critical postures of engagement. In its anticipation of teaching, this text teaches about how teachers read texts, the aesthetic contours of pedagogy, and how readers and teachers negotiate of inner vision with outer form. I have chosen to write what follows as a kind of memoir that reflects the primary mode of expression offered by the memoir that we read and taught. This research memoir, an elaborated phenomenology, recounts and thinks through what happened as we read, planned, and taught the text. This is also an account of an intellectual, teaching relationship that has taught me much in return about collaboration, what it means to read, and what it means to teach. As Taubman argues (2009), audit cultures in which teachers currently practice minimize opportunities for sustained reflection and thoughtful collaboration. As the time and rhythms of teaching are more externally monitored and controlled through testing and teaching-by-numbers curriculum guides, it becomes difficult to reflect on and practice through ambiguous but vital pedagogical questions. What does it mean to read

books in solitude and with others? What responsibilities, possibilities or anxieties does the pedagogical relation offer to (or demand of) reading? How does reflective reading, teaching and research – in the context of friendship – see beyond the limits of audit culture? In what ways are teachers always, already performing these limitations even as they desire to disrupt them? This study raises such questions. I hope that the reader of this text may find it generative of new ways of creating a classroom as a commonplace: a place of common reading occasioned by and leading to deepened understanding of what we can know together.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT HISTORY

*An Opening Word About this Text – How the Idea Began – What are the Questions? – Who is Participating in this Research? – The Grounding Theory and Method – Four Moments of Reading – Narratives of Reading and Teaching (One) – Anticipatory Reading (Two) – Reading While Teaching (Three) – Reflective Reading (Four) – Selecting a Text to Teach – Making the Commonplace Book – About the School and the Course Where We Taught*

This text performs reading for teaching in an audit culture. Two teachers, myself and Steven, read the memoir *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos and, while reading, recorded our experiences as readers and planned to teach the book to Steven's English class. This study is an inquiry into the phenomenon of *reading to teach*, particularly how this mode of reading at once deploys and departs from other modes of reading, such as aesthetic, efferent, and critical postures of engagement. Steven and I read through four "moments"; during the first we wrote about and jointly interpreted our past experiences with reading and teaching to understand what histories we brought to the present inquiry. During the second moment, we read Gantos for the first time (before meeting Steven's students), recording in the margins our experience of reading and plans for teaching. In the third moment we re-read Gantos as the students read the text, recording our evolving relationship to Gantos and revising and adjusted our teaching plans as necessary. After our reading and teaching lessons concluded, we used the last moment to reflect on what we had learned about reading and teaching.



Steven and I became friends four years ago – two years before this project began – after meeting in a graduate class about education that I was teaching. At the conclusion of the course, we discovered our shared interest in literature, poetry, writing, walking, coffee, and, of course, pedagogy. To this project, we brought a history of learning together about reading, writing, living and teaching – and hoped that this project would extend our interest and learning in these areas. Steven teaches at a four-year university in the Northeastern United States. The English 102 class that participated in this study consisted of first and second-year students, diverse in gender, race, and age. The school specializes in the arts, media, and design. While Steven and I co-planned and imagined our Gantos unit, Steven was the primary instructor for his course, thus positioning me in the role of “visiting” instructor – indeed as a *visitor*, with both the limitations and possibilities for insight an outsider possesses.

In its anticipation of teaching, this text itself teaches about how teachers read texts, the aesthetic contours of pedagogy, and how readers and teachers negotiate of inner vision with outer form. I have chosen to write what follows as a kind of memoir that reflects the primary mode of expression offered by the memoir that we read and taught. This research memoir, an elaborated phenomenology, recounts and thinks through what happened as we read, planned, and taught the text. This is also an account of an intellectual, teaching relationship that has taught me much in return about collaboration, what it means to read, and what it means to teach. As Taubman argues (2009), audit cultures in which and through which teachers currently practice minimize opportunities for sustained reflection and thoughtful collaboration. As the time and rhythms of teaching are more externally monitored, controlled, and routinized through testing and teaching-

by-numbers curriculum guides, it becomes more difficult to reflect on and practice through ambiguous but vital pedagogical questions. What does it mean to read books in solitude and with others? What responsibilities, possibilities or anxieties does the pedagogical relation offer to (or demand of) reading? How does reflective reading, teaching and research – in the context of friendship – see beyond the limits of audit culture? In what ways are teachers always, already performing these limitations even as they desire to disrupt them? This study raises and lives through such questions. I hope that, in the end, the reader of this text may find it generative of new ways of creating a classroom as a commonplace: a place of common reading occasioned by and leading to deepened understanding of what we can know together.

### **Origin Story**

It is difficult to know what tense to use – past or present? While I write *I did*, there is the feeling that the work described is not finished. The events of the study may literally be finished in time, but hardly finished in meaning. Is a hermeneutical, autobiographical project is ever really *over*? Is it ever, well, history?

While this inquiry into the phenomenon of *reading to teach* was not borne out of a single moment or experience, a few anecdotes have crystallized and made easier to communicate why reading to teach might be an interesting phenomenon to study. I used one such story in my proposal, even in my job talk, and I want to test its performative value once again, here. In doing so, I join the other characters that populate this dissertation – Herodotus, the poet David Whyte, the writer Wendell Berry, myself as a reader and teacher – that believe (or want to believe) that ordinary experience is enough, that story is enough to communicate knowledge, to draw others in to interesting worlds,

to show us new possibilities for ourselves and ourselves with others. The tale features Dr. Ray – one of my college professors. His knowledge and ability to teach Shakespeare have inspired me, troubled me, and forced me to think about what happens when we read and teach texts to others. Now, the story.

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Dr. Kay arrived to every class session armed with the Riverside Shakespeare. The cumbersome 12-pound volume contained all thirty-six plays, the sonnet collection, plus a generous amount of scholarship. Its reverberating plop on the wooden podium meant only one thing.

“Remember last time we ended with...”

For fifty minutes, three days a week, he told us the story of his interpretation, noting major themes and examining supporting textual details. Once per week (and on rare occasions twice), he posed a question. When we learned the relation between the Shakespearean sonnet and the earlier Petrarchan form, he asked, “Who was the first to experiment with that [Petrarchan] form in English?” Someone answered “John Donne” and was quickly dismissed.

Seizing the opportunity, I raised my hand and spoke: “The Earl of Surrey.”

“Why, yes, that’s right!”

Slightly embarrassed but feeling triumphant nonetheless, I sat back in my chair, resumed note-taking and didn’t say another word.

One could pass Dr. Ray's class by taking good notes and memorizing sections of text to quote on exams. One didn’t have to read. Dr. Kay read for us. His examinations were legendary in the English department. Four large, dusty file cabinets sat in the corner

of his office, housing every student exam blue book going back thirty years. I didn't believe it myself until I asked to see an old exam. Sure enough, there it was, carefully plucked from the back of a drawer. No one left his course with a material record of anything.

The Riverside Shakespeare now collects dust on my bookshelf. Inside, the text is heavily marked with notes scribbled in my own hand but, ultimately, written by someone else. It is a book of impersonation. As a young teacher, I too toted the Riverside. Each morning, its resounding plop on the table embodied the power and authority my young face belied. I pointed the students to those passages of most import, arguing for an interpretation that wasn't mine, yet had become mine. These moments embodied only the appearance of reading; like my professor, I ignored the potential difference – offered by the present, the students and the future – of and in every return to the text.

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The relationship among Dr. Kay, me and my students is mediated by the text, by time, and by reading. Harold Bloom (1997) describes it as one of transference. In the *Anxiety of Influence*, he argues that the literary artist situates his work in a complex relation – filled with admiration and terror – to literary tradition. A “literary father” inspires and compels a belated reader to create, to himself become a writer. Although an initial inspiration, the mentor's influence must be overcome, repressed – killed in the oedipal tale – for the reader-turned-artist to claim a unique literary vision that names the world anew. There may be a similar struggle in teaching. We enter classrooms bent on reproducing ourselves and our interpretations of the world against and despite competing visions. Or, as in my case, we reproduced a vision (version) of the world and the text

without knowing it. When I taught, however, there was no struggle. I incorporated a singular vision of the literary world; a pre-cursor lived through me – his life, his reading, at the expense of reading that was more attentive to the lives and worlds of those present. Dr. Kay succeeded in this Oedipal tale, killing his competitors and extending his reading beyond himself.<sup>1</sup> Instead of struggle, originality and poesis, my body, voice and gesture – our class – became a site of compliance, reproduction, mimesis. Intoxicated by the pervasive spirit of New Criticism, formalism, close reading and correspondence theories of learning – my reading of Dr. Kay’s pedagogy – my pedagogy passed over the students, and rose to the abstractions that promised the world but ignored the people living in it.

There are many purposes of reading. The above story highlights what Rosenblatt (1994) called efferent reading, or reading that values *information* that can be “taken away” and has a more or less immediate utility – in the above cases, “facts” about the text and answers to the exams. The efferent stance is one way to orient to texts. The aesthetic stance, as described by Rosenblatt and taken up more recently by English education scholar, Jeffrey Wilhem (2008, 2011) is another. Generally, this approach suggests that the qualitative experience of the reader reading is indispensable to meaning making, that texts are not complete objects outside of particular readers and readings, a claim that has implications for the text and the reader. The reader response and transactional literary theory tradition holds that readers play a role in creating the text and come to form in reading. I will elaborate on this claim below.

We also read with intentions of sharing our readings with others; or, put less

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<sup>1</sup> The hermeneutic act of ‘understanding the betrayal’ could be translated to psychoanalytic language as ‘patricide’. I do not intend this act as one of self-creation but a translation into a new discourse – of interconnection and relation. One might think of this as being adopted by a new set of parents.

authoritatively, we read to organize pedagogical experience for others, so that they might read with more understanding, joy and possibility. What would have happened, for instance, if Dr. Kay had read with us – his students – in mind? What might this potential relation have offered his reading experience, and how might it have changed the reader, the text and the students? I am pointing the finger, here; of course, it points back at me and my teaching. What if I had been open to the possibility that the imagined and actual relations of pedagogy bring something new to reading? What do the imagined and actual relations of pedagogy do to reading, to the selves that read and to the shared world they inhabit?

This dissertation asks if there is anything specific and interesting about reading a book that one intends to teach to other people. I want to understand what might be termed the *pedagogical stance* towards the literary work. The efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1994; Galda & Laing, 2003), the aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1994; Galda & Laing, 2003; Wilhelm, 2008; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011), the critical stance (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), even the writer's stance (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010) have been written about in the field of literary studies and English education. One can read texts for information; one can read to have a virtual experience, immersed for a time in the world of another; one can read with doubt and suspicion, dismantling a text's representations of the world. But how do teachers read texts to teach them to others? How does reading to teach converge or diverge with other reading experiences? What are the potential implications of the specificity of reading to teach for the reader and for those taught? What are the implications for processes of teacher reflection, teacher preparation and teacher education?

This study uses four *moments* of reading to conceptualize answers to these questions. My research collaborator, Steven, teaches English at a four-year university in the northeastern United States. For this study, we read a text together, planned lessons and taught the text to his English 102 students. From the start, I hoped that this investigation into *reading to teach* would give readers and teachers more intentionality and control over their own reading processes and experiences. As a trajectory of my own history, I also hoped that this inquiry would allow teachers (me) to understand with more clarity their (our) handing over to ways of things and the extensions and alternatives that are present with every reading and teaching moment.

### **Research Participants**

The participants for this research project are me, Steven and his students. Steven currently teaches at a four-year university in the northeastern United States. He is a creative writer and teacher by training, having obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and Creative Writing, respectively, before pursuing his teaching license in English. Steven and I met at UNC in the context of the Masters of Arts in Teaching program. I was an instructor for an “Introduction to Teaching” course and he was my student. Steven is five months older than me. At the conclusion of the MAT course, Steven and I became friends, in part because of our shared interest in literature, reading and teaching. Our friendship grew as Steven completed his coursework and student teaching experience. In addition to offering his syllabus and students in support of this project, Steven also brought his knowledge, experience and interest. While our relationship began with me in the role of instructor, this particular study shifted the dynamics of authority to Steven. While we reached our ideas collaboratively, in the

context of friendship and mutual curiosity and interest, we were teaching in *his class*, in the context of *his syllabus*.

Paul Valery (1958) writes, “There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography” (p. 58). Traces of desire marked and shaped my intentions for this project and also structured the methodology of participatory inquiry. The opening story signaled my desire to teach differently, to read timely instead of out of time – possibly bringing together the students, the text, our classroom context to create something new. I also desired to read differently. The tale suggests that my pedagogy was marked by moments of the *appearance*, not the substance, of reading. Against my reading of Shakespeare, Block (1995) suggests that reading is a creative act – it brings together self and textual world and, in this articulation, both come to form. I have already suggested the ways in which I was “handed over to the ways of things” – to reading and teaching in a particularly technical, even pre-determined, way. This project wants to interrupt this handing over and provides me an opportunity to locate, support and enhance creativity in my own teaching, writing and reading practices.

Other traces of desire came to bear on both my participation and Steven’s selection. While this study is not a biography, Lionel Edel’s comments on biography are applicable here as well: “in a world full of subjects [...] we may indeed ask why a modern biographer fixes his [*sic*] attention on certain faces and turns his [*sic*] back on others” (qtd. in Smith, p. 289). Smith troubles the point even more: “the biographer’s personality – motives, fears, unconscious conflicts, and yearnings – reaches out to responsive, if not similar, territory in the person of the subject” (p. 289). Edel suggests that a biographer, in selecting a subject, is attracted to the same. Might the same hold for



the researcher? Does Steven have something I want or need? Yes. I want to understand his life as an artist and I also want such a life for myself. This project is thus structured around desire, failure and absence: the reclaiming of creativity for reading and teaching, and, perhaps at bottom, for myself. I want to understand the life of an artist. I want to understand if being an artist leaves traces on reading and teaching practice. But, I also want to participate in that artistic life more vigorously, in hopes that leading this kind of life might leave traces of difference on my reading, teaching and living.

Lastly, a dissertation requires time – a necessary dimension for change, renewal and understanding. In *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde (1979) distinguishes between work and labor, helping us understand the relation between time, what one does and who one is. The former can be measured quantitatively, in clock time, and is more likely associated with a context-less (and repeated) application of technique. In contrast, according to Hyde, labor obeys the laws of inner time, of becoming and understanding, and is associated with the production of works of art. A product of labor, like a poem or piece of art, receives the spirit of the producer and also demands a change in the one who gives, dreams, writes; who one is and what one does or makes are thus interrelated. The difference between work and labor has relevance for those working in the area of curriculum studies and English education. Many scholars and teachers working in the (post)-re-conceptualized era of curriculum continue to believe that learning consists of more than receiving a world already decided: of becoming an able worker, for instance, or imbibing scientifically proven lesson plans and curriculum guides (Pinar, 2004; Slattery, 2006). Curriculum scholars and teachers fighting this tendency believe in the possibility of creativity: that curriculum acts/stances/positions help create selves and

worlds different than before. Every reading, lesson, act or moment of curriculum, has the potential (if all goes well) to *go awry*. This particular project about curriculum and pedagogy embraces the iterative, creative dimension of (self) knowledge and rejects the notion that the world and self are always, already read and written.

Following Ursula Franklin (1990), I view this study as a *holistic*, not a prescriptive, technology. The research I desire to undertake is not something one simply “does”, like a series of prescriptive, routine tasks; nor is it only a matter of outer, clock time, although that is surely involved. More importantly, it is a matter of spirit, of inner time, where the product demands a change in the producer. Bloom (2000) echoes the general point, with a specific application to reading when he writes: “you can read merely to pass the time, or you can read with an overt urgency, but eventually you will read against the clock. Bible readers [...] perhaps exemplify the urgency more plainly than readers of Shakespeare, yet the quest is the same. One of the uses of reading is to prepare ourselves for change, and the final change alas is universal” (p. 21). Bloom’s intermediate change is the one that interests and compels me most. Research, like reading and labor, can be a holistic practice, not merely done to pass the time, but an activity that changes who one is and how one lives. This research will demand clock time, but also shape and be shaped by inner time.

One’s inner time, finally, comes to form through engagement with the world: with people, places, texts, things. Like the artist’s materials, readers and researchers foreclose possibilities of change with every decision and selection: this text, not that one; that teacher instead of this one. I can think of no better explanation for why I have selected Steven as a participant. He is a friend, generous reader and caring teacher. It is a selection

I can more than live with. It forecloses as much as any other choice, certainly, but sets up relations that will, I expect, change how I read, teach and live.

### **Theory-Method**

This research project consisted of multiple reading moments that inquired into the phenomenon of reading to teach. The method is supported by (auto)biographical curriculum theory, literary theory and participatory inquiry frameworks. This brief foray into theory and method will inform and support the specific details of the reading moments that follow. First, autobiography. I assume reading and autobiography to be intertwined projects, the former playing an important role in self-interpretation and the writing of a life. Since the re-conceptualization of the curriculum field, autobiography has been central to the projects of curriculum and pedagogy. A form of inquiry that, for Madeleine Grumet (1987), honors the “spontaneity, specificity, and ambiguity of knowledge,” autobiography provides curriculum theorists, teachers and students with ways to (re)write and conceptualize the self in relation to others, to academic knowledge, to the past and, finally, to possible futures (p. 319). This is a welcome democratic antidote, certainly, to curriculum and social inquiry steeped in scientific research and standardized to the point of exhaustion. If there is a danger in autobiographical writing, however, it is trapping ourselves in a single tale. Natalie Goldberg’s (1986) related lament of an artist’s over-attachment to her poems is helpful: “it is very painful to become frozen with your poems [...] the real life is in writing, not in reading the same ones over and over” (p. 33). And more: “Stay fluid behind those black and white words. They are not you. They were a great moment passing through you” (p. 33). The self is stitched together through memory, iteration, and rewriting: a multiplicity that comes with

both a burden and an opportunity. There is always more to write. It is this always more and the always in-time of the self that makes auto-biographical research exciting and unpredictable. I suspect that the reading and teaching done during this project may intersect with my identity as a reader, writer and teacher in interesting and surprising ways. Steven too.

The poetry of the subject, as outlined above, impinges on questions of form for (auto)biographical research generally and this dissertation in particular. Genres of writing available to the autobiographer are described by Louis Smith (1994) in terms of degrees of textual closure and openness. He playfully terms this the problem of the *granite* and the *rainbow*, between the desire for certainty (textual closure) and the always more of experience, self and life. He describes 4 textual forms noted by literary biographer John Clifford. *Objective biography* and *fictional biography* provide the bookends of the spectrum: the former relying on a collation of facts held together by time, the latter on imaginative writing and minimal historical research. The *artistic-scholarly* mode balances these two perspectives and provides the model for this dissertation. Clifford via Smith writes: “[this] form involves some of the same exhaustive research, but the biographer takes the role of ‘an imaginative creative artist, presenting the details in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible’” (p. 292). More rainbow than granite, this approach to language and text enables writers to engage with ambiguity, doubt and the tentative, gradual process of understanding. As will be seen in a description of this project’s phases, the imperfection of reading is a major thread of this study. The artist-scholarly form allows exploration of reading and teaching experience in the most humane

(imaginative, imperfect) terms possible – and in a way that invites readers to vicariously experience the complexity of the research moments.

The artistic-scholarly form parallels the post-structural doubt of the autobiographical genre. Robin Usher (1998), for instance, asks that we question many of our desires that lead us to autobiography, including having a transparent understanding of experience or reliable knowledge of self. She describes two competing stories of autobiography. In the humanist tale, autobiography summons a stable, unmediated past centered around the life of a rational, univocal self. The poststructuralist tale, however, is a little more suspicious of the stability and transparency of the autobiographical enterprise: a life is not reflected but created in the writing. “The subject of the autobiography exists or comes into being *because* of the act of inscription,” Usher writes (p. 20). Because the self lives in time and in relation to the world, this anchoring is only temporary. Furthermore, the texts that inscribe subjects are themselves awash in a multiple play of meanings. The post-structural, autobiographical self is thus “at play” and deferred until and because of later acts of inscription. The artistic-scholarly form converges with these theoretical commitments regarding experience, writing and identity. The form is capacious enough to accommodate anchors of meaning and their deferral: imaginative writing suggests but refuses to nail down. The form reads the self and world but remains open to re-readings.

In addition to autobiographical inquiry, this dissertation uses principles of participatory inquiry, an approach that assumes an interdependence among knowledge, action and reflection. Knowledge is in, through and for action. Reason’s (1994) *extended epistemology* provides helpful distinctions between different kinds of knowledge at work

when we describe, act in and reflect on the world. His concept consists of experiential knowledge, practical knowledge, propositional knowledge and presentational knowledge. The first, experiential knowledge, is knowledge gained through experience and reflection; practical knowledge is related to technique, the “how tos” that structure action in the world. Propositional knowledge consists of the abstract statements we make about the world. Finally, as a bridge between experience and abstraction, presentational knowledge gives form to experience so that propositions can be made about the world: it is associated most closely with creative activity. The participatory inquirer holds that propositional knowledge is amenable because of experience; theories are necessary and useful, but ultimately subject to the misfits and particularities of experience. Theories, finally, are used to inform action but are amenable to the new knowledge arising from action and reflection. I arrived to this project with particular theories about reading and teaching, but, as will be seen in later chapters, my action and reflection produced new knowledge about what it means to be a reader, a teacher and a researcher.

To answer the question “what is reading to teach,” this project consists of four moments of reading. Save for the first moment, the centerpieces of this project are two commonplace books, one kept by Steven and one by me. A commonplace book is less a textual object with particular parameters than a practice with a textual object, a deliberate orientation and relationship that one takes with a (literary) text. More details about commonplace book practices appear in the description of the second moment. For now, an outline of the moments.

1. *Narratives of reading and teaching*. This moment tries to account for the histories and experiences with reading, learning to teach and teaching that Steven and I bring to this project.

2. *Reading to Teach: The Anticipatory Moment*. During this moment, Steven and I read the text and prepared to teach it by writing in our commonplace books and journals and meeting to discuss our reading experience and teaching notes. From our engagement with the text, we made a tentative teaching unit plan.

3. *Reading while Teaching*. The third moment of reading is actually re-reading. It occurred *in medias res*, as it were – as the students read, after the unit began, but before the end. This moment of reading was not exclusively a skimming of the text or of prior notes (although that was involved) but a close re-reading of the text that tried to pay careful attention to the experience of reading under the conditions of teaching. During this moment, the teaching unit was adjusted to meet student needs and/or changing goals.

4. Finally, *reflective reading*. After the teaching unit, Steven and I reflected on what we learned about reading, teaching and “reading to teach” from this project. We also considered implications for our future reading and teaching practice. Below I detail the rationale, method and accompanying theory for each moment.

### **Narratives (Histories) of Reading and Teaching**

We learn from Grumet, Anderson and Osmond (2008) that experience with and knowledge of curriculum phenomena is at once individual, collective and lived-in-time. Curriculum inquiry thus demands understanding of the shared, collective, historical knowledge of the phenomena; an understanding of the phenomenon as lived event (in time) and, lastly, an understanding of the researcher’s history with the phenomenon. This

particular reading moment addresses the last strand. Because researchers must balance the distance of reflection and analysis with the necessary tether of embedded-ness – in history, culture and time – this moment accounts for the circular nature of interpretation and the “always, already” read and written nature of the self. This moment provides us (Steven and myself) with the texts necessary to inform our understanding of later phenomenon, even as later phenomena offer a re-reading of these histories. Past-present-future is thus a tension-filled inter-relation: the past forecloses the present and future even as the present and future re-read the past.

Since this research concerns reading, learning, and teaching, in the first moment Steven and I wrote narratives about our past experiences with reading and teaching. In her book, *Nourishing Words* (1998), Wendy Atwell-Vasey uses teachers’ narratives of reading and teaching to question the division between private and public reading experience. The narratives – beautiful and full of the world – offer glimpses of the possibilities and anxieties of reading, in solitude and with others. I suspect it was her *relinquishing control* that made possible the creativity and intimacy of the participants’ narratives. I quote her (2010, personal communication) at length on method:

In *Nourishing Words, Bridging Private Reading and Public Teaching*, I wrote an account of three teachers who write three different times about their memories of reading. They responded with vivid stories. I felt that these stories were inherently important to them because I didn’t give them any further instructions. Then I asked them to write three narratives about their current experiences teaching high school literature in the present. Again no further instructions. And finally I asked the readers of my text, as well as my three teachers, to look at all the writings in order to think about the possible future of the literature curriculum for them and for our society [...] My emphasis is on the possible motives behind our stories and the interesting ways we tell them and can make sense of them, especially, why a dilemma we have today may be evocative of a history we experienced before. I think it is the connection we make between the two that opens up the future.



Her approach of invitation provided the model. Three stories (of reading, of teaching) instead of one echoes Goldberg's (1986) conviction that our stories are not *us* but *moments* passing through us. The work of curriculum theory is not heroic self-authoring nor is it trapping ourselves in a single tale or telling. It includes balancing the difficult knowledge that our tales are already foretold but not completely foreclosed. Three tales signal traces of the self-in-time, of self with others and in different sites of being, thinking and acting. Because the self lives in-time and with others, interpretation and the dual gestures of looking back and forward matter; interpretation carries with it a belief, a conviction, in the not-yet of self and world. Since this particular reading moment is about understanding the complexities and contradictions of legacy and inheritance – and reproducing and resisting with greater intentionality – multiple tales of reading, learning and teaching were necessary. To engage the first reading moment, Steven and I wrote the following:

1. Three narratives of prior reading experience (three memories of reading)
2. Three narratives of our teaching of literature (three memories of teaching)

After writing these narratives, Steven and I read the stories of the other and discussed what we learned from this process of writing and story-sharing. The act of sharing stories was one way we helped the other reflect on, question and interrupt – and reproduce and extend to others – our habits and practices of reading and teaching. We hoped that these acts of reflecting and sharing would influence, if only in small ways, how we imagined teaching the text and how we positioned the students in relation to it. Gathering these stories allowed us to understand how our inquiries into the phenomena of reading were informed by the ways we have made sense of our past experience. The other moments of

reading also offered us opportunities to re-read these histories in light of continuing learning and self-knowledge. Our stories can be used to interpret successive moments and can also provide the framework for the (auto)biographical significance of this project: the evolving and dynamic relation among reading, teaching and living.

### **Reading to Teach: Anticipatory Reading**

For this moment, Steven and I read the text for the first time and imagined and planned to teach it. Steven and I created commonplace books out of our texts modeled on Dennis Sumara's (2002) work. Commonplace books have an extensive history. Sumara's model, taken from the novelist Michael Ondaatje, is a creative interpretation of the genre. Commonplace books were especially popular in Early Modern and Renaissance Europe (Havens, 2001). Commonplace books were a kind of personal encyclopedia of reading – a place where readers could re-write important, extracted quotes, on a variety of topics such as theology, philosophy, medicine, etc. Because books were expensive and information was not easily or readily accessible, commonplace books were an indispensable part of learning and memory work. Commonplace books literally contained a history of a person's reading – and, if desired, personal commentary. The value of rhetoric and the importance of memory were two major assumptions that supported the value of commonplace book practices. Also known as memorial books, they contained the wisdom, thinking, and authority of others (Havens, 2001). Major factors in the declining use and value of the genre included the arrival of Diderot's Encyclopedia and the rise of enlightenment thinking, which emphasized reason over memory in relation to knowledge and the independence of thought over the impurity of history and tradition. Commonplace book practices continued to be used post-

Enlightenment – W.H. Auden’s (1970) *A Certain World* is a famous example – but are viewed more as an accessory to knowledge, not indispensable to it.

As traditionally conceived, particularly by John Locke, a commonplace book contains fragments of the thoughts of others. Meaningful passages are extracted from a text and re-written (or typed) in the commonplace book under the appropriate heading, depending on the chosen organizational scheme. Even though commonplace books serve as abundant collecting places for thought, I find the traditional interpretation of the genre to lack a sense of meaningful context. Each passage stands alone as representative of a certain area of human inquiry (medicine, philosophy, theology, etc.) without reference to the larger work from which it came and without a reference to the reader’s own history, as a reader in general and *of* a particular text. Ondaatje’s creative interpretation and use of the commonplace genre in his novel, *The English Patient*, restores to commonplace practices relational, historical, interpretive, contextual ingredients. As envisioned by Ondaatje and taken up by Sumara (2002), a commonplace is created by annotating and writing in a text throughout one’s reading and re-reading of it. One can write in the margins, in-between the lines of print, on sticky notes or separate scraps of paper that are inserted into the text. Commonplaces are also made *in-time*, thus the reader finds some way of representing the responses to different readings as they occur over time. In our case, we used different colors of ink, one color for moment 2 and another for moment 3, so that we could discern when responses occurred. Although commonplace books can be made out of any text, with any sized margins, to provide more margin space I actually *made* two commonplace books by copying the original pages onto larger paper. I felt this would make collecting and interpreting data easier. Plus, the effort to make them and the

additional negative space of each page seemed to invite (perhaps demand?) the kind of engagement commonplace book practices require.

Sumara (2002) has written about the relevance of commonplace book practices for interpreting reading and lived experiences – for crafting identities. As mentioned earlier, Sumara takes up Michael Ondaatje’s novel, *The English Patient*, as his model for research. The English patient carries a copy of Herodotus’s *The Histories*. He has read the book many times over the course of two decades. His copy is unlike any other that exists. He has filled the margins with notes; responses to the text; memories; copies of other texts pasted in the margins; love notes; maps of the Lybian and Egyptian desert; real and imagined stories of romance. The book is twice its original thickness. *The Histories* is both literally and figuratively a map for the English patient. The reader learns that, among his many occupations, he is an explorer of the Lybian and Egyptian desert, searching for the lost oasis of Zerzera. Herodotus’s account contains details of the desert that help the English patient navigate his frequent crossings. The text also becomes a metaphorical map of identity. Cradled within Herodotus is the English patient’s history of reading, living, relating, loving, and imagining. With each (re)reading, the English Patient is able to stitch together a history of past, present and possible selves in relation to Herodotus’s texts. As he reads, he writes. His copy, in fact, becomes two histories.

Sumara (1996) points out that commonplace book practices – reading, writing and interpreting – are a form of “embodied action” where the reader creates the self and “co-emerges” through the relations with text/context/other readers. In other words, in reading and re-reading a text, we must prepare ourselves for change – of self, of text and of

world. The commonplace book provides material traces for the argument made earlier: reading is autobiographical and inter-textual.

Now, to a more precise description of the second reading moment. Our initial reading was both independent and collaborative. We read the text once through on our own, and, in the commonplace tradition, noted our responses/reactions/ideas in the margin. We responded as readers, as teachers and as inquirers into the phenomenon of reading to teach. In addition to the commonplace book, both Steven and I kept a notes journal that provided more linearity and structure to the data. At regular intervals of 50 pages (an average, as we wanted each interval to coincide with a chapter or section break) we wrote “notes” over that specific section of text: these notes encompassed our reactions to and interpretations of the text as a reader; initial thoughts and ideas for teaching; and reflections on the experience of reading to teach. The commonplace book thus served as a kind of index to these journal entries that were more reflective, logical and purposeful. Whereas the commonplace book provided a way to synthesize and collect the fugitive pieces of reading experience and ideas for teaching, keeping a journal at regular points about reading, teaching and the phenomenon of reading to teach provided a means for me – as researcher – to interpret within and across moments. After reading the whole text, writing in the commonplace book and in the notes journal, we met in person to share our readings of the text, our ideas for teaching, and reflections on the phenomenon of reading to teach. The first time we met to share our readings, reflections and teaching ideas was only a few hours before the first session of class for the quarter and the first time Steven and I would meet the students. The timing was intentional. We wanted to complete the first reading and planning sessions before meeting the students; this distinction, we

thought, would allow me at later points to play with and interpret a relationship, a potential tension, between imagination and reality.

During our first reading of the text and during our planning meetings, we negotiated three different but inter-related identities: reader, teacher and inquirer. As readers, we were (at least) concerned with interpreting the text and with understanding reader-text-context relations; as teachers, our concerns were how to plan and structure pedagogical opportunities for students to engage with the text; as inquirers, we wanted to understand our experience with text under the conditions of reading to teach.

While I was open, as an inquirer, to what the phenomenon might bring, I was thinking about several questions before and during the study. In what ways does anticipatory reading converge/diverge with other reading experiences and what are the consequences? I kept thinking about Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, her hunger for reading to the point of madness. Woolf writes, "[His] taste for books was an early one. As a child [Orlando] was sometimes found at midnight by a page still reading. [His parents] took his taper [light] away and he bred glow-worms to serve his purpose. They took the glow-worms away, and he almost burnt the house down with a tinder" (p. 55). Would we also read with this kind of desperation? Would pedagogical reading fulfill a need for us as books did for Orlando? I was also curious about the position of the imagined others in our readings: the students, and what these others do to reading. In a reproduction of Dr. Kay's readings, would the students be invisible? Would they be imagined as a threat, an intrusion to reading, or a potential gift, an abundance for what the text might mean or do in the world? And what might this say about reading and teaching?

### **Reading While Teaching**

*To live is to read or rather to commit again and again the failure to read which is the human lot.* -- J. Hillis Miller, 1987, p. 59.

Reading while teaching is re-reading. We returned to the text for our second reading during the teaching unit. Unlike the second moment, Steven and I here shared our reading with the students, who became co-readers. We re-read the text as they read for the first time. In the third moment, we tried to understand our reading experience that occurred after we met the students, while actually teaching the text and as the students were responding to, experiencing and understanding the text.

Before beginning the study, Steven had struggled to engage his students in the study and reading of literature. Many students saw little connection between reading literature and their interests or future career choices. He has tried and still tries to address this gap by framing reading and writing as relevant activities for their future and with varying success. We both desired to make something happen in this study: to read and teach differently for the students and ourselves. We did not know exactly what this difference was: but our co-readers, the students, would play a significant role in what was made, learned and enacted: in the world and in us. The chapters that follow address this point.

Scholes (1989) suggests that reading is mis-reading. If we are always outside the text, as he maintains we are, our knowledge remains incomplete, making reading always necessary, always a partial answer to desire's question. What interested me was that if reading is always a failure to read, what does failure mean in the context of reading the text with others? What/who does failure foreclose and what/who does it open? How did we mis-read the text in relation to the students and the students in relation to the text? What does mis-reading tell us about the fantasies and projections that saturate pedagogy?

I indicated earlier the multiple and inter-related identities that Steven and I occupy during this study: reader, teacher, inquirer. During the second moment, Steven and I had the (relative) luxury of time to dwell in the generous and converging space of three concerns: the text, imagining and planning the teaching event, and the research questions about reading experience. Reading while teaching occurred during a different context: of actually teaching. So, questions I want(ed) to pose include what happens to our identities during this moment of reading (and teachers' identities when reading to teach) and how do these happenings shape reading and the reader? I suspected that this moment would involve a different relationship to the time of reading. Hunsberger (1992) notes that reading literature potentially involves two kinds of time and their inter-relation: clock time and inner time. She writes: "In reading, clock time lies on the horizon of inner time. Clock time must recede to the horizon, but not disappear out of sight entirely. To live exclusively within inner time is the mark of illness; to live exclusively within world time and have no inner reality, no vision, may be just as disturbed" (p. 68). Inner time is the landscape of becoming, of understanding self and world, and is formed in relations with others, with texts and with the work of reflection. In relation to time, I wondered how the time of reading would be affected by teaching – after all, the lesson, the students, the world await for the teacher to emerge from the aesthetic time of reading. What does the a) immediacy of teaching and planning and b) the simultaneous co-reading of our students do to the time of our readings? And how does any potential change in the time of reading affect our reading experience, our reading identities? What identities (as reader, teacher, researcher) does reading while teaching mute, exaggerate, or complicate? Can we, like Orlando, read with imagination and creativity? Orlando reads in solitude. We



read with others. He has a “freedom” that we did not. So, what might reading with imagination and creativity mean in the context of reading a book with others? What possibilities, if any, does reading with others have that reading in solitude does not? Finally, how does this moment re-read the moments that came before? Related to this last question, what is the tension between the students we imagined and the actual students we teach?

Similar to the second moment, the data for moment three consisted of commonplace book annotation and writing in our “notes” journal about reading, teaching and the phenomenon of reading to teach. We wrote “notes” over chunks of text that corresponded to the same chunks as in moment 2 – making interpretation within and across moments easier.

After every teaching session, we reflected on what happened during class and how we might adjust our teaching unit based on ongoing experience and reflection. Our conversations during this time focused on teaching. But, we were also interested in our changing reading experience. We used our commonplace book annotations and “notes” journals to understand how our reading experience during this moment extended/departed from previous moments. Lastly, we were interested in collecting and documenting student perspectives/work from this portion of the study. To do so, I recorded class sessions and obtained student work related to the project (creative writing, discussion question worksheets, final projects). This allowed me to understand the relation between what we imagined and wanted students to learn and what they learned as represented in writing, discussing, performing, etc.

## **Reflective Reading**

At the conclusion of the teaching unit, Steven and I had several conversations about what we learned about reading and teaching from the research and teaching process. In what ways, if any, is reading to teach an important, interesting, or challenging phenomenon? What did we learn that might help us be better teachers in the future? And better readers? What would we change about the project had we another opportunity? Have we changed as readers or teachers? If so, how? Those were the key questions that occupied our attention.

## **Selecting a Text**

Selecting a text was a fascinating problem. Before the current approach to this dissertation was devised (i.e., *actually* teaching a text to real students), Steven and I envisioned a similar exercise of preparatory reading that remained hypothetical. In November 2009, I pitched a project to him that involved methods used by Grumet and Pinar (1983) in a piece called “Doublereading.” In this case, Steven and I would read the text separately and note our responses for reading and teaching but we would also predict the responses of the other reader. “Double reading,” it seemed at the time, would allow me to understand the psychodynamics of reading and teaching, particularly 1) how and when interpretation swerves to meet the needs of the ego (Holland, 1980) and 2) the contours of introjection and projection that point to the identities readers claim and disavow. Just how “double reading” would have helped me understand the phenomenon of reading to teach was, in hindsight, not well developed or justified. Had we carried on with this project, however, we also would have imagined and planned to teach the text

but would never have *actually taught the text or any students* – an obvious and major difference between that version of the project and this one.

Felicitously alone in our solitude, the books we discussed reading for the “doublereading” version were texts that in our various identities as readers, teachers, and artists we wanted to read. I was partial to Penelope Lively’s (1987) *Moon Tiger*, which explores issues of history and life writing – elements that, I thought, shape our reading and teaching acts even as reading and teaching shape history and life. I suspected that *Moon Tiger* would have invited a playful weave of its content and the enactments of reading, writing and teaching taking place through it. Steven fancied *At Swim Two Birds* by Flann O’Brien (1951), a highly experimental, meta-fictional novel. Characters rebel against authors; writing and plot-making are exposed as forms of control. O’Brien’s rich and abundant tale is told by a university student of Irish literature preparing for end-of-term exams. Although we did not know much about the text outside of these few details, it tempted us with quality ingredients: education, creativity, the multiple and intersecting plots of authors and those ostensibly created.

It soon became clear, however, that to adequately understand the concept of reading to teach and how the reader experiences such a phenomenon, we needed to teach actual people in a real learning situation. A hypothetical teaching scenario would not present the concrete, bodily relationships our task seemed to demand. I worried that our readings would not be honest nor would they matter. The act of teaching seemed to tether our reading and theorizing to the world: beyond ostensibly private aesthetic experience, there are students who demand our attention, who disrupt, diminish, enhance, enlarge reading. I hoped the classroom would restore to our reading acts a dialectic that may have

been minimized if not absent otherwise: the tension of imagination-reality, dreams-lives, gift-demand, self-other.

I needed to find a real classroom and a real audience. I would have preferred to work at a site closer to North Carolina. However, since the project involved an intense time commitment, a love of reading and a level of intimacy with me, the researcher, Steven seemed an appropriate choice. When I asked if he wanted to co-teach a text to his English 102 class, he welcomed the project as an adventure and opportunity to learn. The more we thought about our potential audience, the more our prior choices – like *Moon Tiger* or *At Swim Two Birds* – seemed inappropriate: specifically, we worried about our literary fascinations being too idiosyncratic. Perhaps these texts would be too challenging or disconnected from the students interests. *What is the text?* was a point of obvious concern for us in planning this project. I came to the project with criteria in mind for selecting the text and so did Steven. Many of these standards were implicit and only named in the process of negotiation with each other. We slowly came to discover what we wanted as we thought individually and together. Several issues informed my end of the choice.

Block (1995) notes that pedagogies of reading shape the *what* and the *who* of reading. Conceiving of the text as an object, for instance, means that the *what* and the *who* of reading will be markedly different than if teachers conceive of text as encounter or event-in-time. Reader-response theory and transactional theories of reading support this claim (Rosenblatt, 1994; Wilhelm, 2008; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011). In addition to the pedagogies of reading noted by Block, the form of the text shapes the *what* and the *who* of reading as well. The distinction Barthes (1974) makes between *writerly* and *readerly*

text helped me think about our choices. A readerly text minimizes the gaps and indeterminacies that cultivate reader-text relations and the imagination. The *writerly* text, however, requires the reader to write what is read. The reader constructs meaning from the text by adding to it. Scholes (1989), in the clearest formulation of reader/text/context relations I've come across, maintains that the reader is "always outside the text" (p. 6). Reading brings together "at least two times, two places, and two consciousnesses" making interpretation an endlessly fascinating problem. The reader is not the author (even if they are the same person) – thus the reader's otherness and outside-ness. We must add something of ourselves to what we read, put beautifully here by Scholes: "to read at all, we must read the book of ourselves in front of us, and we must bring the text home, into our thoughts and lives, into our judgments and deeds. We cannot enter the texts we read, but they can enter us. That is what reading is all about" (p. 6). To satisfy our desire for narrative completion, we must add something to the text in order to read it—and this *something* must be the self in a social, historical, desiring moment. Scholes is fond of repeating Barthes's notion of reading: "we *write* the text of the work within the text of our lives." For these theorists, the writer-ly text foregrounds the inter-textual and autobiographical character of reading. Because the writer-ly text is located in the commonplace of reader/text/context, it would seem to offer teachers more creative possibilities and problems to think with, against and through when reading the text, and when imagining and doing pedagogy. For these reasons, I wanted to read and teach a *writerly* text.

I also noticed that selecting a text involved my (and to some extent Steven's) fantasies of reading, teaching and of the students. Traces of these fantasies were threaded

throughout the initial proposal: the fantasy of being a creative reader, perhaps compensating for an unfilled writing life; the fantasy of teaching making a difference, perhaps compensating for a fear that teaching, our life's work, does not make a difference; the projection of slight deficiency on to the imagined students, thereby propping up my position as a capable, competent reader. These fantasies (and others I cannot or refuse to name) were and are "in play" as the study happened and as I (mis)read and interpret the data. I will return to these later in the writing.

In September 2010, Steven and I resumed an ongoing discussion about which text to teach. *Moon Tiger* and *At Swim Two Birds* were off the table. Steven proposed a variety of genres, including graphic novels. He had prior success with *American Born Chinese* – his students seemed engaged with the format and structure of the book. We thought seriously about teaching *Watchmen* – a graphic novel that we thought presented many advantages. We imagined that the students would be engaged with the content. We also saw an opportunity to use the text to critically examine the concept of *superhero* in the American cultural imaginary. I was reluctant, however, to peg my dissertation hopes on a genre I had little experience with. A few months later, I read *Epileptic*, a graphic novel by David B. While the story was gripping and intellectually challenging, I found my first experience reading both print and image overwhelming. So we turned to plays.

Plays offer brevity – an advantage from Steven's point of view when incorporating new pedagogical material into an already created course structure and progression. Perhaps more importantly, plays return readers to their bodies, their gestures, their physical presence in the world – and thus cater to a bodily, interactive pedagogy. Steven loves Shakespeare. Would it not be a bit of poetry, he asked, to teach

Shakespeare for this project, given my opening tale and previous experience teaching him. It doubtless would have been. But I was concerned about alienating the students (and myself!) from the project. If a play's the thing, I wanted something with more contemporary language – perhaps *Waiting for Godot* or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. We did not get much further with this debate. Between Shakespeare and more contemporary drama, we could not find a bridge. So we returned to prose.

Steven suggested we limit the text to 200 pages or under. I searched for novellas. Two were particularly interesting: *The Devils Own Work* by Alan Judd and *The Diving Pool* by Yoko Ogawa. Judd's work features an aspiring novelist who, like Faust, sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for a writing muse and worldly fame. *The Diving Pool* is a collection of three novellas, an attractive form that lessened the anxiety of choice. *The Diving Pool*'s language was particularly attractive, rich in subtext. The tales, however, seemed eccentric. Two featured suicide and incest. While both books seemed to offer something for us, we worried that the students would not find it interesting *and* were reluctant to engage these topics with them. The central tension in the selection process, not surprisingly, was how to balance the needs of the teachers and the imagined students. Thankfully, by December 2010, I found *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos at the recommendation of a friend.

The text seemed to offer something for everyone. From skimming the pages and reading reviews online, I knew it was about Jack's journey to become a writer. Steven and I would both be interested in that, I thought. It was also an adventurous story of good intentions gone awry. Jack sails a boat full of hash to New York in hopes of saving money for college but, predictably, gets caught and lands in prison. Only in prison, a

most unlikely place, does he *become* the writer he had so long dreamed of being. For the students, it seemed to offer adventure with a coming-of-age twist that would be appealing. Finally, during my initial investigation, I learned that Jack actually keeps what amounts to a commonplace book in a prison-copy of Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*. This book is instrumental in his *becoming* as a writer. After consulting with Steven, we decided it was a sensible choice. We penciled in Gantos as the text – found at last – and were fairly confident that we would not change course.

I wanted to keep options open, however, because I felt uncomfortable selecting this text to teach without having more knowledge of it. After all, teachers do not decide to teach something without having read the text first. That would be silly. However, I felt at the time that giving the text a thorough read would certainly influence my marginalia during the first reading of the text with Steven. The difference between reading and re-reading is certainly not small. I worried that I would not have as much to say or write during the “research readings” if I read the book closely beforehand. But I knew I needed to read the text or at least large chunks of it before finalizing our plans. In his landmark *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton (1983) made a jab at the practice of “close reading” – a literary critical practice that focuses exclusively on the “words on the page” rather than the economic, material, ideological context out of which a literary work is produced. The practice, he says, “seemed to imply that every previous school of criticism had read only an average of three words per line” (p. 38). I read the book the first time in December. I read more than three words per line – all of them in fact! But I was hardly *close reading* in the tradition that Eagleton describes. It would be a stretch to say that I read without thinking – an impossible task, certainly – but I did read in a cursory way. I did not take



notes or have long moments of reflection. I read for the “what” of the book – what Rosenblatt calls *effere*nt reading or reading for information.

After reading the text, I was ambivalent about the text and told Steven so. The story was certainly exciting and adventurous. It had elements that both we and the students (we imagined) would like – a writer’s journey, difficult decisions shaping lives, the dangerous edge of drugs. But one aspect of the book concerned me. The prose seemed flat, too direct, and the plot too linear. It seemed like a simple tale, with no gaps, leaving me, as a reader, with nothing to do. It was a strange quality. I admitted to Steven my hesitation. This book did not seem very “writerly” at all – I had spilled quite a bit of ink and time proposing why a writerly text was theoretically justified and interesting. Gantos was certainly not Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, E.L. Doctorow or Michael Ondaatje on Barthes’ writerly scale. But Steven thought this would be an asset – from the students’ perspective and perhaps from ours as well. A combination of length and textual difficulty might make the reading experience impossible for the students (and I can only speculate about what this combination might have meant for our reading experience as teachers). Plus, he thought, Gantos might be a welcomed change of pace from the more difficult authors that make up the course. I saw his point of view. And I took solace in two concepts. First, there was a reader’s endemic outsideness, courtesy of Scholes. One is always outside the text, no matter how simple a tale, and so there is interpretive work to do. The second was Umberto Eco’s (1994) view that every text is a lazy machine, waiting for the reader to do its work.

Taken together, these concepts promised what I probably already knew – that reading is never exhausted with the author’s pen but is opened again with the reader’s

eyes. I suspected, again, that my response to Gantos's text would be surprising and would generate enough material for research. I began to wonder then (again) about the relation between "writerly texts" and a reader's creativity and pleasure. Perhaps this relationship was more tenuous than I first thought? Was my faith in this relationship itself a sign of something more interesting about reading, writing, teaching and creativity and/or how these human activities played out in my own life?

### **Making the Commonplace Book**

The margins of *Hole in My Life* were not very spacious – about a ½ inch on all sides. How, exactly, would our engagement with the text be represented in such a narrow space? When thinking about the structure of the book and how to possibly modify it, I recalled Seth Lerer's (2009) lecture on the codex as a technology.<sup>2</sup> The architecture of contemporary texts – *Hole in My Life* being one example – devotes much of the space to the printed word. The margins and space between lines are small. Contemporary readers would be surprised, Lerer argues, by opening an older version of the codex, say, from the Medieval period down to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries. So little of those larger pages is devoted to the main text. Plentiful margins let the main text breathe and leave room for commentary. Earlier acts of reading were acts of writing – the margins enabling material engagement and conversation. The technology of the codex itself shapes what reading was, is, might be. Compared to early versions of the codex, contemporary versions seem claustrophobic. They leave little room for *you*. Because I was interested in materially

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<sup>2</sup> Codex is the word Lerer uses to describe the version of the book we know today, with spine and leaves. His lecture is full of great details about the relationship between technology and "reading" itself. For instance, unlike reading a codex, one does not need a "bookmark" when reading from a scroll. The notion of "skimming" a text did not exist prior to the codex. One can quickly flip through its pages, an orientation the scroll does not allow.

collecting and understanding the reading experience of teachers, I thought the earlier shape of the codex might be a useful model for my project.

To enlarge the margins of *Hole in My Life*, I cut up and individually removed the pages from the paperback copy. I had not yet envisioned exactly how later steps would go, but I imagined copying these pages onto larger paper. I thought it necessary to individually remove the pages from the spine because I worried about “copy shadows” if I tried copying with the paperback intact. I purchased an exacto knife and went to work. Before disassembling *A Hole in My Life*, I practiced on two older paperbacks, an unsettling yet necessary choice. I had never destroyed a book before. When I felt comfortable with my new skill, I turned to *Hole in My Life*. I first removed the outer paperback cover to expose the first and last pages and a spine encased by a thick coating of dried glue. I used the knife to remove the layer of glue and remove each page from the spine, one by one. The whole process took about 5 hours. No doubt others could have completed it more quickly, but I relished the chance to do something material. At this moment in the study, I was also writing the reading and teaching stories and struggled to find a language to make them come alive. I wanted to write what seemed to be distant moments lived by another. Acts of writing were getting me nowhere. Wielding a knife and ripping pages *was* getting me somewhere. I was able to plan, act, and reflect on the tangible quality of my work. So I took my time. Holding the knife, scraping the glue, feeling the grainy texture of the paper – it turned into a prolonged, if destructive, pleasure. I was making progress.

I had many friends help me along the way. After cutting up the book, I went to see Debbie to complain about how the stories were not coming along, to surprise her with

the destroyed book, and to ask her how I might bind the pages together into a regular codex. This was a particular point of concern as I knew very little about the craft of bookbinding, and Steven and I needed to start reading in a few weeks. She advised that I wait to bind the books until the project was over. “That way it’s a living document. More organic.” It was a brilliant suggestion. The idea of a living document resonated with me too. That is what I wanted, after all – a book that captured the life of reading and teaching even as it enabled new forms through memory-making and interpretation.

I went to a local business that specialized in office supplies. I explained to the sales associate what I wanted to do and if his business could help me pick out paper and even copy the pages for me. He said yes to both. I wanted paper that mimicked the texture of Gantos’s pages and many other paperbacks. Gantos’s pages were cottony – soft yet textured. The sales associate felt the pages. He suspected that the samples up front had been flattened out through repeated touch and oil. Thinking through his fingers, he led me down a long aisle of choices. He opened a few boxes and let me feel an untouched sample. What I picked was cottony 8.5 x 11 resume paper. It felt perfect. But before I could be sure, I asked to write on a sample with ink as this would be the only means of materially representing our engagement with the text. Again, the sales associate was very accommodating. The paper absorbed the ink quickly, reducing the likelihood of smudges. Plus, a line of ink stayed a *line* and did not absorb into small arteries as can sometimes be the case with thicker paper. I was satisfied.

I also asked if they had bookmaking supplies or offered bookmaking services. The sales associate said he could bind the copied pages into a spiral bound notebook with plastic covers by the next business day. When he showed me an example, I politely

declined. The form looked better suited for a lab manual or an annual business report. They also offered hardcover book binding. Technically, this is what I wanted but, again, when he showed me an example, I declined. The books resembled a high school yearbook or a bound dissertation. It looked mass-produced and lacked any fingerprint of my own imagination. I would stick with the loose pages. After the research process was over, I thought at the time, I would learn about bookmaking from the local craft artist community.

### **Context and the Course**

Before Steven and I began *anticipatory reading*, I asked him to tell me a little about the school, the students and the course so I could have contextual information to help me imagine pedagogy during our first reading and throughout the study. This particular section is written in a different voice. Much of the material is an adapted interview transcript of a conversation Steven and I had about his course, the students and the institution. I have tried to balance Steven's perspective with summary, commentary and transitions to make this part more readable. At points, I have left pauses, stutters and hesitations undisturbed. I felt this would give the reader (and me, the interpreter) a better sense of the struggle that Steven has understanding exactly *where*, *what*, and *who* he teaches – and *how* he should teach. I have struggled with these questions before and, as will be seen in later chapters, some of his anxieties were contagious. I have tried, finally, to write this section in a way that brings readers close to the one speaking.

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College is a four-year private university, located in a large metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. College specializes in the arts, yet every student at College, regardless of major, must take General Education courses. English 102 is one

such course and focuses more on literature than on argumentation and writing, like English 101. I asked Steven to tell me a little about the students he teachers. Many in his introductory English classes are “like normal undergraduates” – 18 or 19 years old. The students come from different racial backgrounds; over half are usually identified as Black or Latina/o, the remainder white. There is also a “fair amount”, he said, of people in their late 20s or early 30s coming back to school using the GI Bill. Some have been working for a while – 5 or 6 years -- and want to come back to school.

Steven also organized students into two bigger categories. One group is composed of former [nearby Metropolitan] public school students. He offered his perspective:

We are in [Metropolitan area], or right next to it, so you're getting a lot of people from [County] area public schools. They usually come from really rough neighborhoods. And these students want to do stuff. The nice part is they clearly want to learn because they want to achieve some sort of proficiency in some field. There's something that made them enroll in College. They aren't being made to sign up. But they come from rough backgrounds. Their study skills are not very good. Typically they hate English, usually. And there's some pretty surprising language, I guess, deficiencies when you look at their writing. But I think, partially, most of that is probably the public schools, which are pretty bad. That's one stream.

The second stream he described as older, working or retired military students coming back to school and looking for something “alternative” in a college choice.

They don't want to go to community college and are looking for something a little bit different. Maybe their grades weren't good enough to get into a four-year so they are looking for something non-traditional. You know what I've heard? Apparently they have very flashy commercials of the school that sell the place. They have a lot of computers that are really nice, the building is nice, so in some aspects it does sell people with some kind of flair or pizzazz or whatever that a community college doesn't have.

Steven said the three biggest majors are audio engineering, animation and culinary arts. A common refrain in our conversation was doubt – about the viability of these major areas of study and his own viability as an English teacher.

So a lot of people are there to do something with audio in hopes of doing something with hip hop at some point in their career. You know, I don't know, I don't know how much of that is actually achievable. I have no idea. You would think that the interest in hip-hop would trickle in to, uh, poetry being interesting or somehow accessible. But, I haven't found that to be the case yet [he laughs]. Yeah, it hasn't happened yet. [...] Another major is animation. People want to become animators or they want to become, you know something...they like to draw basically. And they are trying to do something with art, mostly animation. So you get a lot people who are into drawing, that sort of thing. They'll be doodling in your class [laughs]. One of their big draws to the school now is culinary. They have a kitchen on the 12th floor. They have a pretty vibrant culinary community. It's probably 20-30 percent of the students. And they're pretty good too. They're in some aspects more military-like because the chefs are very strict disciplinarians [laughs]. So sometimes it's good to have those students because they will be a little bit more...I don't want to say pliable but I don't want to say obedient either...more willing to listen maybe?

In a variety of ways, Steven expressed his uneasiness teaching at the school. Referring to College as *them* and *their* instead of *us* and *ours* was one subtle way. At certain points, he was more explicit. College offers some *pizzaz* that community colleges do not or cannot, but with consequences:

It's 2000 dollars for a class. So it's really expensive. I guess in that aspect *ethically* it's hard, it's... it's hard. I wish I were teaching at a community college because I would feel less guilty. Because I know some people are just throwing in money and they are failing classes. And they are just going to go into debt. The thing about the arts is that it's one of the hardest majors to make it in because so many people enjoy the arts. So, you know, you can't be lackluster or half ass the arts. You gotta be, you gotta be really motivated and really driven and some of the students *are*. You will find students who are at the university and you are wondering why they aren't at the University [large state university nearby]. Some of these kids are pretty good and you're like -- I don't know why they are there. Maybe they just wanted to go to a school that was less of a liberal education and more of that kind of "okay, here are the courses you need to take for this specific major." It has that directness, that trade school approach, that people like.

Steven also made predictions, maybe even warnings. He continually advised me that College was different than what I was used to at UNC, in terms of the quality of student.

Probably in our class, we'll have around 2 students that could be at a four-year university and you are kind of wondering why they're not. And then a couple, probably 4 or 5 that are going to be people from the DC public schools and are

less motivated. I mean they are motivated somewhere but they won't be motivated in English and it will be harder to get them in to the conversation. They are friendly, though. The people here are very friendly. The nice part about working with college-aged students is I feel like people at that age are pretty affable and you can even joke around with them. I think the key is just trying to motivate them and doing that can be hard. I have trouble getting them to really try to get to put serious intention to their writing and verbal skills. But the kids are friendly. It's nice. I just sometimes feel bad when I teach there because I wish it didn't cost so much. I'd feel less horrible if it didn't cost so much. But it costs enough and the students don't have rich families so it's not like you are teaching at Princeton and you know they'll be all right. These are people who are taking out a lot of loans to go to school. And they are under the mentality -- which is understandable -- that "oh, I'll pay it off later." But you know it's just going to rack up.

These conversations left me feeling upbeat and a little overwhelmed too. What an interesting, provocative location to do my study, I thought. I am interested in reading and aesthetics, and generally try to dissociate myself from corporate, for-profit kinds of ventures, people and places. And yet, here was my dissertation site.

I also wanted to know more about Steven's course, the objectives and his other readings. I knew the form this study would take would depend a great deal on his course goals, how he taught, his classroom culture, and the memoir's placement in the syllabus. The Gantos unit, in other words, would not exist in isolation but had to exist alongside the other units that he had prepared and would be teaching. Before reading, I talked with Steven about his course and syllabus to get an idea of how Gantos might fit into the course trajectory.

Steven has been teaching at College for three years. Our course would be his 5th time teaching English 102. He favors this course over the other two courses he regularly teaches, English 090 (remedial skills) and English 101 (rhetoric and argumentation). He enjoys teaching literature more than writing – not unheard of for an English Major! – and savors the relative freedom and flexibility of the English 102 syllabi.



One of the things I like about the 102 course is I'm able to be a little bit more relaxed in that class because that's the end of the road in English for them. I feel like in 090 and 101 [other courses he teaches], I'm really trying to push basic writing skills – so there's pressure to get them up to speed – where I feel like you can be a little bit more free in 102. I'm not really teaching argumentation anymore. In some aspects the purpose of the course to me is to kind of fulfill this idea of a humanist education. Trying to give to people an alternative to or at least an outlet for living, to make life a little more interesting.

The relative freedom of 102 and the broad humanism supporting the course rationale – as interpreted by Steven – brought with it an anxiety of *relevance*. This influenced *how* he organized the course and gave rise to a supplemental rationale. During the first iterations of 102, Steven described himself as “more free flowing” with how he organized the course and the readings, but now he has come to organize the course around “genres.” He found this was necessary in order to respond in a tangible way to what he described as *skeptical eyes*.

I realize that people are skeptical towards reading. When I teach literature sometimes I feel a lot of skeptical eyes staring back at me. So by focusing on genres, I'm trying to say look, look how these people do this, how they achieve an effect. This will help you analyze anything. Not just literature or movies. Anything. You are trying to look at how something achieves an effect. If Barack Obama gives a speech you're trying to see how he achieves whatever goal he is trying to do. How he wants to persuade people. You can see this in anything I feel like. You're just trying to break open the clock and see how it works. I try to stress that as a kind of practical goal towards studying literature.

Steven describes his course as a “survey” class. The course text – DiYanni's *Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry and Drama* – is a large, somewhat cumbersome text suitable to survey courses. In fact, the largest chunks of a typical section of Steven's course are (short) fiction, poetry and drama, with a few additions like a graphic novel and a translations unit to fill out the 10 weeks. Steven's typical course begins with fables and parables – what he calls the core of storytelling. Tales include selections from Aesop's Fables, “The Good Samaritan,” “The Parable of the Taoist Farmer,” Buddha's “Parable

of the Mustard Seed” and Kafka’s “Before the Law.” Fables and parables balances form and content. *How you tell it is just as important as what you are going to tell*, he says. Fables and parables allow Steven to approach the art and structure of storytelling while being approachable and fun. Plus, students can read them and talk about them in class – an advantage on the first day.

The fiction unit (four weeks total) is filled out with a turn to mythology (“The Epic of Gilgamesh”) and unique subgenres of modern short fiction. Genres include horror, science fiction, and magical realism. Authors include Edgar Allen Poe, Shirley Jackson, Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel Marquez. Steven likes to conclude the short fiction unit with a brief look at literary modernism, specifically Borges’s “A Garden of Forked paths” and Heminway’s “Hills Like White Elephants.”

Poetry usually gets two weeks. Steven explores the question “What is Poetry?” with two poems – Billy Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry” and Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica”. Using these definitions, students explore possible meanings in the work of Emily Dickinson, Taylor Mali, W. H. Auden, Pablo Neruda, Langston Hughes, William Blake and Lewis Carroll. Steven fills out the unit with a lengthy discussion of rhythm and meter – the architecture of poetry – and also explores two particular forms, the sonnet and the villanelle, using diverse authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and the more contemporary Elizabeth Bishop and Dylan Thomas.

For drama (2 weeks), Steven provides a general introduction to theatre – including Greek drama and earlier influences on Elizabethan theatre– and an introduction to Shakespeare. While there are many plays to choose from, certainly, Steven has the most experience teaching *Othello*. Three smaller units round out the course -- a 1 week

unit on comics and the graphic novel *American Born Chinese*; a one week translation project over Dante's *Inferno*; and, finally, a one class exploration of five different philosophies or worldview's and the thinkers behind them: Socrates's skepticism, Chuang Tzu's relativism, Epictetus's stoicism, Schopenhauer's pessimism and Sartre's existentialism. Steven likes to end every quarter with this lecture and gives students the opportunity to write an extra credit response paper as well.

Course grades (out of 300 points) are calculated based on essays, quizzes, classwork, projects (translation project) and response papers. The three biggest assignments are two essays (80 pts total) and the translation project (30 points). Essay 1 covers the fiction unit and Essay 2 the poetry unit. Both essays ask students to display their understanding of the "game of genres."

What you are doing is you are trying to define it and then you are trying to say what it's capable of and you are trying to analyze one of the stories (or poems) we read as an example of the genre. How much of it is an epitome of that genre but also how much it deviates from, you know how much does it play the game? How does it use the form of the genre?

In addition to regular reading quizzes and class work – in the form of group discussion questions – students also respond at various points in the quarter with brief response papers. One to a Borges essay entitled "On Poetry" and another to the temptation scene in *Othello* (Act 3, scene 3) – where Iago employs sublime rhetoric to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. Finally, with a "Poetic Form Creative Writing Project," students have the opportunity to compose a sonnet or villanelle creatively using the rules of each poetic form.

The decision about when to place the memoir unit was reached collaboratively, though Steven decided what material to cut. We ultimately decided that the memoir unit

would fit in weeks 7-8, after the fiction and poetry units were finished. Steven offered his perspective.

Yeah, that's perfect. That's when the poetry unit would end. I feel like that would work pretty well because they are going to be really tired of poetry at that point. We all are. So I think something which in some ways is incredibly straightforward might be a breath of fresh air.

Despite the addition of the memoir, the fiction and poetry units were kept in tact.

*American Born Chinese* and the translation project, by necessity, were eliminated. The translation project freed up 30 points, whetting our imaginations with the possibility of a big Gantos project to take its place. Shakespeare was moved to the end of the course and the philosophy lectures to week six, providing a buffer between the poetry unit and Gantos. This turned out to be a beneficial move, because the Gantos unit ended up bleeding into both weeks on either side. We used half of class on week 6 to introduce commonplace books and the final Gantos project. And students used an hour of class during week 10 to present their final projects (before Steven commenced with *Othello*).

Steven's syllabus was populated with authors that I was familiar with and also enjoyed. While his focus on genres and "how the game of texts" is played seemed *potentially* counter to reading as a profound and transformative experience, I did not mention this to Steven as I was a guest in his course and reluctant to disrupt his syllabus and course organization. Additionally, both Steven and I thought "genres" presented an opportunity to invite students to learn through doing, to create their own memoirs and reflect on the process. In general, we were hopeful that Gantos would offer our pedagogy, and the students, something new.

What follows are chapters that described and analyze our experience of the four moments of reading. "Narratives of Reading and Teaching" addresses the histories of

reading and teaching that Steven and I brought to the project. “Anticipatory Reading” describes and analysis our reading experience during the first reading of Gantos, before we had met the students. “Intertude” addresses our initial design of the Gantos unit and the questions we thought through during the planning. “Reading while Teaching,” in two parts, describes and analyzes our second reading of text that occurred as students were reading, during the Gantos unit.

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVES OF READING AND TEACHING

*Intentions Behind the Tales – Stories that Point to our Anxieties and Desires about Reading and Teaching – Teachers, Accidental and Essential – Teacher (Im)Potency – Herodotus and Thucydides – How Does One Teach Without Killing the Text? – The Private Reader's Influence on Teaching – Writing our Past to Imagine How we might Teach the Text*

Is it the foot, which rubs the cobblestones and snakestones all its days, this lowliest of tongues, whose lick-tracks tell our history of errors to the dust behind, which is the last trace in us of wings? And is it the hen's nightmare, or her secret dream, to scratch the ground forever eating the minutes out of the grains of sand? [...] On this road on which I do not know how to ask for bread, on which I do not know how to ask for water, this path inventing itself [...] I long for the mantle of the great wanderers, who lighted their steps by the lamp of pure hunger and pure thirst, and whichever way they lurched was the way. – Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares* (1971), p. 21-22, prose adaptation, pasted into my commonplace book

The first moment of reading, what I called “Narrative Histories of Reading and Teaching” was meant to account for the histories and experiences with reading and teaching literature that Steven and I brought to this project. Over the course of three weeks, we each wrote three stories of reading experience and three stories of teaching experience. In *Nourishing Words*, Atwell-Vasey's (1998) method of collecting memories of reading experience served as the model for our story gathering. She gave no stipulations about what reading experiences she wanted her participants to recall (for example, in school or out of school); by letting the method breathe, she invited the unpredictable story, the insight that comes from hunger, from lurching forward in the dark. Taking inspiration from her *unmethod*, I kept our requirements as spare as possible:

to write about reading and teaching experiences that were important to us. After we composed our stories, we traded and read the stories of the other person so that we could have an informed conversation. My intention was to talk about the stories; to discuss the histories and experiences of reading and teaching we were bringing to this project; our gathering of the past, I imagined, would provide insight into how we have been shaped, for better and for worse, by the social practice of teaching. I imagined that such an insight would help us interrupt and/or extend these histories with greater intentionality. I also wanted to talk broadly about the current state of our reading, teaching and writing lives and envision how this project might fit into or interrupt the rhythms of those dimensions. Lastly, in anticipation of the project, I wanted to talk about how teaching might nourish and be nourished by a creative life.

I have tried to retain as much as possible the narrative quality of our stories and our interview conversation. For this reason, I frequently quote interview text and the stories themselves. The reason this section relies heavily on these texts, instead of a certain, analytical and present authorial voice, is because there was and is the feeling that the work I am describing is not finished. The events of the study may literally be finished in time, but hardly finished in meaning. This raises the question of whether a hermeneutical, autobiographical project is ever, really, over? Is it ever history? While I am compelled to have something to say and not disappear in the messiness of abundant, interesting data, I imagine that the last moment of this project, *reading together*, while certainly raising more questions about “reading to teach,” will provide a measure of closure and solid footing to the questions raised and provoked in this chapter and in subsequent chapters. I envision this chapter as one piece of a collaborative reading and

teaching (auto)biography. I have taken the term *collaborative (auto)biography* from the work of Tom Barone (1997) and I wish both to depart and add to his usage of the term. Barone has been a central figure in conceptualizing how we can write research differently – through the arts, through stories – in ways that acknowledge the productive ambiguity of inquiry. Writing research through storytelling invites the reader – similar to the reader of a literary text – to make meaning of the textual experience in ways that the researcher cannot control. Barone (1995) claims that there are two purposes to human inquiry: to resolve uncertainty and to provoke it. Storytelling, even as it gathers up experience, invites the latter. I am trying to craft small stories of reading and teaching made from written and interview documents that Steven and I have made. It is collaborative and an (auto)biography in this sense. But, it is also *collaborative* in another sense, one that perhaps Barone did not intend. Because I present lengthy transcripts and stories, the reader will have the opportunity to read me and us in ways that are, at this point, beyond me. Steven and I, like you, are caught in the hermeneutical circle. We are shaped beyond our wanting, knowing and doing. Our stories and conversation likely contain traces of such surplus readings. The reader is in excess of the writer. But the story is also in excess of the reader. Research stories, as Barone (1995) says, “rattle commonplace assumptions [,] disturb taken for granted beliefs...invest in ambiguity [and] eschew direct summaries for delicate hints” (p. 170). Research stories lead the reader to question, wonder, move into new spaces of being and action. I hope the tales below challenge the reader in a similar manner and trouble their own autobiographies as readers and teachers. As the reader is also in excess of me, the writer, you will likely suspect more than I can know or



say, reading me and Steven in ways we cannot read ourselves. With time, reflection, and more writing, I hope to catch up with you.

### **Teachers, Accidental and Essential**

No one told me it would lead to this  
No one said there would be secrets I would not want to know  
No one told me about seeing, seeing brought me loss and a darkness I could not hold.

...

No one told me it could not be put away. I was told once, only, in a whisper,  
"The blade is so sharp - It cuts things together - not apart." – David Whyte, 1992,  
"No One Told Me."

Steven and I used our writing and sharing of stories to learn more about our relation to teaching, reading and writing. Sometimes our revelations even came as a (troubling) surprise. Learning how we both *lived* with teaching, I think, nourished a hope that this project would move us into territory where teaching, writing, and reading were complementary dimensions of a creative life. Our attitudes about teaching also troubled me and made me suspect that this project was not going to deepen an attachment to teaching after all. Perhaps I was trying to conjure – invent – a love that was not present to begin with.

Steven's memories of reading were vivid, playful, written in a creative style that suggested he enjoyed remembering and writing those moments. He wrote an *Aesop's fable* of reading experience; an invented dialogue between his past and present reading self over the merits of Kazantakis's *Zorba the Greek*; and a vivid memory of reading and re-reading *The Hobbit* as a child – being enthralled by words on the page. Unlike his accounts of reading, Steven's memories of teaching, while informative, possessed an abstract, treatise quality. He commented on the importance of colleagues when teaching; used Aristotle to distinguish between essential and accidental teachers; and recalled a

moment from his student teaching experience when the students, to wish him farewell, re-enacted a scene from *The Dead Poet's Society* by standing on their desks and yelling, "Oh Captain, My Captain." Save for the last piece, I was struck by how distant his writing about teaching seemed from the texture of memory and experience. The difference in the form of writing was striking, as if Steven wanted to refuse any immediacy or attachment to pedagogy. When I asked about the difference, he said he felt recently sick, "in a surreal mood" and "didn't feel up to" exploring his early anxieties with teaching, which, he reminded me, "were enormous." Even so, his teaching experiences contained a rich history that we, together, would have to negotiate moving forward. Particularly thought provoking was his distinction between "accidental" and "essential" teachers. I quote his "tale":

What I plan to expound below is less an experience and more an observation digested from a collection of experiences. Anyways, my observation is this: I believe there are "accidental" teachers and "essential" teachers. To clarify what I mean by these two terms "accidental" and "essential," allow me to make a reference to how Aristotle uses these terms, for they are how I wish to use them as well. Aristotle suggests that each *being* has accidental and essential qualities. Accidental qualities are those qualities that are part of a substance but which can change without substantially changing the substance itself. So, for example, if we placed a rock on a hill and then moved that rock to a valley, we would be changing one of the rock's accidental qualities (its location—whether it was on top of a hill as opposed to at the bottom of a valley) but not one of its essential qualities—what makes it, well, a rock (perhaps its solidness or the fact that it's composed of minerals, etc.)

That said, on to my second observation: I myself am an accidental teacher. What I mean by this is that if I stopped teaching tomorrow, I don't think I would be very much different than I am today. I believe my character and disposition to the world would be fairly similar. Now, one might counter by saying, "Well, so what? I mean, most people's occupations are 'accidental' qualities of some more permanent being." And I would answer this counter by saying, "True...but when it comes to the occupation of teachers, this fact (that one could be an "accidental" teacher) is more disturbing than in other occupations, such as being an accidental receptionist, an accidental lawyer, an accidental IT technician, etc." I believe that one of the reasons I teach at a community college is because of this fact: that

teaching is an accidental aspect to my being. Contrarily, if I was an essential teacher, I would be teaching in middle school or high school—where teaching is (or at least seems to me) more nitty-gritty, hands-on, earnest, weighty, altruistic, consequential, essential.

Writing enabled Steven to summon Aristotle's language to describe old feelings in a new way. I was struck by his distinction, fascinated by the idea of people finding their way daily in work they found by accident and likely would not choose again if given the chance. His desire to find distinctive terms was borne out of trying circumstances that occurred a few years prior to this study. During Steven's student teaching experience, we met as frequently as possible to walk, talk and digest what was happening to him. He expected to have time to write while teaching high school, but this was not the case. He refused to write about these anxieties in his stories, but I asked him to revisit those times as I thought it was an important history he, we, were bringing to the project.

I had a project every night and I had to practice what I was going to say. It's not like I had all the lessons under my belt. Being new didn't help. It was all so frustrating. I just hated having homework everyday and night. I knew it was going to take me all night and then I'd just have to do it again the next day. It was like Sisyphus. It was really like Sisyphus. There's a boulder. It lands. And then I'd have to roll the boulder again. It never ends.

He was not writing. Later that semester, Steven ran into an MFA colleague who was receiving support from faculty for publishing her work. Their exchange highlights the complicated place of teaching in Steven's writing life.

I ran into this person from [the University where Steven received his MFA]. What a coincidence, right? She was down there for only a couple of days. She said "Oh yeah, David [a professor] is trying to get my book published." And I was like "oh, that's good." I want to be a good person and not feel envious but at the same time I was like "damn." I mean, people are going after you, you know, trying to publish your stuff. I tried throwing my stuff out and you aren't even trying and people are getting your hands and holding you, dragging you across the finish line [we both laugh]. I mean, I tried. I sent my stuff out to numerous agents and different publishers and mailings and all that other stuff. Tried all these different things and I'm just like "ugghhh." So frustrating. At the same time, I was in the

MAT program and – I didn’t have any time to do anything. I didn’t know what I was going to do for a job. I didn’t think I could teach high school, you know? But, I didn’t think I could make enough money doing community college. I feel like there’s not enough money in that to sustain yourself. And I don’t want to make much money. Just enough to eat bread [laughs].

Steven did not claim these anxieties in his stories. They were from a past life. Instead, he summoned Aristotle as a way to acknowledge them without bringing their texture into view.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, the most positive of Steven’s teaching tales was also about his student teaching experience.

As a teacher I peaked early in my career and am now riding a slow downward slope ...This is not to say that I dislike or have not had successful teaching moments since; it is simply to say that, in the nascent period of my teaching career, I experienced a moment whose besting I doubt.

He was teaching an IB English class. As a student, Steven had never taken an IB or AP English course. He found it particularly intimidating, challenging, but, ultimately, rewarding.

In the span of a little under 3 months, we were able to build a rapport in which a palpable and mutual engagement of the material was formed, allowing me as a teacher to feel gradually more comfortable experimenting in my instruction. I created a mini-translation project involving the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a grammatical unit connecting the flexible sentence type known as cumulative sentences with the Australian rodent known as wombats. We explored the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of “The Transvaluation of all Values,” had a shown-in-tell day in which I myself shared a poem concerning a mugging I had experienced a few years prior, and a day of *Mystery-Science Theater* where we mocked the feeble cinematic version of the magical realist novel we were reading at the time, Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*.

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<sup>3</sup> Steven felt uncomfortable writing about his early anxieties with teaching, but was willing to talk about them and have them become part of this text. He indicated that writing would have made them “all too real” again. What also became apparent later in the study is that his participation in this project and the time it demanded put him in a complicated position with his other writing and teaching commitments. To spend time probing and trying to express a difficult past seemed to exceed what was appropriate and possible.

During our final classes together, I was honored by having a handful of students stand on their desks and reenact the scene in *Dead Poet's Society* in which the students say a farewell salute to Robin Williams' character: "O Captain, my Captain!" It was, as I said before, a moment I was and am still deeply honored by, a moment which was partially achieved through my own trust in the students and willingness to experiment with them but mostly due to their own intellectual engagement, hunger, and good-natured attitude.

When I asked Steven what writing the stories brought to the surface about his own reading and teaching life, he admitted that this particular story reminded him, sadly, of how alienated he feels teaching at the university. He warned me about the high contrast between his earlier memory and his present life.

I think I am nostalgic about that time [teaching IB] because it was so much different than what I do now. I had such a better, more of a connection. I really do feel, not in a bad way, alienated. I think alienation sometimes gets a bad wrap, like it's always a negative thing... But I do feel alienated from the students now. I don't really feel a connection with them. Sometimes I laugh and enjoy myself, for the most part I enjoy myself, but I don't feel a connection to my teaching.

Steven had seen *essential teachers* put energy and angst into their craft. They had helped him name his own relationship to teaching. Seeing *those* people helped him decide, "teaching is part of their bones. It's not part of my bones." Part of the distance he maintained was due to the university structure itself. On the quarterly system, 10 weeks (and sometimes meeting with the students once a week) was not enough time to build rapport. "Right when you start to get to know them the best is right when the class is pretty much done."

The more powerful reason for his distance was writing. "My teaching is all kind of blah, now. I don't get a real sense of internal satisfaction from my job. It's just something I do. I don't identify with it very much. But I kind of wanted to achieve that position. I probably don't feel that attached to it because I don't want to feel that attached to it. To be able to write."

Steven's dis-ease with teaching made me think about my own. I told Steven that there was a time in my life when I felt like I was born to teach or made to teach. My father, mother, two of my brothers – all are teachers – so at times it seemed an obvious and inevitable career choice. But my feelings were more complicated than that.

In a way, teaching has been the obstacle to distinguishing myself from other members of my family. I don't think that's a very conscious thing that I say a lot but I guess it's there. There's a tension too between filling your station in life and reaching beyond it in some ways. It's interesting in the professions I've chosen [English professor then, later, Education professor] that teaching is both the obstacle and the necessary means to make those other activities, like reading and writing, possible. So I guess it's occupied an interesting place with me. Teaching has always been there. And I think – this is going to sound horrible – but since there's no way to get rid of teaching in my life, I want to think and do teaching in ways that are creative. I want to bring teaching and other creative activities that I want to do into conversation.

I wanted to think about the interface between teaching and other art forms because, “for better or worse,” teaching would always be there. I wanted to integrate it into the writing and reading life I wanted to live. I did not understand at the time that this desire, this impulse to integrate could also be read as a desire to make teaching disappear, to blur its distinctions between it and other creative acts like reading and writing. Neither did I understand the consequences of this desire. Only later would I acknowledge the possibility that teaching served as substitute for an inactive writing life. I had to learn that teaching is not writing, that teachers are not authors, and that blurring them in practice leads, ultimately, to a poor pedagogy.

This raises a question: what kind of life do I want to live? Writing the stories was an angst-filled yet wonderful experience for me. Perhaps all creative activity – especially when we care about what we produce – is just so volatile. Initially, writing was dreadful. I became ill, was trying to finalize IRB approval for the project and was thinking about

how to make the commonplace books. I felt distracted. In her books about writing practice, Natalie Goldberg (1986, 1990) ends many of her writing prompts with, “Make it happen again, on paper.” Nothing, *nothing*, was happening again. I kept her words on my breath – revise, re-write, remember. Soon, the stories embodied lives, places, and books I could settle into again. After reading my work, Steven must have sensed this too. Had he not known otherwise, he would have suspected my stories were written by someone with an MFA, not someone pursuing a PhD. I could have objected to his stereotype of academic writing, but took it as a compliment. I actively try to write in many languages – creatively and technical – and have tried to find a haven in creative academic work and arts-based approaches to research. These approaches, I said, restore a dimension of humanity to those who participate in, read, and write research. At the time of writing the stories, I was also participating in a creative practices group – composed of researchers in education and communication studies – that gathered weekly to deliberately practice arts like creative writing and painting. I was turning into a person who practiced writing.

*Have you ever thought about writing fiction?* Steven asked. This was the question I should have been asking. To give myself over to what I really wanted? I did not answer him, returning instead to the interface between education and the arts, afraid to let go of the world that gave meaning to the practice. *You want me to talk about my growing identity as a writer?* I replied. I pursued this line of thought instead, ignoring his original question.

I feel like you just asked me a question that I need to be asked, so thank you for asking it. I do try to make writing a daily practice. Just the importance of being disciplined regardless of genre, just to sit down and be okay with the blank screen or the words that won’t come, with shitty first drafts as Anne Lemont would say. My identity as a writer has grown too with working at the writing center and being identified as a tutor or a quote unquote expert or consultant. You said

earlier that you hesitate to claim yourself a writer until you've published something. I think I'm learning to claim myself as a writer as long as I'm engaged in that daily practice of trying to hammer out something. But you asked about branching out into fiction? I would not identify myself now as a creative writer or an aspiring creative writer, even though...[pause] I think part of it has to do with my past identity as a reader and aspiring English professor. I love creative artifacts and love reading them, so I guess there's a natural kind of desire to reproduce those kinds of objects in my research of (for) others. I think you're right. I think there's a desire on my part to be a creative writer, to write fiction but maybe I view it as an impossibility now with the career choices I've made. I think again it goes back to what I was saying before about teaching. Since teaching will always be there I want to make it as good as possible. Since maybe I've chosen the path of education but there's been this other desire in the past that wasn't pursued to be a creative writer maybe I'm just trying to blend those two worlds together in the work I do. I think part of it is just trying to reclaim things I love and have left behind.

Maybe. Steven again asked if I had tried to write pure fiction. "I just thought given your stories here and the creative work you've done in the past, that you might enjoy it."

No, the prospect is so frightening.

No. I don't have the skill. No, I'm not prepared so why bother?

But, at the same time... The short answer is "not really, no."

What I wanted to do and be was both claimed and unclaimed: doors of possibility closed and ajar. Writing fiction seductive and frightening. Sensing my hesitation, Steven was encouraging.

I think that when you get the time you should just try it. Your stories were more literary than mine! [laughing] I would just find out if like it. Try to write just a story and see if it intoxicates you. I would definitely read one of your stories. I think you can definitely do it... It could be one of the boons of the project.

In the proposal of the dissertation, written a few months before this interview, I wrote that this project offered Steven and me a chance to read and teach differently. The project was thus significant for the students in our classrooms and for our autobiographies as readers and teachers. I indicated that I desired to read and teach otherwise. Specifically, I wanted compensatory reading and teaching moments that redressed past failures and



(re)produced reading and teaching acts that were more ethical, loving, and attentive to the text, to reading, and to readers. I spoke for Steven as well. I said that he was having a hard time sustaining a vibrant artistic life while teaching. At the time, I thought he desired to use this project to bring these two spheres of life into more conversation and harmony: where teaching perhaps becomes a resource or inspiration for art, and art a resource for teaching. These moments of doing and being otherwise, I said, were biographical moments: they become part of the weave – of past, present and imagined future – of identity. As such, they can potentially inform future reading, teaching, and living.

But what if I was romanticizing teaching in my proposal? What if what I most wanted was not to weave teaching into my imagined future, but cut it off? After writing the stories but before reading the text, I thought about Steven's perspective on teaching and my own potentially dark self-deception about my profession. Perhaps he did not want to think about his teaching craft at all. Maybe this project was only a distraction from finishing his novel, from writing. Maybe he wanted to keep undisturbed the rhythms of his teaching and writing life, making this project a risk, an intrusion. Perhaps what I most wanted was not to read better or teach better but to write and to fall in love with writing. Did I choose Steven to participate because he is a writer, not a teacher, and could mirror – even validate – my loves and repulsions? Did he serve as a double, a place-filler, for a version of myself that was lost but potentially retrievable? I entered the next moment of reading thinking about these complications and, perhaps more interestingly, embodying them.

## Teacher (Im)Potency

Teaching held a precarious position in our lives. For Steven, teaching was an “always present” distraction from his writing. I enjoyed teaching, had spent most of my life in varying levels of education, and yet had to admit that writing offered me something as yet unnamed that teaching seemed to lack. In our conversation about the stories, we also discussed what it meant to teach literature. How should one teach a text? And is a text worth teaching in the first place? We struggled over these questions, along the way trying to name interesting histories we were bringing to the project. I quote Steven at length.

My own doubts about literature is that sometimes I think that we’re putting a costume over something and I don’t really know if you take off the costume, what’s really there. Whether it’s a magic trick and there’s nothing there or whether you take it off and there’s lots of, you know, there’s a skeleton in there, there’s anatomy, there’s things to go off of. So I think, for me, there’s always that problem of not knowing if what I’m doing is a sham. That makes it a lot more difficult. [Teaching IB English in High school] I’d have to analyze at a very high level and I would doubt myself if someone asked me a question. I was afraid that at the end of the day I’d have to say, “well, I don’t know why we are doing this.” If you can read and write pretty well, then studying literature seems like a leftover from humanist education in the 16<sup>th</sup> century [We both laugh]. I don’t think there’s any easy answer for why we study literature. I *do* think it’s useful, but in some aspects I don’t know if it should be mandatory useful [uh-huh, interesting] I’ve never come up with a proof for why it should be mandatory. So, I think that makes teaching literature intimidating sometimes. If I was teaching science or physics I would know exactly what to teach because I would be like “gotta teach them the laws of the universe.” But I feel like with English, the laws of English, I don’t know if the laws of English are very important, if metaphors, for example, are important. I know they’re important to me. I don’t know if I can make the induction that if it’s important to me and it’s important to my friend Brandon then it’s important for everyone.

Unlike Steven, I could not recall doubting the uses of literature. I tried to remind students that literature was an important human artifact to consume and produce – it expanded our horizons of experience, allowed us to potentially be, slip on or become many selves, and

was inherently a democratic experience. But Steven's doubt seem to lie on other grounds as well - the costume used when teaching the text. What is the costume and what, if anything, lie underneath?

Both of our histories bear marks of exhausting the text, mining it for every possible question and detail. My experience reading and teaching *King Lear* (the story I opened with) and Steven's past experience teaching *House of the Spirits* in high school are two examples. Steven had been asked, or forced, to assume a pedagogical orientation that desired to exhaust the text, to control it, to consume it entirely. This desire for exhaustive control, to leave no stone of the story unturned, may, as Steven suggests, lead to the death of reading and, likely, to the death of teachers. One cannot eat the text and have it too. Even though he refused to write about it, Steven offered this account of teaching *House of the Spirits*.

It wasn't about reading anymore, it was about solving a puzzle, the puzzle being what were we going to talk about for six weeks. Even if we put the author of that book in the room, she couldn't talk about it for that long. She'd have the same problem I had and be like, "I just wrote it." I don't think my supervising teacher had any sympathy for the teacher who says "I've run out of things to say."

Steven recalled one particularly memorable lesson.

I had a lesson plan that I thought was a lot. We started off with a journal entry on *The House of Spirits* about point of view. That was about 5 minutes. Then, I added questions and they broke into groups. I asked why the author chose second person for a particular part then shifted to third person omniscient for another part. They got into groups and talked about that for a while before we re-convened for whole class discussion. Then, I showed a powerpoint slide about cumulative sentences. I made creative sentences about Wombats that I thought were funny and I added some stuff about how to make a cumulative sentence which [author] does a lot in her novel. Then, the students made cumulative sentences on their own and we talked about that as a group. After that, I read a few passages that were interesting about a character named Esteban and we came up with his views on four different topics: women, politics, individuality and something else that I can't remember. Gosh, by that time there was still 20 minutes left. I was just like, "are you kidding?" I didn't know what to say - I was

absolutely running out of things to say. So, I tried to break into the whole college thing and say, “well does anyone want to talk about anything?” And nobody did. I had to end class early and my mentor teacher, frustrated, said “you can’t keep ending class early.” I told her I had nothing left to say.

The students may have learned interesting information about *House of the Spirits* and acquired interpretive skills to use in later contexts. But, after all the analyses, the gathering of information, the *doing and saying*, there was silence. Nothing left to say. I’m reminded of David Jardine’s (1992) criticism of the attitude and arrogance of “scientific” curriculum stories. The climax of the technical-rational-scientific curriculum tale is perfection and, ironically, the end of inquiry. “We have become inundated,” he says, “with research that is aimed at pinning down the life of the child in such a way that, in the end, nothing more be said” (p. 117). Such an approach to education exhausts the mystery of curriculum, teaching, and reading. Jardine warns that this story will end in silence, “the hoped for end of the Word.”

Steven sensed that such an approach to curriculum and reading was creating information but not any sense of value or relevance. While teaching, he had little time for reading on the side, except for one experience with Seneca’s *Letters to a Stoic*.

It’s just his letters to this one person. A very casual style with really quotable stuff. I said to myself, “this is really enjoyable and relaxing and healing to read.” I was thinking, “huh, this is so nice and I prefer this so much more than reading “Occurrence at all Creek Bridge” or *The House of the Spirits*. I felt like that was actually practical in helping me. As a person.” Those other books are okay to read but I wasn’t not sure how much they were helping the students. It would be so nice to have time to read that kind of stuff, which I feel actually enhances life, compared to that other stuff which I have to treat like a puzzle.

A curriculum that hungers after more and more fantastic knowledge leaves one empty of words, and, potentially, of purpose and direction. After all those lessons and analyses, nothing was left. Nothing was mentioned about why we read, what we read for or what

reading helps us understand. Perhaps potency lies in simplicity, in stripping curriculum of fantastic and obsessive analytical architecture. Steven points to this, again referring to his high school teaching experience.

I remember near the end of the semester wanting to do a “show and tell” day with the students, something completely different. I think the arts give people a strange melting pot where people can share their passions and origins of those passions. So I wanted to have each of us bring in something that was close to us or had an effect on us. We were able to dangle keys in front of each other, I think. Maybe they’d open a few new doors later on. So I read “The Greatest Weight” from Nietzsche and read a poem I wrote. And another girl brought in her favorite *Manga* comic books, and another guy brought in a mandolin he had constructed with his dad. I shared the poem to show them that they always had the resources of writing even if they didn’t consider themselves writers. I am certainly not a poet and didn’t tell my students either that I wrote outside of this poem. I didn’t want to tell them that because I wanted to instill a certain “if he can do that, I can do that” mentality. I think for me it was a way of trying to legitimize literature or maybe even English in general. We had spent 5 grueling weeks on analyzing literature and getting ready for essay writing and I felt like everything I enjoyed about literature was not inside those weeks. I wanted to show them that literature can be about more than explanation; it can be about creation.

Perhaps the more we dress up literature with elaborate architectures of interpretation and analyses, the more damage we do to the pedagogical potential of reading, storytelling, and the arts. The show and tell day seemed, to me from the outside, like one of the few moments of meaningful learning in Steven’s course. The six-week unit appeared manic by comparison, a defense against the anxiety of mis-reading, of losing information, of the iterative process of learning and reading. Perhaps pedagogy needs to leave holes for the text to get through.

I read this same desire for simple, ordinary pedagogy in my stories. In “The Things They Carried,” for example, reading seemed to offer both me and the students comfort, a moment of pleasure, of quietly taking in the text and letting mystery linger.

I carried ungraded papers (separated into stacks by paperclips), extra pens, pencils, paper (for kids who forgot), books of poetry (Owen and Sassoon), and

photocopied poems (probably a copyright violation). I carried a copy of O'Brien's book to give to Heather for her writing project on memory and war. Ben was sitting beside her when I placed it near a pile of papers on her desk.

"Can we read it Mr. Sams?" Ben asked.

I probably said something evasive. Parents wouldn't appreciate the profanity. I was young and inexperienced and didn't need to be making poor curriculum choices on top of it. Ben was one of my favorite students, though. He dreamed of being a Marine – he must have owned 4 or 5 different Marine t-shirts. He wore camouflage frequently – pants, shorts, shirt -- but thankfully never at the same time. I remember his frustration when Owen and Sassoon questioned war. He wanted things in Black and White; there was no ambiguity with him.

"I want them all in."

Ben's daily dose of Lithium and Ritalin were kept in the office but he carried it nonetheless. He trusted me when I poured the pills into his hands. In exchange, I gave him the promise of a kept secret. His bouts of rage were balanced by moments of insight and gentleness. He had kind eyes, despite how red they were from lack of sleep (and maybe other things). Ben could communicate fine in speech (a mild stutter was not uncommon) but his handwriting was another story. He could do a number on a clean, lined sheet of notebook paper. He chewed his pencil and his fingers. His lines were angry, anxious, full of feeling but rarely sense. I could barely separate the top layer from the dark pool of eraser smudges underneath.

Ben must've seen the invisible soldiers on the cover and asked what it was and if we could read it. I didn't have any lessons planned for it. Heather and Ashley asked if we could read it too. I held my ground.

"No, we have more poems to read in the unit."

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With 15 minutes left in class, I asked them if they'd like me to read to them. There seemed to be no hesitation.

"YES."

Reading together was marvelous. I hate managing time, choking it. Our reading let it be.

Just Present.

Reading and listening.

Some laid their heads down. Others sat up and cupped their cheeks with their hands. *Just follow the rhythms of my voice, children. Breath gives text life*, I thought. That first day, we read for 10-15 minutes. We kept reading almost everyday after that, for 10-15 minutes...

A few of them – Heather did, I know -- purchased copies to follow along. I made copies of the text for those that wanted it. I heard giggles when I skipped over the naughty parts.

We cried when Kiowa died.

I wish O'Brien's book were longer, that we could have read more slowly. And we could read more slowly. I didn't want it to end and I don't think the students did either.

"Can we read another book like we did with *The Things They Carried*?"

I wish we had.

Ben dropped out of high school two years later. Heather went to college and studied English and Philosophy. I never read to my class again; but those 10-15 minutes felt, maybe more than any other moment, like teaching.

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The ostensible simplicity of the scene contrasts with the costume put over literature by the curriculum. There seemed to be little barrier between the students and the text.

Ironically, as a teacher, in scenes such as these, I felt highly effective when getting out of the way. And yet, both Steven and I found comfort in what we wanted to refuse: in the costume, in being the keeper of the secret in the text, in teaching texts where, slowly, our pedagogy took the veil away. Steven's invented dialogue of past and present reading selves brought these issues to the forefront. Though the story itself addresses reading experience, I found in it fruitful connections to teaching. I quote the dialogue at length.

FORMER READING SELF:

What you reading?

CURRENT READING SELF:

Just a novel: *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis.

FORMER READING SELF:

Yeah, I remember reading that once my senior year of undergraduate. The girl I was dating at the time had just read it and loved it, so she suggested I take a stab at it. She probably added something about me being Greek as well—can't remember.

CURRENT READING SELF:

She did. I remember—me being you and all.

FORMER READING SELF:

Right. Anyways, how you liking it?

CURRENT READING SELF:

Well, to you the truth, I love it. I've been trying to re-read it every year, but that plan hasn't panned out yet: it's been more like every other year. But still, I don't know, it never fails in instilling in me an invigorating medicine, a balm which makes me want to turn reading into action, to not just think things but also, on occasion, to do them as well!

FORMER READING SELF:

Did you just use an exclamation mark?

CURRENT READING SELF:

Uh, yeah, why?

FORMER READING SELF:

No, I just remember that that was one of the things I couldn't stand when I read that book. I mean, really, no one uses exclamation marks anymore. Or at least no one who's writing profound and engaging literature.

CURRENT READING SELF:

I know, I know. We didn't like it the first time we read it, did we? But, personally, I blame that on us being immersed (drowning?) in the prejudices of collegiate English departments.

FORMER READING SELF:

Now wait a second—

CURRENT READING SELF:

Slow down buddy. Just humor me for a second. What else didn't you like about *Zorba* when you first read it?

FORMER READING SELF:

Well, for one, it was too easy.

CURRENT READING SELF:

Too easy?



FORMER READING SELF:

Yeah. Too easy. There was no confusion over who the narrator was or what was happening in each scene. There was no playing with chronology or litotes or dramatic irony or footnotes, etc...

CURRENT READING SELF:

Interesting. What else?

FORMER READING SELF:

Well, again, it was my senior year of undergraduate and I had been used to reading works by Joyce, Woolf, Shakespeare, Eliot, Austen, etc. I was even taking a Faulkner/Morrison class at the time, which had trained me to judge a book by how difficult it was. The equation being: the more difficult, the more profound, the better. A second equation (also formed from my collegiate reading experience) being: the more melancholic, the more profound, the better. Now, if we were to put *Zorba* on that scale, it would weigh quite poorly in both contents. I mean, seriously, how can a piece of art which uses exclamation marks be taken seriously?!

CURRENT READING SELF:

You do realize...never mind. But how can you be so sure you understood the book if you later changed your mind about it and found it be exhilarating and thus profound and thus good?

FORMER READING SELF:

Says who?

CURRENT READING SELF:

Me, your current reading self. Trust me, I have insight into these things. But let's try to analyze the rationale of your equation. Let's take the difficulty=profound=good formula. Now, this seems to me to be the rationale for the literary genre known as parables. One uses a parable in order to cause the reader to think and interpret for themselves as opposed to being handed the information directly. Parables in this way can be seen as a form of indirect communication. Now, while I do find indirect communication to be useful, I also find it has a tendency to fall into ruses, parlor tricks, smoke and mirrors, etc. Take, for example, this journal entry I am writing right now. Now, if I were to pen this same message in some sort of code (pig-latin or perhaps something more complicated) and then give it to you, you might take the time to translate what I had done, to demystify it, and then conclude afterwards that what I had written was genius, confusing the effort you put forth to clarify my work as genuine literary merit. Or, to take another example, what if I was to bury a basketball and tell you that if you wanted to play basketball you would have to dig up the ball I had buried. Now after being a little peeved, you would probably dig up the basketball (if you really wanted to play) and then, sweating profusely, upon first bouncing that ball, conclude: "this is the best basketball I've ever dribbled before!" But again, it's not. What's so incredible is the effort you put in and the resilience you had in digging it up—and not the essence of the

basketball itself. If anything, the ball probably smells and is a little bit flat because of the time it spent underground. Anyways, to conclude, these are my misgivings on “serious” academic literature...

FORMER READING SELF:

You really went off on a tangent there, didn't you?

CURRENT READING SELF:

(sighs) All right, now, while it's true that I just spent half a page denouncing burying things in order to make them more profound, what I would advise you to do is to bury this same journal entry (like a time-capsule) and dig it up in six or seven years. Trust me, it will sound—again, despite what I was just saying—more profound...

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What interested me was the possibility that Steven's ghost claimed reading desires and prejudices that were still present. *Zorba* was too easy, he claimed; Nikos refusing to play with time, narrator, etc. His present reading self implied that readers mistake the quality of the text with the effort expended to understand. This reader wanted to claim that ostensibly simple stories can be profound too, that the “what” of the text might be equal in importance to the “how.” At the same time, I noted how this skepticism seemed to be lost on us while we were picking out the text for the study. We desired what Steven's present reading self had earlier refused, or at least questioned (and me too). I too felt empowered by reading a text aloud to my students and removing the usual architectures of interpretation and lesson planning. Yet, during earlier stages of the project, we both wanted to read and teach a *writerly* text, *At Swim Two Birds* and *Moon Tiger*, specifically. Even after we abandoned these choices as too difficult for the students, we clung to the idea of a writerly text. Me to the very end. Two months after we had settled on Gantos, I still looked for alternatives, worried that Gantos was too simple to elicit our interpretive deliberations. Without a writerly text, I could no longer claim the creative reader and teacher identity that I wanted. Steven's story raised the possibility that

we sat on the fence, one leg on the side of the former reading self and one with the current.

To complement his story, we discussed the tension of wanting and refusing the writerly text, along with the possibilities and limitations of reading and teaching it.

Steven: I feel like you never really lose the attractiveness to those books. You probably can't shake it once you get it. Those texts might actually be better for teaching. When I was teaching high school and even now I had an epiphany. "This is why we read these [writerly] texts," so people can have, so I can have something to say [laughing] so I can sound profound by taking away the veil slowly from the book [laughing] and showing how it was put together.

We both laughed. He nailed it on the head, I thought.

And I feel torn. I don't want to teach these books because I have doubts about whether they are any smarter than other books. But they do give me something to talk about as a teacher. I think we were trying to pick out a book like *Moon Tiger* or *At Swim Two Birds* because we were looking for something like that. We knew we could spend two weeks on it [laughs]. I guess that goes back to the practicality of teaching. You're thinking how long can we as a class spend on a text before in some aspects they mutiny? Before we say, "I don't have anything else to say." So I'm always struggling with that issue. Because so many people think that profound literature has to be confusing it makes me want to be more active in questioning it. If so many people think that serious literature has to be written like Faulkner or depends on the obtuseness of the text ... while I've found those books interesting, I've never had a deeply invigorating moment with those kind of texts, I just never did. I felt more invigorated by searching for the meaning but I never felt invigorated by the text once we had taken away any kind of veil from it. I'm torn by it. But I think it will be interesting when we teach the Jack Gantos book because like you said it's going to be the opposite, we won't really have that luxury of being like "hey, this is a modernist text, it's difficult, let us show you how to piece it together and what they're doing and how cool it is." We just won't have that luxury [laugh]

*At Swim Two Birds* and *Moon Tiger* as I indicated earlier were textual choices that demanded creative reading, perhaps compensating for a failed or inactive writing life. But they also activate, even exaggerate, the desire of the reader to know, to understand. If the reader is always outside the text, writerly texts exaggerate this distance and make interpretive work more difficult but, at the same time, more rewarding. Teaching this type

of text seemed to allow us, as teachers, to be keepers of a secret of the text – what William James (1986) would appreciate as the elusive *figure in the carpet*. Our job would be removing the veil to help students locate the secret as well. Keeping the secret of the text positioned teaching for us in comfortable ways: our job was to explicate, remove the veil from the text – in short, be and act on the authority that interpretive power provides.

We continued:

Brandon: But the book [Gantos] that we are reading, from what we know about it on the surface at least, it seems very simple and it sort of dismantles the hierarchies that might be present between teacher and student. So, it's kind of like, "what the hell are we going to say?" you know?

Steven: that's interesting. When I teach poetry and more so when I teach a short unit about prose fiction, I do modernism. I'm not really a modernist person, I don't read much modernism and I never really loved it but it's just funny that I teach it and really part of the reason I teach it is because it's one of the easiest to teach because I can spend a lot of time talking about the architecture of the story and it's just kind of funny that I probably wouldn't teach that if I could talk more eloquently about things that were less complicated [we both laugh] or at least outwardly complicated.

I told him that I thought we were both hitting on the same anxiety: what do we do when the story seems simple or when the reading the story itself is enough and requires (or seems to) no further pedagogy? We had no answer. We were preparing ourselves for the challenge of "having something to say" (and having something to do as a teacher) about a text that, on the surface, seems to explain itself.

What happens when there is little perceived need for the teacher to mediate between student and text? What happens to teaching when the story is perceived to be enough? When the text says all that there is to say? When the potency of the story substitutes for meaningful pedagogy? How does any desire to retreat from pedagogy mediate these questions and any potential answers?

Finally, teacher (im)potency surfaced in relation to the “creation” of readers. When I confessed – following “The Things They Carried” – that the best or most memorable teaching moments for me was when we were just reading a text and not trying to analyze it or pick it apart or reveal the secret of the text, Steven was reminded of the importance he placed on “self-revelation” with learning.

Part of the reason I’m not an essential teacher is that I believe in the experience of self-revelation with literature and with learning and knowledge in general. I feel like whatever knowledge you’re going to pursue you might be lead a little bit by a teacher, but I think those moments of really striding forward in some kind of discipline or expertise have not come from a teacher; for me, they’ve come from a lot of accidental circumstances, like a friend giving me a book or me just finding that book or whatever. In some ways that makes me less of a true or a die-hard teacher because I sometimes think about my students in these classes that we are going to be teaching and the ones that already read, read. I don’t need to push them anywhere. The ones that don’t read I’m almost 100 percent positive that I, I can’t, sadly, get them to read outside this course. I feel like with the community college level it’s hard to really feel like you are making a difference. I feel like you’ll see with the readers. We are going to be able to pick out within the first week who the readers are. Typically in my 102 classes I have around 25 students. And usually around 4 or 5 of them are readers who read for fun *something*, you know sci-fi whatever, whatever they read. Then the rest of the students are not readers and that will come through in the conversations and in their writing. I’ve never had, I haven’t had a moment yet, I’m not saying it’s impossible but I haven’t had a moment yet where I feel like I’ve turned someone on to reading afterwards. I just haven’t had that and obviously that would be a big moment but I never feel like someone is actually going to pursue literature after the class if they didn’t already come in pursuing it. I’m always thinking “well, they’re already readers or not already readers.” I’m going to teach them something and I hope they learn something but I’ve lost almost the bigger goal of lifelong pursuit...talking about that makes me wonder what turned me onto reading. Was it a teacher? I know I became one in college, late college. I feel like I became a reader when... I guess now that I think about it, it must have been writing. That’s exactly what it was. Writing turned me onto reading because I knew if I wanted to write I’d have to be a better reader and a more enthusiastic one. That’s probably why I can’t link it to a teacher, why I can’t imagine teachers as having that influence. I feel like people who aren’t readers have to have some kind of experience, that’s not teacher related, that’s going to turn them onto it. I guess for other people it could be other things, like something dire can happen in a life or something like that and that can kind of change their outlook. I don’t know, you know?

Steven set himself up for disappointment. Why does a teacher have to summon, from seemingly nothing, an interest in reading? Steven's perspective seems to ignore the interests and histories students have and the reading they already do. I responded that that I view my job (at least part of it) as a teacher to potentially enrich and extend reading in their lives or their interest in literature. My responsibility was not to create readers – this seems to overestimate the power and control teachers have in students' lives; it also seems funded by a deficit perspective that ignores what students are reading outside of school, and basks in the orgasmic, but frustrated, potential of pedagogy. *Let me turn you on to what I love.* I did not say so at the time, but I saw similarities between Steven's desire to turn someone onto reading and my often unexpressed wish to learn how to teach reading, particularly to adults. What magnanimous work to undertake! But there is darkness (t)here too. Reading is the gateway to understanding self and world; one is lost, figuratively and quite literally, without it. Teaching one to read is one of the most powerful signs of one's potency in the world, one's influence over others. The world might just bend to one's wish. As we move forward, it will be important to keep in mind what tensions, if any, might arise between a subject (or a teacher's) wished for omnipotence and a world whose materials (students, texts) refuse to accommodate. Might our attraction to writing be the unacknowledged desire for omnipotence, to work with materials that conform more easily and plially to inner wish? And in what ways, if any, would such an (un)acknowledged fantasy shape our pedagogical imagination and practice?

### **Herodotus and Thucydides**

My favorite of Steven's stories embodied how we understood our reading and teaching experiences, the potential tensions between them, and in how we envisioned *teaching otherwise* in the latter stages of the project. Here is, "If Aesop Wrote a Fable about Reading Experience", in full:

A goat was reading a biography of Julius Caesar which was 800+ pages long. This particular biography was of that school of history whose salient characteristic is to forsake storytelling for exhaustive superfluous detail (aka, Thucydides over Herodotus). Coincidentally, about 200 pages into this book, the goat began to have some medical problems. It experienced tingling in its legs, heaviness in its hooves, and numbness in its arms. These conditions persisted and forced the goat to make an appointment with a doctor, scheduling MRI's for both neck and horn. And during these somewhat surreal experiences, the goat began to wonder why in the world it was reading an 800+ page book of encyclopedic superfluity. It immediately went home, put down the biography, and began reading something higher up on its list of "books I want to read before I die." The moral—

*The healthiest reading habit is to read as if you're soon to die.*

I enjoyed Steven's story because of the Steven I knew outside the story. His fable brought together many aspects of his biological, writing, reading, and teaching life. At the request of one literary agent, Steven had spent the previous year revising his novel in an attempt to make it less fragmented and more reader friendly. *Editing Aesop*, the revision, emphasizes the importance of storytelling to life, to self-understanding, to cultivating and sustaining relationships. Steven spent many hours researching and reading *Aesop's Fables* to support the project. This was his only reference (muted, at best) in the six tales to his writing life. I was struck by the absence. Even though he was (and is) engaged in a daily practice of writing, editing and revising, he has trouble publicly claiming his identity as a writer. "You never really want to call yourself a writer," he said, "because until you actually publish something it never feels like you're a writer. You feel like you're a hobbyist or a piddler." Writing was a "sore thumb", a desire he was almost

embarrassed by. “I didn’t mention writing [in the stories] because if you don’t name something then uh [laugh] it won’t be sore.”

Like the fabled goat, Steven had recently experienced mysterious and recurring medical problems which shaped his reading diet and reinforced his preference for *re-reading*.

Part of the reason I re-read is because I have a fear of mortality [laugh] so I feel like I always want to be reading stuff that is really important to me or that will have an impact on me. I never want to be reading just to say I’ve checked that one off of my list [hmm] and that’s why it’s hard to share literature even with friends that matter because very few people connect on that level [this thought trails off]. I mean I don’t want to insult someone by saying “no” if they say, “oh, you should really read this book,” but at the same time I won’t read that book because I have all these things that I want to read. It’s almost like a race [laugh]. It’s a race of time. So that makes reading more urgent [laugh] than it previously was.

His fear of mortality turned reading into a solitary act. If, existentially speaking, death is the only thing uniquely ours, uniquely owned – it demands absolute solitude. For Steven, the adored text occupied a similar position. Literature was so precious, so needed, his texts so uniquely *his texts*, that they could not be shared or, if shared, could not be kept. His stories are marked by this history. Recalling the first book he became obsessed about, *The Hobbit*, he wrote:

I remember (I must have been in the second grade at this point) listening to my father and my oldest brother reading *The Hobbit* on the weekends together—Will reading out loud, my father correcting him when he couldn’t define a word, had mispronounced a word. And I would always ask my brother later that night to explain to me what was happening in the story, who died, who cried, who got away, what was the protagonists’ latest adventure... I had an early taste for fantasy, and I think it was this that made me so interested in what Will was reading at the time. That, and the seemingly private experience that reading offered its clients as opposed to watching a movie, which had a more communal and therefore a cheaper and, yes, more transparent gloss.

But to use a conversation we’ve had before on the topic of reading, what I link to this experience the most is that first craving for books. That craving which we are



always trying to re-create later on. To be literally enthralled by mere words on a page.

The ostensible solitude of reading experience can read as a compensatory relationship or experience for what is *not had* – the communal experience of reading together with father and brother (Silin, 2006). One love created (present) to fill the absence of another. In conversation, Steven shared another moment that valorized the primacy of individual reading experience and the potential threat posed by outsiders, in this case teachers who demand answers.

In high school, I thought literature was kind of...it wasn't alienating but it was ... I would say it was, um, it did seem a little bit like physics, like I wasn't getting something a lot of times. And that would frustrate me. History I always got. In history, I understood the story and I understood the causes and the effects but literature wasn't about causes and effects really. So I had a harder time getting into it, despite me liking a lot of the content. You know, I would like a story, like King Arthur, if we read *le Morte D' Arthur*, I would like it. But I really couldn't talk about it and therefore I felt less – I liked it less because I couldn't talk about it. I think that's it. Or I realized I liked it less if I was put on the spot to talk about it and couldn't talk about it.

I didn't have anything to say about the stories, you know? I think that was the biggest thing. And still when I'm teaching sometimes, in my fears of teaching, that's one of my fears that I won't – it's not that I didn't understand the story – it's that I don't really have anything to say about it. It doesn't teach me to talk about it. So sometimes if I read Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I would like it. Like I liked it in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I thought it was a cool story. But if somebody asked me to talk about it or write an essay about it I'd be like... "um." I'd just have a lot less to say and then I'd feel I was missing something. But I wouldn't feel like I was missing something until that moment. And that's, that's interesting.

Steven gravitated toward solitude, wanting to retreat from the world to the text. Although we are very alike in our preferences, I noticed in my own tales – about reading especially -- that solitude seemed to leave me empty, like I was ignoring the world – at times to the point of insanity. Unlike Steven, my teaching stories were primarily positive, the presence of others giving the text a mysterious life, a new vitality. To illustrate this tension, in the "Summer of Reading," for example, I chronicled an ostensibly wonderful

experience of reading for pleasure the summer before I started graduate school. By the end of summer, however, I craved a world texts could not offer. In my story, I wrote through Ferrol Sams's novel *When all the world was young*, one of the many books read during that luxurious summer. During World War II Porter Osborne, the protagonist, skips the draft by attending Emory Medical School. While his friends are fighting, the guilt mounts, his sense of duty and right belonging on the front lines. Porter's perceived retreat from the world reminded me of my own retreat from the world, embodied by me, reading. Here's an except from the tale.

Porter made sense of the world through literature. I'm not sure if I brought that habit to my reading of him or if he brought that habit to me. He was in a time of transition -- leaving his Georgia farm for Atlanta, the demands of medical school, and later the prospect of fighting and dying for his country. He suffers because he's exempt from the draft. *Just because of his profession*. His friends who chose law or journalism are not. One year in, he deliberately gets an F to flunk out and join the front lines. Porter's inner struggle helped me understand that I too was struggling (surely in different ways and to different degrees). I wasn't sure I wanted to go to graduate school -- can one ever be? My family members were teachers; it seemed unnatural that I wanted to spend a life reading and writing. My friends were going to teach too -- doing real work. I tried to convince myself that reading, too, (and writing) was real work but it was a hard sell then and still is today. Porter did something about "selling out." Did I? Didn't I learn anything?

For Steven, the solitude reading offers is nourishing. For me, too, but perhaps only up to a point. I was searching for ways to bring text and the world together, to dissolve the seemingly hard line between reading and living. I was also struggling with the question of "of what use is the [solitary] reader?" and "is there even such a thing?"

"Possession" is the strangest of my reading tales. It points to the dangers of solitude *and* how imagined others -- particularly threatening others -- can dramatically change the reading act itself. In full:

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*Don't mess this up.*

*This is really important.  
You have to know this.*

I read the paragraph again (30, 50, 80 times). More underlining, more scribbles in the margin, more questions.

*There is a little demon in us who whispers I hate, I love. Only listen when he says I hate.*

Two reading moments, six months apart. What did they mean? Will they happen again? Are they good for me? Both times, I was preparing for something important – I read Robert Scholes (in January 2010) *Protocols of Reading* before comps. Only six months later, I read Block's *Occupied Reading* before writing my dissertation proposal.

*You're not ready for either.*

Reading interrupted. I fixated for hours, sometimes days at a time, on particular passages, some only a few sentences long. I read the words again and again – sometimes aloud – they have meaning and then poof – gone. I convince myself that I understand.

*I'm a smart person. I've read scores of books. Many more complicated than this.*

My body disagrees. Not one limb feels at home. My stomach churns.

*Read it again.*

I press harder, make the underlines thicker, the doodles more strange, the repetitions more urgent. I memorize large chunks of text to quote during the day when opening the book isn't possible.

(obsession giving life the runaround)

I rest.  
Stop reading.  
Put down text down.

No  
more lines.

(it begins again)

I try keeping the text at a distance. Or, even better, keep it close by but closed. Near but not given over to. Close but not haunting.

One night, I cried  
to my wife

I'd been reading the entire day:  
8 pages.

Scholes says we are 'always outside the text' – meaning there is no such thing as a perfect reading. But that's what I wanted. The text wasn't out there, but inside. It had become me.

(Maybe reading requires a comfortable distance)

Another way of saying it is: we have to use our own creativity and judgment to understand.

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My friends write surrounded by books – stacks cover entire tables at cafés or libraries or homes. Piles are a physical catalogue of thought – never completely organized, the piles shift and change as they write into sense. Writing is messy. Thought is messy. Their tables are messy.

I don't carry books or notes with me when I write. If I want to quote or paraphrase something, I do; I summon the lines easily.

I've had two of these reading episodes.

(is it even reading?)

I'm grateful they occur so infrequently. I don't think I could live like that all the time. My wife is supportive and understanding – but my anxiety tests her patience. More than once, we've been dressed and ready to leave the house.

*Just one second, honey*

and I open the book again.

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The text swallowed me and, thus, the world; instead of enhancing or enabling life, reading destroyed it. I had gone too far, slipped over the edge. The imagined others waiting for me and my reading seemed to dissolve any boundaries between me and the text. The text was not outside me but had become me. I quoted part of a Mark Strand poem (1979, "Eating Poetry", lines 1-3) ironically in a footnote.

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.  
There is no happiness like mine.  
I have been eating poetry.

Ink ran from my own mouth, too, causing a good case of indigestion.

Overall, I was surprised that my teaching tales were more vibrant, lively, and interesting than my reading ones. Teaching seemed to enlarge (my memories of) the text, giving a life and vitality that was absent in my memories of “solitary reading.” My tales of reading, as indicated, were fraught with anxiety, frustrated desire, loss, emptiness. For a lover of reading, this trend surprised me. As the reader probably already understands, I can be a gloomy fellow, prone to melancholy, a disposition not entirely absent from my teaching stories. But, unlike Steven’s recollections, these darker notes were balanced by life, of things and people made and created. For instance, I framed two of my teaching tales as letters to former students. I was seeking an intimate form of writing, hoping the mode of address would bring into view the people, texts, and interactions I wanted to remember. The letter form was also inspired by Tom Crick, the history teacher and vivid storyteller of Graham Swift’s novel, *Waterland*. Tom addresses his young charges as children, tells vivid, complicated tales. He trusts them to stay with the story (and the reader, too, who is the vicarious listener). I hoped that using his language would summon his imaginative power.

#### This is Just to Say

Children,

I want to read you a short passage from Julia Cameron's book, *The Sound of Paper* (2004, pp. 29-30).

The lightning bolt reminds me of how we think and talk about creativity. The way we speak in dramatic terms of 'breakthroughs.' We even use the phrase 'bolt of insight'. Every so often, just like tonight's big storm, I do get a creative breakthrough or a bolt of insight, but much more often creativity is pedestrian and non-dramatic, more a matter of suiting up and showing up and listening than standing on the edge of a cliff as the earth splits open at my feet. I experience writing more like taking dictation than giving it. I try to write something down, not think something up, and the

sense of direction is important here. I think if we talked more realistically about what creativity feels like, we might let ourselves do a little more of it. If we thought of it as normal -- 98.6 on the human spectrum -- instead of a sudden spike in our psychic temperature, we might let ourselves do it as a daily practice. We might all show up at the page or the easel and discover that there are reams of work waiting to move through us, right now, in the exact life that we have already. Creativity is not aberrant, not dramatic, not dangerous. If anything, it is the pent-up energy of *not* using our creativity that feels that way.

Remember our creative and critical writing portfolios? That unit was one of my favorites. I remember being happy seeing you compose and paint and design. I didn't want to run away from you, like at other times. Maybe, like Cameron says, the pent up energy of not doing those things made me want to run away. But it was different with the portfolios. We were writing poetry, drawing and interpreting. I was participating along with you. It was risky at times -- I didn't always want to participate and be on the line, like you were. But, maybe seeing me write and create something inspired you to do the same in our shared space and time. I know you were all very creative, but I don't think all of you were used to doing and being so in school. James, I loved your mind and the way you thought about the world. What I liked most was how you made what you said count. I wish you would have made a portfolio, done something out of the ordinary. But, instead, you turned in sheets of notebook paper with poems and interpretations of other poems. Why so ordinary? I shouldn't have given you that option. The out was because I can see myself in you. I can see the impatience with mediums that require a different mask. I understand your reluctance to take up tasks that require giving yourself to an unknown.

Children, I loved the beautiful books and albums you made to keep your writing. I need to explain why I left the books in my car, though. As you know I didn't have an office or a permanent desk -- none of us did. We were all traveling teachers, carrying piles of materials under our arms or in our bags. Piles of your graded and ungraded work had overtaken my apartment and I guess my car was next. I kept your books in my car because then I could read them at the Health Food Store (my other job) when it wasn't busy. But, the truth is, you weren't my number one priority. I was. I was in school getting my Masters. I didn't read your books while I was at work. I read and wrote my own stuff. That's why your books spent so long in my car and suffered under the April and May heat. That's why the glue and paint you used melted. I couldn't open them and neither could you when I returned them, ruined.

Do you remember Williams Carlos Williams's "This is just to say"? I loved that poem. I think you started to like it too, after you got comfortable with the absence of rhyme and traditional form. I'm no Williams but I think this letter has taken on the tone and intention of that poem too.

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My tales of teaching were full of life. Writing about teaching allowed me to incorporate my love of poetry and creativity, the work of William Carlos Williams and Julia Cameron being two examples. I puzzled over how and why a story about teaching seemed to bring together so many elements of my life as a reader and writer, while written in a form that I thought was creative and enjoyable to read. The content and the form of the stories seemed to bring together what I loved and longed for most, as a reader and writer. Why did the writing of teaching, the profession I struggled to accept (and partly wanted to refuse), serve as a commonplace for what I loved? I struggled to understand what this might mean and what significance, if any, it held for interpreting what teaching meant to me and what place, if any, teaching would or should occupy in a creative life.

Now, to Herodotus and Thucydides. The two “fathers” of history, and the differences in their methods and ways of telling history, became a trope for my understanding of the conflicts between our desire as readers to listen to and tell good stories and our perceived need as teachers to accumulate more and fantastic knowledge *around* the text and *of* the text to support instruction. I had confessed my desire to pursue simplicity in pedagogy; Steven, in contrast, felt most comfortable covering his back with elaborate preparation, side reading, the accumulation of details. Our early forays in thinking about “reading to teach” pointed to the early distinctions we were making between aesthetic reading and pedagogical reading. He says:

I think one of the definite things for reading for class or reading to teach as opposed to reading for pleasure is that I’ve been slowly re-reading Shakespeare’s plays for pleasure and I think one of the reasons I enjoy them is because I’m not stopping that much when I read them even though there’s parts where I clearly don’t get the reference or I don’t understand the Elizabethan language, when the lower class characters are speaking, for example. But I can just glide by as if I

understand it and I think I enjoy it much more because of that, because I'm not stopping to highlight my ignorance at every moment. It's just interesting. That may be one of the biggest differences either for reading for teaching or reading for pleasure. It's kind of this idea of having to stop when you don't understand as opposed to not having to stop. And I think this idea of like a story is whole when you don't have to stop feels more organic. Obviously there are advantages to stopping but in some aspects it kind of kills the story if I -- you know -- stop telling the story and then go wash my hands or if I'm telling a story by the campfire and every two minutes I stop. That's kind of off putting [laugh] for the people who are listening. Maybe, maybe it makes them want to know more [laugh] but, uh, maybe not.

I responded on a similar note. To prepare to read Gantos's memoir, I was checking out several books on creative non-fiction, trying to build an *architecture* of reading. Reading to teach, for me, for us, seemed to demand background and parallel reading on this side. Steven noted that this tendency seemed absent in aesthetic reading. The story or text itself was sufficient enough. For aesthetic reading, not knowing seemed okay. Pedagogical reading seemed burdened – potentially in a good way – with the responsibility to know. We exchanged more on this point. I began:

With aesthetic reading, you're not as obsessed with what you don't know or might not know. You're just reading for yourself. I guess with reading to teach, there's this pressure to build up an architecture around what you are reading with all these other...other materials.

Steven: to bounce off that, it's interesting because you want to be okay with not knowing everything, you want to tell the students "hey, I'm exploring too." But I don't know, in my own experience, I never feel comfortable being like "I don't know" or "I'm still exploring as well." It's like showing that you are not wearing armor and somebody could shoot you [we both laugh]. I don't really feel comfortable doing that. I feel more comfortable covering my back in reading these side projects that you are talking about. Even though a lot of times in modern pedagogy it's more okay to be like "I don't know, I'm exploring as well, we are in this together." I feel like it's still, it's a hard thing to actually do as a teacher because it kills the illusion. We almost want the illusion that I know everything. At least, I want that in my teachers [we both laugh].

Brandon: what we are talking about now has been coming up here and in our stories. As readers and writers, we want to either be Herodotus or to read Herodotus's writing. But as teachers we feel the need to be encyclopedic,



obsessive, detail accumulating kind of readers -- which is not what we ourselves want to read but it's the kind of costume we feel like we need to assume.

One week later, we reflected on our longer conversation by thinking more about the histories of reading and teaching we wanted to extend and/or refuse.

Brandon: We talked a lot about how we ourselves may not have been comfortable with a text when we were required to produce or know certain information. And I think we also talked about how we imagine that the students could probably be more comfortable with what they are reading if they didn't feel like they would be held accountable for every nitpicky thing. So I thought that might be interesting to think about as we read the book.

Steven: Right, right. I guess to bounce off of what you were saying I'm trying to think of what you would do in order to make something more perhaps friendly, reader friendly, but at the same time also have something to assess. I feel like with a book like this the one thing we might have a problem with if we are trying not to nit pick is that this is a book that will encourage nit picking. We will need to nit pick to get stuff out of it.<sup>4</sup>

This posture, of wanting to create a “reader friendly” pedagogy without exhausting the text or killing the text, would shape our pedagogical imaginations going forward. Steven continued discussing the 102 course and the attitude he could afford to assume towards the text and the students.

I like the 102 course because I'm able to be a little bit more relaxed because that's the end of the road in English for them. In 090 and 101, I'm really trying to push basic writing skills and argumentation, but I'm not really doing that anymore in 102. I talk a little bit about it, but the purpose of the course to me is to fulfill this idea of a humanist education, trying to give to people an alternative to or at least an outlet for living. Something to make life a little more interesting. So I feel a little bit more free. Writing those reader response essays, I realized I haven't had much fun teaching in the past couple quarters. So, it'd be nice to be looser and more relaxed for the lesson, let the conversation be more free flowing. I think it will be easier because we are both there. One of the things I've been doing ever since I started teaching high school was using these worksheets as kind of like a guideline for what we are going to talk about. I give them questions, have them break into groups, answer the questions and then we talk about it as a class. I find

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<sup>4</sup> I shared my initial concern with Steven that *Hole in My Life* was too simple and direct a tale. Steven was worried that we would need to “nit pick” the text in order to extract something to say out of a text that was ostensibly simple.

that to be effective time wise and also to be effective trying to get people to start talking. But it does limit what you talk about because the questions are already there. So thinking about that now, one of the things we could do is be more free flowing with the questions, letting or giving the students more control over how we discuss it. So that's a possibility if I'm trying to think about things to change. It would be a good experiment. I haven't done that in a while. Always the risk of that is they don't really have much to say and you're kind of like uh... -- of course you can always have a back up plan, then. You know you could always have a worksheet just in case people don't want to talk but with this option, we'd put more confidence in the students, which is a plus.

Finally, I imagined a reading and teaching experience allied with Herodotus.

Brandon: One of the things that came out in the interviews was just how much we identify with the organic nature of and occasions of reading – the kind that's not really obsessive, not overly concerned with knowing every little detail. You mentioned that with your reading of Shakespeare and we talked about that as a tentative difference between aesthetic reading and reading to teach, or how we've read to teach in the past. I guess that's been on my mind. How can we create this organic classroom and atmosphere and experience for the students that's less broken up by minutiae and still find some way to assess them over something?

Steven: I agree. I think one of the things we could do is like you said try and come up with some kind of project with a memoir. That would make it less about minutia about the actual book and more about taking the form of this and do something of your own with it. That approach makes it less just analytical and it adds creativity to the analysis. Another thing is if we do bring up allusions to other books [that Gantos mentions in his text]...that might not be nit picky, it might be just us showing them doors -- we can use that analogy that we both like, the idea that each book opens up different doors. You can go through those doors if you want and it can lead you different places. Gantos could lead you to *Brothers K* or other places. I'll have to read it and see where those other places are but I like the idea of a book as in some ways a house with a bunch of rooms. That isn't an overly analytical approach either. We're not really looking at the sentence level of the book.

Gantos's text was filled with references to other texts like Dostoyevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Perhaps these could play a part in our pedagogy? The idea of showing students the open textual doors offered through Gantos provided some relief from our anxiety about (and attraction to) over-reading Gantos, filling our pedagogy with minutiae, and potentially ruining the text for the students. Thus,

we might save Gantos from ruin by pointing the students to other things. We were also attracted to having the students create things, make things, such as crafting their own memoirs. Both of these options, again, seemed to rescue the text and teaching from over-reading. Our posture seemed anxious of New Critical approaches to literature pedagogy; in pursuing pedagogy as Herodotus wrote history, we were aligning ourselves with theories of the text that return the reader, such as the transactional and reader-response approaches of Rosenblatt (1994) and more contemporarily of Jeffrey Wilhelm (2008), who writes of the importance of the *connective* and *reflective* dimensions of aesthetic experience. Not only do readers make connections of similarity or difference between their lives and textual lives, they reflect, *through the text*, on who they are, the world in which they live, and what is worth caring about. We wanted to leave enough holes in the text and in our teaching for students to *bring the text home*. Asking students to write their own memories, to become writers, seemed to be an important step in *teaching otherwise* – positioning students to be creators, not just receivers of knowledge. Although we did not use this language, we were aligning our imaginations with process composition pedagogy, particularly the work of Donald Graves (1994, 1999), Lad Tobin (2001), and Nancie Atwell (1998). Students learn to write best, according to advocates of process pedagogy, in the context of their own writing, with writing that emerges from their own experience and relates to their life-worlds. Steven and I, aligning ourselves with these pedagogical traditions, *seemed to* have our bases covered. We did not want to kill the text. We wanted to help readers make meaning of Gantos on their own terms, rather than on our terms. We also wanted students to see themselves as makers, as Gantos himself was a maker. In opening doors to these possibilities, we did not yet see that, perhaps, we

were in danger of losing *the text*, Gantos, in our rush to fill pedagogy with other texts, be they Dostoyevsky or the students' creative practices. We did not yet see how much see how much of our teaching and reading identity was tied to making Gantos the pedagogical center, even as we imagined a pedagogy that seemed to de-center Gantos, and thus save it from ruin.

## CHAPTER III

### ANTICIPATORY READING

*The Importance of the Ordinary – Learning How to Read and Write from Gantos – The Benefits and Challenges of Reading with a Commonplace Book – Demands of the Text – The Selves of Reading – A Reader Past, Present, Future – The Robust Pedagogical Reader – The Skeptical Pedagogical Reader – The Last Reader – Anticipatory Reading as Gift and Nightmare*

Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.

...

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water.

– T.S. Eliot, “The Wasteland,” lines 3-4, 19-24

After writing the opening tales, we thought about the past experiences we were bringing to the project and the new possibilities the project offered to read and teach otherwise. The first reading of Gantos took place, for both of us, during a three-and-a-half week period after we wrote and discussed our stories. During this time, we read the text and annotated the margins with notes about our reading experience and ideas for teaching. We thought of the margins as, again echoing Jardine’s (1992) words, as a thankful gathering. We were not quite sure what “texts” would end up there – but were excited to find out. We also wrote at regular intervals in our reflective journals about experiences reading to teach Gantos. We read with diverse and overlapping interests and intentions at the same time: as readers, as teachers and as inquirers into the phenomenon

of reading to teach. For Steven, the first reading of the text coincided with the end of the winter quarter and a brief hiatus before the start of the spring quarter. I read while transcribing and writing through data from the previous moment, the story gathering and sharing. I was daily living through the position of researcher while being in the mess of reading experience. I was above the ground and firmly on it. Our reading, writing, and initial planning of the Gantos unit occurred before either of us met our actual students in the spring quarter section of English 102.

In the introduction, I wrote that one intention of the form of this work was to take a cue from the artistic-scholarly form of biographical writing, as described by Smith. I find the mixed style advantageous for communicating knowledge but also allowing the reader to have an experience of what it was like for us to read and to plan to teach. The artistic-scholarly form thus attempts to be both a primary and secondary experience for the reader and for the writer. It reports about but also reconstructs so that one can live through. Barone (1997), in his work on the uses of literary storytelling in social research, suggests that literary forms accommodate ambiguity, invite questioning, refuse to finalize meaning. I have tried to write in this way by including works of art to compose a research intertext. I suggested earlier, using a scale of textual closure and openness, that the artistic-scholarly form is grounded in the world, in facts (in my case, in data) but the literary form means the work *remains open enough to invite re/reading*. Textual form connects in interesting ways to the outside-ness of Scholes' (1989) reader as described in his *Protocols of Reading*; while a reader is outside any textual form – an imperfection and necessary condition of reading – the artistic-scholarly form draws attention to the written text as a textual other. The reader's desire for sense demands a stitching together

of gaps and drives the aesthetic encounter. Reading is creative, a bringing together of the outside and inside. The pure presence of being “inside the text” connotes a perfection that, as we will see, suggests the end of reading and creative activities, such as teaching. Through error, mis-reading, filling the gap of absence, something is made, read, and taught. Alienation is a necessary condition of good reading, good teaching, and maybe even good research writing. The following chapter is one way into the second reading moment, replete both with sadness and possibility that being the always outside, never perfectly inside, reader suggests. I begin by examining what reading Gantos and keeping a commonplace taught Steven and me about reading, writing and teaching. I then suggest that commonplace books practices and the character of pedagogical reading was productive through absence: the event of pedagogy, the imagined presence of the student, waited for us in the text and so compelled our reading and writing of different, but related, selves of reading. Pedagogical reading demanded a gathering of past reading, past lives as the ground through which to imagine teaching. The gathering was sometimes thankful, and, as much as we wished otherwise, threatening too.

### **Start Close In: A Necessary Word**

The poet David Whyte (2004) serves as the staring point. “Start close in, / don't take the second step / or the third, / start with the first / thing / close in, / the step you don't want to take” (lines 1-7). Poetry represents and generates. It reflects what I know and what I hope you come to know, but also pushes my thinking and yours into the unknown. On engaging with the work of art, Gadamer (2006) writes that “[there] is much that is completely unnamable to which the work directs our thinking” (p. 58). His insight reveals the remainder, the as-yet-unknown that constitutes our engagement with a work of art

and my own relationship with the poems that populate these chapters. The poem-in-the-text is marked by these two different yet complementary qualities: the appearance and deferral of meaning; the poem gives its spirit but never exhausts itself or the text of which it is a part.

Start close in, through small places and things. “Start with / the ground / you know, / the pale ground / beneath your feet,” Whyte admonishes (lines 8-12). “Start with your own / question, / give up on other / people’s questions, / don’t let them / smother something / simple” (lines 16-22). *Start close in. Take the step you don’t want to take.* While bringing “who I am” to “what this study is” potentially makes the writing more interesting, more in tune with human experience, and, thus, the reader’s experiences, starting close in creates writing that can be, itself, solitude. I worry that it is for no body, no other besides the writer. Starting close in carries the risk that there will be no way out, no bridge to another, and no shared meaning. In fact, communicating through one’s own interests *to others* was a fascinating problem that surfaced in our readings of Gantos. I have learned from the work of Peter Taubman in *Teaching by Numbers* (2009) and Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998) in *Nourishing Words* that repudiating my creative and intellectual needs to accommodate pedagogical spaces or acts governed by standardization, anti-intellectualism, and a paternal objectivity makes me vulnerable to diminishment, self-hatred, and is certainly no way to live, write, or teach. Taubman (2009), in particular, suggests that teachers sacrifice their creative and intellectual energies in the name of *loving the students*, as success on standardized test scores has become the only recognized language of student and teacher competence. I will try to love myself a little more. I will also take a cue from Jack himself. You, reader, may not



have read his story. While I hope you are prompted to from this text, I hope you get to know Jack and his tale while reading my own.

His story, at bottom, is about starting close in. In his journey to become an author, he distrusts the adequacy and quality of his experience to create quality art. Jack is haunted by absence. He wants to be a writer but does not know how; his life lacks the structure to make writing possible. He believes his experiences are ordinary – poor inspiration and material for art; he longs for the life and places of the writers and stories he reads: Ernest Hemingway’s Paris, John Hershey’s *Hiroshima*, for example. He hungers for an *other* life, for a fantastic adventure he thinks his writing needs. In search of a story outside himself, he ignores the quality and character of the experiences he has already lived through. During his prison experience, he slowly acquires the patience, discipline, and perspective to realize that *story* lies not in the fantastic experiences he has yet to have but in what he *makes of* the ordinary life he has already lived. One of the lessons Jack teaches us is that once we have the courage to look, to inquire into the ordinary, it becomes strange – extraordinary – and great material for a story. Jack’s story, in Wendell Berry’s (1995) words, is the “ground underfoot.” Jack’s story requires vision and perspective. Like Jack, I am slowly learning to trust my own experience in the field, as a reader of Gantos and of the different “texts” that constitute the research experience. As readers and teachers, Steven and I encountered the problem of trusting ordinary reading experience, as not only enough for pedagogy, but potentially teeming with life. Finally, I am learning to communicate and write through the ordinary, through the ground underfoot.

### **One Way In: Learning How to Read and Write with Gantos**

I think of myself as being essentially a reader. As you are aware, I have ventured into writing; but I think that what I have read is far more important than what I have written. For one reads what one likes – yet one writes not what one would like to write, but what one is able to write – Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse*, 2000, p. 97-98 (pasted in the margins of my copy of *Hole in My Life*)

I have been reading a lot lately – poets and poetry, mostly – and writing makes me want to bring these texts with me, to help me understand what I am *just here* writing. I learned this move from Jack; or maybe he helped me name something I already do. In our reading of the memoir, Steven and I learned that Jack reads *a lot*; we suspected, over and again, that he was lying about how much he read, which says as much about the readers as it does Jack. We speculated that Jack positioning himself as always a reader would make his memoir less a construction of a writer's life than an outcome of a writer's life – more truth than artful construction. See? Texts have always been with me. Envious, Steven and I wondered how a teen could read that much.

One could look at Jack's reading life suspiciously, as we occasionally did, but we realized that the text is the reader's gift, too. *Hole* is an abundant intertext; Gantos (the author) tells the story of Jack's (the character) journey to authorhood through numerous references to the books and authors that inspire the young Gantos to think, live, and pursue writing (and texts the older Gantos uses to interpret and write his younger self). This "other literature," hardly an accessory, amplifies, complicates, and communicates meaning. Gantos, to write his life and enable the reading of it, gives us numerous texts to read with and think through in our journey to understand and appreciate Jack's story. Thus, Gantos makes concrete, in writing, what reading is. *He invites us to become a reader, to be reading.*

One passage that illustrates this unusual claim takes place on the drug ship Jack sails in hopes of making enough money to fund his college education and become a writer. While on the boat, Jack reads Jack London's *Martin Eden*, and, in this scene, imitates Martin's suicide – perhaps as a combination of boredom, insanity, and a risky solitude that comes with being immersed in a story world. Before I reference the scene, I should note one fascinating ambiguity about it. It is not immediately clear if this is the actual writing from young Jack or if it is a memory from the older Gantos written in the voice of his younger self. The passage in question comes from a ship's log Jack found on board. The discovery of this book prompted him to assume the role of the boat's historian. Jack began recording daily journal entries to chronicle his experience at sea. During the first reading, neither Steven nor I were sure how to read these passages. Were they the actual passages Jack wrote at the time? Or were they memories from the older Gantos? Were the passages fiction in the service of the truth of the memoir? The reader finds out at the end, however, that the ship's log, with all of Jack's entries, was actually recovered from Jack's hotel room by the police as evidence. Twenty years after the trial and the events of *Hole* have passed, the ship's log is returned to Gantos, who presumably uses the stories therein to craft the memoir. If we are to believe that the memoir genre uses (arti)facts in the service of communicating a larger, more human, more subjective truth about living and being, then I want to believe that the ship log entries in *Hole* are the actual writing of young Gantos, not touch-ups or fabrications of the older author. The question of whether or not we should care, I will leave for a later moment. For now, Jack/Gantos puts the scene beautifully:

On my night shift I've begun to act out the final scene [of the novel], where Martin Eden pushes himself through a porthole and dives into the dark water and

intentionally drowns himself. I don't have a porthole to dive through, but I do have a ship to dive from...I wondered if I could ever kill myself as he had. I do know that there is no reason for me to drown myself from sorrow since I haven't yet tried to achieve anything great. (p. 90)

Jack does not say so, but *Martin Eden* is a Künstlerroman, a story about the growth of an artist, in the tradition of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. These are the intertextual crumbs Gantos wants us to pick up. Jack reads about another artist's journey even as he uses the textual relationship to make sense of his own experience. *Martin Eden* is one instance of Jack using art to locate himself along the horizon of being, the confluence of past-present-future. Gantos's intertextual memoir suggests that Jack, like Borges, is essentially a reader. He lives to read and reads in order to live with more understanding, conviction, and direction. One of the most moving passages of the book, one Steven and I quoted many times in conversation and preparation to teach, goes thus:

Since I was trying so hard to make books lead my life, I didn't want to read them and then just put them back on the shelf and say, "good book," as if I was patting a good dog. I wanted books to change me, and I wanted to write books that would change others. (p. 61)

While books inspire Jack to write, to pursue *juicy stories* like Hemingway and John Hershey do, the above passages point to the subtle ways Jack lets books lead his life. Time and again, Jack lives an inter-textual existence. Books like *Martin Eden* help him read himself – he realizes he has yet to attempt greatness; and they inspire him to keep pursuing writing. Books help Jack understand his history, his present, and even his possible future. But Gantos, *literally in the book*, also brings texts together to *write* his life, suggesting that writing, like reading and living, insists on and flourishes within a thankful gathering of texts. Writing this way gives something to readers as well. Gantos

points us to open doors that we can walk through – for the first time or as a return reader. Since reading *Hole* and teaching it, I have read Paul Bowles collection of stories *The Delicate Prey* (Jack’s favorite collection of stories), Frank Conroy’s *Stop Time* and intend to read *Martin Eden*. In addition to being educative in this respect, Jack’s inter-textual memoir also teaches us *how to read* and gives us a *model of reading* – to read Jack fully, we, too, must read the texts he reads and is nourished by. Reading *Martin Eden*, *Stop Time*, or *Catcher in the Rye*, the reader might come to a different, perhaps more nuanced, understanding of Jack and his story. Perhaps Jack is like Martin or Holden: misunderstood, adrift, trying to read a world that resists. The connections Gantos invites us to make are many and, in some sense, are out of his control and up to us.

The memoir nudges us to *practice reading in a certain way* and become practitioners of theory. In *Occupied Reading* (1995), Alan Block’s theoretical commitments mirror Gantos’s portrait of reading as a creative gathering that invites the new. Block argues that reading is not purely a decoding of another’s thoughts, of words on the page – although that is involved. To suggest that reading only decodes a predetermined meaning in the text is a legacy, he says, of neo-platonism. He argues that reading is creative work, is an original form of thinking, and nothing less than consciousness itself. Block would find germane Jardine’s (1992) reading of Heidegger’s playful coupling of Denken and Danken, *Thinking* and *Thanking*. For Jardine, thinking is a form of thankfulness; thought, a thankful gathering and recollecting—a bringing together of the contours, questions, and text(ure)s of life. In this same way, Block argues that reading is a form of thinking, a bringing the text home into what is already gathered and *at once* creating a new, meaningful gathering that invites readers to understand self,

text and world. Jack's reading of *Martin Eden* is one example of reading that gathers the past to understand the present and invite the future.

Gantos found that writing his life was most honest and meaningful when he gathered texts together. In my reading of Gantos, I also gathered my texts together – both for my own understanding and with the hope that I could help others understand too. A commonplace book is a perfect place to gather texts. Before commonplace book became popular in the Renaissance period, the medieval version of the genre was called *florilegia*, the flowers of reading (Havens, 2001). I regret that we have lost the use of that term. Our first reading of the text was filled with insight, expected and otherwise, about ourselves as readers, about the students we had yet to meet, and about the classrooms we wanted to make.

### **Commonplace Possibilities & Difficulties**

Dennis Sumara (2002) suggests that keeping commonplace books changes reading in many ways. Writing in a book encourages alertness, attention. One is able to read the main text and also the previous selves that read the text. One can materially represent the thankful gathering of reading by recording in the margins the other texts that help a reader understand. A reader can make interesting and unpredictable “readings” from all the materials gathered together, leading him to claim that reading and commonplace book practices contribute to the “ongoing invention of the reading subject.” I have found Sumara's claims largely true when I have kept other commonplace books. The practice changes how one reads. Reading becomes a conversation, done with pen in hand. One cannot as easily slip into the text and disappear into the consciousness of another. I have found that writing with a book, in a book, helps maintain a difference, a separation,

among narrator, author, and reader. In this separation, a relationship between text and reader is possible. Writing helps create a me not-me tension that might vanish without it. Jack's reading illustrates this very point. One day at school, the principal invites convicts to come speak about "where it all went wrong" as a cautionary tale to the audience. As he watches the prisoners marching away, Jack makes a connection to reading fiction.

I felt adrift inside, as if I had a compulsion not to be myself. I especially had that feeling when I read books. I seemed to become the main character, as if I had abandoned myself and allowed some other person to step right in and take me over...when I regained my own voice it was always strangely scarred from the experience. (p. 30-31)

Jack is describing a powerful aesthetic experience, when boundaries between self and other become more forgiving, thereby allowing imagined, what-if possibilities to flourish. Jack is performing what Wilhelm & Novak (2011) call the "evocative" dimension of aesthetic experience, where a reader reads into and performs the life of another. Jack lacks what Wilhelm calls the "reflective dimension" of aesthetic reading, where insight into the self and world are made *through the text*. The reflective dimension maintains the vital difference between reader and text, actual and virtual worlds. This issue can also be understood using Margeret Hunsberger's (1992) distinction between inner and outer time. When inner time dominates a reading experience, there is complete merger between a reader and a book; the world and self disappear. When outer time dominates, there is no relationship between a reader and text; one is too firmly attached to the actual to learn from the virtual. Jacks knows he needs to bridge outer and inner time to read well. He is right to be concerned. For Steven and me, writing in the commonplace provided the name, the word, of separation, between us and the text. While writing recorded aesthetic experience, it facilitated the reflective dimension necessary to maintain the difference

between me and Jack, firmly grounding his story in my world – even as I, admittedly, gave up mine to enter his.

Another important point to note, at the start, was that while writing drew the needed line between inner and outer time, so did teaching. For Steven more than myself. I noted earlier that, in the second moment of reading, the gift of time – to read and to plan – would make possible the flourishing of three related identities: reader, teacher, researcher. This happened for me, but not so much for Steven. Steven, in his journals and in conversation, returned to the question of “well, what are we going to teach?” at the expense of the aesthetic-connective-reflective ramblings I readily took advantage of. The boom of practicality stopped ostensibly private, aesthetic experience *in its tracks*, forcing play and possibility to give an account, to answer the demand of teaching, of the other, of the imagined student. This relationship between the demands of pedagogy and the possibilities of private, aesthetic experience is more complicated than I can appreciate here. For now, I will say that inner time, on occasion, had to answer to the very real demands of outer time.

I had experienced and was excited about keeping a commonplace before beginning this moment. I did not anticipate, however, the emotional, physical, and intellectual demands it would place on us. Here is a telling passage from Steven’s notes journal, when he had just begun the process of data collection.

My second observation concerning reading *Hole in My Life* regards the process of actively taking notes while reading a text. Despite my literature background, I’ve never been one to hold a pen in my hand and write in the margins of a text. I found this process both encouraging and artificial. In some ways, it is the difference between going out to dinner by oneself and going out to dinner with someone else. In the latter case, the individual (no matter how taciturn they might naturally be) is forced to have something to say. The same seems to apply to commenting inside of a novel’s margins. I was forced to delve into what



otherwise might have remained liminal or latent and to extract these thoughts into the conscious realm, dressing them in language and more thought-out analysis. The positive aspect of this is that it forced me to make discoveries I might not have made otherwise. In this aspect, I can also relate it to writing. One never knows what they will write until forcing themselves in a room with pen and paper and actually writing. On the other hand, the artificial quality of writing in the margins was also noticeable. I sometimes (while reading) was thinking about what I should write as opposed to paying complete attention to what the author, Gantos, had written. To use an analogy, I felt sometimes like that listener who, instead of listening to what another person is saying, is thinking over what they will say next.

Steven did not write much inside his commonplace. He admitted ambivalence in his journals and during our conversations. As he indicates below, it interfered in interesting and unanticipated ways with his reading and writing life. We discussed our experience reading the text the first time and stumbled upon new ways of understanding our relationship to books and to reading and writing. When I asked Steven about his favorite part of the book, he said he liked the “getting caught story,” when Gantos relays to the reader the sequence of events between landing the boat in New York and his capture. We were both so captivated by the story that we could barely respond with a word in the margins of our text – about the reading experience or the imagined teaching experience. We could not wait to find out what happened next. This part of the conversation picks up when Steven turns the question on me.

Steven: you have any ideas for...

Brandon: my favorite part? Probably whenever he was writing. Whenever he was talking about wanting to write, or talking about the structure of his writing journal. And obviously near the end in jail when he first sees the prison copy of *Brothers K* because of what happens during his relationship with that book [he learns to be a writer]. That was probably my favorite part because I know or knew at that point that Jack was on the cusp of becoming a writer.

Steven: I agree it is nice when he's talking about writing. When he gets to *doing* some of the writing is nice too.

Brandon: the idea of the commonplace is just very seductive to me, as you can probably tell. So of course I liked Jack's writing in *The Brothers K*. When we were talking on the phone the other day, I thought about the difference between your first read and my first read as far as how much we wrote. I thought about it a lot. I haven't your copy yet, but based on your description, it's probably more natural than mine. Because the commonplace collects its fullness in time. I might be seduced by that fullness and felt compelled to over respond or over produce. I've never kept a commonplace book for research and teaching before, so maybe it was just a function of needing data and needing to have ideas for teaching – so probably a combination of those. But, I want it to be full. I wanted it from the beginning. Maybe I was just too into it at first. Fullness happens in time, during the course of things.

Steven: I think you're more used to it. I'd never done it before. [Brandon: it's hard]. You like writing in margins. Where to me it's completely alien. I never write in margins.

Brandon: Tell me why, remind me why.

Steven: I think I don't do it because... I read out loud and writing in the margins disrupts my reading out loud. I think if you are reading in your head, it's easier to disrupt with writing. Reading out loud, it's more obvious, because sound has stopped.

Brandon: did you read this one [Gantos] out loud?

Steven: portions, yeah, when I had it at home. If I was reading it on the metro, no.

Brandon: you took it on the metro? [we both laugh, as this would seem to make for an awkward ride]

Steven: if I was reading somewhere like that then I didn't. But if I had it at home then I would. So it depended on where I was. And I think that determines how much I might write about it. On the metro it's harder to write about it because it moves you know [laughs]. If you are at home and the comfort of home, it's easier to write about stuff because the world is more stable. I think that was part of it. I don't really write in the text. If I know of a line I really like, I'll write that down for books. But I never write that inside the book. I try in some aspect to not mark up the book very much. I don't like marking up books. I write on notecards. So writing in the book was different for me. Mine is a lot more sparse. I think it's good and bad though. For me, I didn't take as many leaps towards uh, you know, if I had written more I would have come up with more thoughts that were unpredictable. Like you said it disrupts the reading too. So it's a double-edged sword. Writing inside of a journal. Like you said, sometimes you know what you want it to look like. The margins, you want them to be marked up. It reminds me a little of those students who had all those, they weren't markers they were little,

like what would you have??

Brandon: tabs?

Steven: yeah, they'd have tabs on every page. I would always wonder how they did that. Do they really have tabs on every page? It makes their book look really organized. I wondered how they put so many tabs on there. Are they type A? That they have to put tabs on everything? I have no idea. But trying to do that was interesting, trying to record your thoughts. But I think it could be good for the students because I bet they are more like me in that they never write in their books and I think it could be really helpful for them to try it and see what happens and what they can create from that. It will force them to think more about the story, that's for sure. So when we come up with the assignment, I think the journaling will be good for them because I don't think they ever journal. They might journal their own thoughts but I don't think they journal while they are reading. I just don't think that happens. I don't know how natural it is. But I wonder how many people take notes on what they're reading inside the book. It might be an older craft that's been lost. If you look inside Thomas Jefferson's library you can read what he wrote inside the margins about what he was reading. I don't think that's true as much today. If you look at some of my books, you'd have to ask, "well, did he read the book? Well, the spine is kind of worn. Did he read the book? We have no idea." Whereas it's obvious that Jefferson read it. I don't know if people do that as often now.

Seth Lerer (2009), referenced earlier, suggests that earlier forms of the book shaped acts of reading as engaged acts of writing. The large margins and, by comparison, smaller main text, invited the reader to practice reading and commentary together. Reading was done with a pen in hand. Contemporary forms of the book, in contrast, provide little space for the reader to materially engage with the text. This is a very believable claim. If you picked up any book, hard or soft cover, nearby, it very likely appears as if there is no space for you. A page devoid of white space is very much like a monologue. It physically exists as and represents knowledge that is finished, invulnerable to dialogue, time and the reader's context. Looking at most any contemporary codex, there is the feeling that this text needs to breathe: to live in the present and be received charitably and relevantly by the reader.

Writing with a text and even reading a text aloud embodies reading acts that are suffuse with relationships. We can read the contemporary, margin-less texts as one that invites silent reading, literally and metaphorically. David Jardine (2008), in “Translating Water,” reminds us that it is “lost to memory that the very idea of silent reading only entered European consciousness in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century [...] In almost all cases texts were ‘til then *voiced* when read” (p. 12). Otherwise, the text remained “dead and useless and meaningless” without the voice, “without transport on the breath, without the spirit performing the text” (p. 12). Further, silent reading proved hospitable to the view of the singular, purged, autonomous subject. Jardine maps the co-incidence of the rise of the written text, the arrival of silent reading, and the self’s movement inward. He continues: “once written texts became more widespread, it became more possible to imagine the voices of the ancients housed in texts outside myself. As such, as the ancients moved outwards into the world beyond my breath and voice, my sense of ‘myself’ moved inwards. ‘Myself’ became increasingly more singular, purged, less haunted by the ghostly voices of others” (p. 12). Commonplace books, even though a written text, invite the ghostly voices of reading aloud. Instead of a self, a reader, that is purged of the world, the commonplace functions to restore multiplicity to the reader. It potentially allows a collecting place for many voices, for many texts. As we have seen, reading is a thankful gathering and the commonplace allows for its material representation. But Steven also noticed, as I did earlier, that writing/words divides. Writing/words separate us from the text. While writing draws the line between outer and inner time, Steven experienced writing as a withdrawal of attention, of intimacy. The possible double movement of the commonplace – the invitation and separation – would surface and be referenced explicitly

in later moments. We even found the physical shape of the commonplace alienating.

Steven: Like you said, for us there's so much empty space it's hard not to write there. You feel like you should complete it. For our reading -- it's funny, I went off and on reading this book [touches the commonplace] or reading the copy I had [a regular codex]. Sometimes I just wanted to read a book like a book [we both laugh]. You know, like I had to [Brandon: hold it] hold it in my hand and hold it and not feel like I was going through a manuscript [laughing]. Just the feel of the book is different. Sometimes I would just read the book and mark on pages that I thought I could write on. I just liked holding the book. I liked the smallness of it. [laughing]

Steven's reluctance to write disappointed me but did help me understand the power of reading rituals – how the feel and intimacy of the codex, for example, seduces one into reading and may even be indispensable to it. Perhaps his reluctance is a mark of the sacred. Like the books his friends recommend that he refuses to read, there is an urgency to his reading practice, a solitude he refuses to interrupt with difference. I keep coming back to the feel of a book – the feel of it in your hand, the texture of the pages, the position of the reader's body. It seems like a world of one's own. Perhaps Steven's reluctance to write in his commonplace and even to *read out of* the commonplace attests to a certain difficulty readers have in sharing their world of solitude with others who demand we have something to say, who hold to account an experience that, ostensibly, is usually is free of accounts. I love the smallness of a book too, so I can sympathize with Steven's always feeling out of place in reading the commonplace. For now, I read my friend's refusal charitably: his relationship with the commonplace is more realistic – perhaps not ideal for generating data, but more realistic, in that it collects its fullness in time. I did not explicitly say how much “marginalia” was required. To police another person's engagement with a book did not make much sense to me.

In contrast, I wrote *a lot*. I wrote all over the margins and added inserts of pictures

and commentary. This image of fullness contrasts with what I imagined as the emptiness of Steven's book.<sup>5</sup> I began to think that the natural time and fullness of the commonplace was probably somewhere between us: neither a poverty of words nor an unrestricted outpouring. The commonplace becomes full during many return readings. To fill it too quickly stops its potential short of collecting bits and pieces of the world and self-in-time. I had been seduced by the English Patient's copy of Herodotus. The imagined act of teaching, more than anything else, encouraged my outpouring of words. Perhaps I had hoped to answer the student's call through my outpouring. In saying all that I knew to say, the answer to pedagogy's question, to the other's question, would be found. My commonplace book (and the journals) attempted to be an ethical, attentive texts as we tried to answer our student's imagined demand: *I'm here. Teach me. Help me learn.* Perhaps behind my urgency to write, to respond in the text, was to answer this imagined call, to become a *responsible* reader and teacher. I will discuss more fully the anxiety I experienced at having nothing to say, nothing to write in response to the text. For now, this anxiety was more than just a failure of imagination or of thought. It was failure at *responsibility* to the other in the text.

### **Demands of the Text, Demands on the Spirit**

My intention in using the commonplace book was to deepen our relationship with the text. However, cultivating this relationship demanded time. I was curious how teaching could fit into a creative life, particularly if and how pedagogy could contribute

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<sup>5</sup> I imagined at the time that Steven's book would have a feeling of emptiness. After the study was over, I asked for Steven's copy so I could get an idea of the particularities of his reading experience. He doubted it would be of any use to me, warning/wanting me to remember that he didn't write very much in the book and relied more on our conversations to contribute his reading and teaching experiences (which he happily and abundantly did).

to and emerge from such a life naturally. We learned that this was not an easy process, a struggle that raised questions about the relationship between pedagogy and creativity.

Steven comments:

Right now the Gantos book is so far from my mind because I've been teaching these other things and trying to write the novel at the same time. I haven't had to think about the story since we last talked about it. It's just funny how even though we are both going to be teaching this, it's so immediate in your mind because you've had to sit with it for a while and with our conversations. I've sat with other things. Like what I'm going to talk about in 101 or today's class or whatever. It's just funny how we're at completely different wavelengths right now. I haven't thought about the story since we talked about it. I just haven't had time.

We related differently to Gantos and to the project as a whole. While this was expected, the particular contours of difference were interesting. I wrote voluminously in my notes journal and commonplace book. Steven wrote far less because he could not easily fit this project into his existing life. He was keeping himself on a strict deadline for revising his novel. Our project took place from February to June. He wanted to finish revising his novel by the end of June.

I think you wrote a lot more than me because of what I'm trying to do the novel. That's my creative outlet. Things that interfere, I have trouble doing them. So writing in the journal was hard for me. It's hard to spread your writing. I don't know what else you are writing right now, but if this is the main thing you are writing then it makes a lot more sense. You know a student came up to me the other day and asked how to write better essays and I told him that when I write I have to think about it for a couple of days and then slowly, subconsciously, it builds on me. For creative writing, ideas will build on me because I've been thinking about it for a while. Where with this stuff, it hasn't been in my subconscious for ideas to be coming and be free flowing. It's only in my immediate consciousness, so I have less to say because it's not churning inside my brain right now. The novel is churning inside my brain so I don't have a lot of thoughts or as many as I would hope to have. When I was reading your journals, I thought, "Brandon is having a creative outlet through this project. He's writing this and it's nice to write about this and it's nice because you can enjoy your voice writing about this project." I realized that my creative outlet wasn't this project; it's the novel. So I couldn't write that much about it. But, creativity happens in different places. We're always trying to have some kind of outlet. Ultimately, it will be what we are teaching, right?

Brandon: hopefully

Steven: I thought that works really well for what you are doing. Your creativity is going into what you'll be teaching, but it's not what my creativity is going to. I can't help it. I set this deadline for June, I want to do something by June. Maybe part of reading to teach versus reading for pleasure is just trying to have those two meet so that your outlets don't avoid teaching but lead into it. It's hard to do but optimally that would be what you are striving for.

I mentioned earlier Lewis Hyde's (1979) distinction between *work* and *labor* along with Ursula Franklin's (1990) useful terms *holistic* and *prescriptive* technology. I thought of this study as more closely aligned with labor and holistic practices: it demands clock time but also requires a change in how one lives and who one is. Practices of labor are closely aligned with matters of spirit, of inner vision, and (un)fulfilled desire. A practice need not be one or the other but can reside on a sort of sliding scale between holistic and prescriptive nodes. From the passages above, one can read that, for Steven, this project and the activities of reading and teaching associated with it, are closer to prescriptive than holistic practices. Earlier he confessed that teaching was just "something he does," and here one can read this distance in similar forms. "I just don't have time" has more than one meaning: literal time and inner time. He might literally be limited in clock time but also, understandably, his inner vision, desire and "imagined becoming" is caught up, like Jack, in potential authorhood, not with this project nor with the reading and teaching it demands.

My experience reading and keeping the commonplace aligns with Hyde and Franklin's conceptual assertions about labor and holistic practices. Keeping a commonplace, in the form that we did, demands that you change how you live your life. It changed how I lived in various ways. I couldn't read *just anywhere* at any time. I



needed space to spread out the pages. Since walking is my primary means of transport, I had to consider where I wanted to go and if it was appropriate or convenient to bring the book along. I also learned to anticipate interruption if reading in a public space. What are you reading? Is that your dissertation? *Well, yes, sort of, but I didn't write all those pages.* Initially, I kept the pages loose in my backpack, but this approach caused undue wear. I found a sturdy cardboard mailing container to keep the loose pages. One year later, I still keep it there. While it is true that I could have travelled with only a portion of the text I was reading at the time, this felt inauthentic and even contrary to reading. To understand any potential part of the book, I thought, I needed to carry the whole thing. My movement and time had to accommodate the commonplace, a virtual literary prosthetic.

I also needed extra time to read. The loose pages were less amenable, unlike a codex, the quick opening and closing. The commonplace book made just taking a peek into the text almost impossible. Reading the commonplace required a more structured, ritual reading performance – of sitting just so, with *this* pen, for just so long. I also needed to write while reading, thus slowing reading down. I had to have something to say. The commonplace book thus made literal and material the claim of some reader-response theorists (Rosenblatt, 1994; Iser, 1978), semioticians (Scholes, 1989), and post-structural thinkers (Barthes, 1974, 1986; Sumara, 1996, 2002): that reading is writing, intertextual, creative. Commonplace reading required more time, attention, thought and energy and demanded I restructure my life. Like Steven, one of the first elements of the research and reading experience I commented on was the commonplace technology.

First, I think this particular writing technology (the commonplace) makes everything a problem worth commenting on. All the blank space is staring you in

the face and, as a reader, I'm like, "wow I better pay attention and have something to say." I think reading/writing in a text with big margins, and being expected to write, makes you pay attention more, makes you make connections, may even make you *invent* connections. There's a part in the book when Jack is high (surprise) with his friend Tim and says "my brain hummed along as one thought segued into another. The concentration was incredible. If I had been reading a book, each page would have been the size of a Kansas wheat field. The space inside my mind seemed endless" (p. 43). I thought this connected in interesting ways to my experience of reading to teach and doing it with a commonplace book. There are periods of reading where an hour or so will go by and I've only read 4 or 5 pages. But this alarming inefficiency goes largely unnoticed because so many other things have been read and written (literally, in the margin) along the way. It's a very erotic, intense experience. I'm constantly monitoring what I'm thinking. I make connections about the students, myself, Steven and Jack and how all our lives might be similar (in the areas of searching for a vocation/writing voice, feeling like a misfit, hating school, feeling adrift). I was many selves at once[,] a lovely and intense convergence. As I mentioned earlier, though only a few pages would go by, a lot of text had been read and written. I think the text is like that expansive field that Jack mentioned, where connections (a network even) can be made, enabling me to read the text, myself, and other parties in new ways. In the most generous sense of the word, the commonplace is a space for thinking.

Because the commonplace book invited dialogue *and* because the students imagined presence demanded I have something to say, I read and wrote myself into different selves of reading. What were these selves? Below I describe the *reader past, present, future; the pedagogical reader; and the last reader*. These different but related selves suggest that reading to teach is full of interesting contours and even corridors – moments that nourish the private self, demand a connection to the other, and suggest when the self might be threatened through those very connections.

### **Selves of Reading**

Perhaps all so-called narrative poems only point out how impoverished we are, how, like hopeless utopians, we live for the end. They show that our lives are invalidated by needs, especially the need to continue. I've come to believe that narrative is born out of self-hatred [...] What we call narrative is simply submission to the predicate's insufferable claims on the future; it furthers continuance, blooms into another predicate. Don't you think that notions of closure rest on our longing for a barren predicate! – Mark Strand, *The Weather of Words*, 2000, p. 63, 65

## A Reader Past, Present, and Future

While reading Gantos, I summoned texts that were a part of a past life of reading. These texts helped me make sense of the text, Jack's experience, and my own experience. The margins of the commonplace were accumulating material evidence of the theoretical claims made in earlier chapters: that reading is writing; that reading is always re-reading; that the time of reading is never only the present but draws on the past and hopes for the future. The self that reads gathers past experience together; the text becomes the gathering place of these other times, selves and spaces to become the ground for new possibilities, understandings, and futures. The following is *one way* to represent these selves written into the margins of the commonplace and in my journals. I have tried to retain the relational dialogic quality of commonplace writing. I have put into play Gantos's original text, my marginalia (which includes my thoughts and references to other texts) and my journals. Where necessary, I have inserted a more distanced narrative voice that provides details and commentary for the reader. This narrator is also part of the play of meaning, adding perspective that earlier Brandons could not, bringing with him texts that belong in the commonplace. While this narrative voice is not indented, the pieces "in play" are. Lastly, Gantos's original text is in italics.

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*My entire year was a grand balancing act between doing what I wanted and doing what I should, and being who I was while inventing who I wanted to be: a writer with something important to say. (p. 9)*

Jack makes it clear from the beginning that he wants to be a writer. What he has not learned is the disjunction between wish and reality. He has not learned that writing is a practice; inspiration and ideas come *in the writing* instead of a bolt of inspiration or

insight, which is what he waits for and what never comes (Cameron, 2004; Goldberg, 1986). The older Gantos knows this, but Jack does not: that writing requires an inner vision that gives form to the chaos of experience. He has to learn to take the world into himself and transform it through writing; otherwise he will never learn from experience. And never write. Stephen Dedalus told a similar tale in James Joyce's (2000) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As long as Stephen searched for truth and order in the world of objects, his art failed; the word, his word, cannot give form because there was none to give; his art arrived belated to the world after meaning was finished. Marion Milner's (1950/1990) *On Not Being Able to Paint* is my favorite example of a person who learns that satisfying artistic work negotiates inner and outer, subject and object, a negotiation Stephen struggles to learn. During her initial experiences learning to paint, Marion painted mimetically, trying to copy the world onto her canvas. This is an approach that makes sense on many levels. First, there is no risk in one's relation to the object. One is relieved on the anxiety of the blank canvas. *What must I paint?* The world as it is. The mimetic approach to art-making relieves anxiety; not the anxiety of choice, necessarily, but of vision. Mimetic art provides an objective standard. Painting mimetically, however, failed to satisfy her creative needs in two ways: she could not see the world in her work. She failed to copy adequately and discovered that mimesis was an impossible standard. She also failed to see herself in her work. Her attempts to copy the world left no room for her dreams or impulses. Perhaps worse, the canvas and the world represented there seemed fixed, lifeless, invulnerable to change. Only when she begins to paint in a way that blended inner vision and feeling with outer world did she feel satisfied and intrigued by the mysterious inner visions that give rise to the objects on the canvas.

What I take to be her most profound point is that the canvas, the objects imbued with inner vision, keep alive a belief that we can change the world, that our inner wish can shape the not-me, the world outside. Her canvas sustained a belief in a world that can receive our action.

I think Jack, in the beginning of the book, is much like Stephen and Marion. He reads all the time, has a voracious appetite for books, but cannot find his own voice as a writer. He never (and would never) admit this: but perhaps he reads too much to write. His voice is overwhelmed by his idols, by the books he loves – setting him up with an impossible standard. Writing – his dream – provides form for an otherwise disorderly and adrift life. I really admired him for keeping a writing journal and could identify with some of the passages. Like Marion and Stephen, he takes initial comfort in the copy. He divides his writing journal into four parts – and one of them is copying down passages he loves:

*The next section was my favorite. Each time I read a book, I cataloged the parts that struck me dumb with envy and admiration for their beauty and power and truth. I spent hours copying entire pages. (p. 21)*

I have done this too, taking in a poem, memorizing it, copying it, wallowing in its language – part of me wishing it was from my own pen. I discussed my tendency to eat texts earlier in the story “Possession.” The text overwhelms my sense (and Jack’s) of creation. In this particular example, Jack and I are eating words for different reasons: Jack because of love; I ate texts in “Possession” because of fear. But the risks are the same: if you eat poems, you will be eaten from the inside out. The texts’ total presence will suffocate any emerging visions of the world.

*The fourth section was devoted to the moments of inspiration when book ideas came to me in full-color flashes...I’d flip through these pages, reading them to myself, pondering each idea, and rejecting them. All of them...I just didn’t have the confidence and determination to sit still and nurture them properly. (p. 22)*

As a matter of self-preservation, Jack decides that his writing problems are due to an uneventful world, not inadequate vision. He has not yet found a good enough story. He

craves a world that is ordered in a particular way, not yet aware that one's inner vision shapes the potential story to be written from the world outside.

Jack turns to reading and writing for stability, yet, in his writing frustrations, he finds only an image of himself as an unfinished artist. Like the texts I consumed voraciously, what I formerly loved – reading – returned to me a broken image of a reader. I hated the text and myself. Reading and writing, Jack's loves, return a broken image of a writer. He is prone to wandering, to weaving in and out of existence, to being lost to himself and a vision for his future. The text and the world are dissatisfying to him. Over and again, he finds himself in loveless and hopeless situations. So he drinks, only adding to his troubles.

*I had been reading Frank Conroy's Stop Time... He was hiding from everyone, especially himself. I recognized the feeling... I didn't have any plans. No big ideas. No hopes. No dreams. I was beat, inside and outside. (p. 18-19)*

He turns from drifting to writing, specifically his structured journal, to organize his life around his desires. I identified with his writing, his drifting, and his not feeling quite at home doing either.

I saw myself in Jack's drifting. When he is working on a construction site, playing cards with workers, you know that soon he will get the itch to write, suddenly feel out of place and the impoverishment of his world. Deep down he knows it's not what he's supposed to be doing; he doesn't have anything he desires on his horizon. I thought a lot of my time in teaching. There were times when I felt like a misfit, alienated from my dreams and my own life. Like I had bigger spheres ahead of me but wasn't really filling the sphere I was in. Just drifting along, like Jack. Some of those teaching times felt like the "time between times" that Mark Strand (2003) mentions in "A Piece of the Storm." There were days that felt like funerals and only I knew about them.

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,  
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room  
And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up  
From your book, saw it the moment it landed.  
That's all There was to it. No more than a solemn waking  
To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of attention, swiftly,  
A time between times, a flowerless funeral. (p. 20, lines 1-7)

I cannot comfortably read the last line. Possibility abounds for this future someone, but not for the present. Now is *not* the time. Jack surely feels the impoverished present; but perhaps this is muted because Gantos, the memoirist, writes with the whole in view, any anxiety assuaged by narrative closure, his knowledge of the

future.

*But after a while, I began to think of school again...I admitted that electrical work was not in my future and I made the decision to get my high school diploma. (p. 11)*

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Being a writer seems to be Jack's imaginary place of belonging. I love when he thinks about writing because it means he recognizes his desires and his future. He hates being a construction worker. And I remember working for my dad on a construction site. I hated it. I liked helping him but I mostly resented it. I think because of my past work experiences, I really admired Jack having authors as idols, his willingness to pursue his dream and his openness to being inspired by others.

Jack goes on a personal writing retreat to jumpstart his writing. He drives to Florida intent on finding a juicy story to write about. He also intends to visit the houses of Ernest Hemingway and John Hershey. He is full of hope about the future, that he is enlisting in a great quest of writing. Suddenly, he is overcome with anxiety. These men did great things, went to the heart of human life and conflict. And what has he done? At the moment when he has these feelings, he is sitting on Hemingway's lawn writing about a huge, brooding turtle. His ordinary life, his cowardice overwhelms him.

*I depressed myself. The only thing I had to write about was a turtle in Hemingway's pool. Moments before it seemed so romantic. Now it seemed mundane. (p. 51)*

Jack does live in pretty horrible circumstances while working at the grocery store and living in the hotel, so I can see why he cried while reading *A Moveable Feast*. It's easy to think you are born in the wrong place and the wrong time. The wrong time for reading, the wrong time for writing. I felt so sorry for him when he goes back to school, moves in with that weird family and gets in the habit of drinking. His dreams just aren't in view. I couldn't help but think of all the alcohol I drank while teaching. I was working another job and going to school. So maybe it wasn't all teaching. It might have been an unhappy time in my life. The wanting something more but getting stuck in a rut. I really started to identify with Jack in the early pages (1-54). I hadn't really expected that. I expected to make a connection between Jack and the students, with me safely out of the way. That's not what happened. I kept thinking about David Whyte's (1997) poem "Sweet Darkness" and the tired eyes and the tired world. I wonder which comes first?

When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone  
no part of the world can find you. (lines 1-4)

I think what Whyte is saying relates to Jack. He's trying to cut the strings to his present life; he's running towards hope, or what he thinks is a fresh start, away from the mundane grocery store job, towards a life with excitement, something, anything different.

Jack is accepted into the University of Florida, but decides not to go. He thinks he can go someplace better. But, he needs money. He decides to go to St. Croix to work for his father, but the economy is so poor, he ends up agreeing to sail a boat full of Marijuana to New York for \$10,000. Of course, he gets caught, arrested and thrown in jail. But, while on board, he finds the ship's log and begins to write. Any passage that talked about Jack's love for books or his desire to write resonated with me.

Of course, it made me extremely happy when Jack found the ship's log. It makes me happy when he's writing. I love the physicality of the book, it's heaviness, the smell of diesel, how it's picked up bits and pieces of the world.

*I set it on the galley table and opened the cover. It was blank...It smelled salty, and a bit like diesel fuel. I loved it, and immediately thought it was up to me to record my boat's history, like so many other sea writers had done. (p. 81)*

When the ship lands at Cape May, I couldn't help but think about the similarity between Jack being caked with salt and wanting to wash off, and the reader emerging with a "body full of sentences as moments" as Michael Ondaatje (*The English Patient*) would say. The salt is like being in the messiness of reading, the convergence of teaching, reading and researching selves.

When Jack lands in jail, he spends the first few days with nothing to read or write. Then, he is brought a cart full of books, a few of which he takes notice. *Hole* is a frame tale.

The opening chapter gives the plot away. Jack spends time in jail and learns to be a writer through this horrible experience. We learn in the opening chapter that Dostoyevsky's



*Brothers K* is the book with which and in which he learns to be a writer, recording what happens outside and what he makes of it on the inside.

The part when Jack first sees the *Brothers K* in the collection of prison books almost made me cry. His writing begins, I thought. After all the silence, the crises of confidence, the missing words when he most needs them, the words pour out. I also thought of writing as a practice, a discipline. A way of life. He can't escape writing now. He can't drink or go out or anything. All he has is writing and all he can do is write. Jack's writing may not be good at first but the first step he must learn to take is putting pen to paper. I must learn this myself to write well. Does hope begin when we are buried at the bottom of a heap? Sometimes all there's to do is bury ourselves in a practice. When writing was all he had, when it became a necessary vital function, he became a writer.

*Dostoyevsky had spent some time in prison...And I guess knowing that only encouraged me to use Karamozov for my journal. I read the book first. Then I began to record my own lines between his lines. Naturally, his were better. But mine were mine, and I didn't take me long to find out I had plenty to write about. (p. 159)*

What a great passage. And really a great passage about commonplaces. He is coming to form as a writer through the commonplace. I wonder what form I am writing myself into now? A more sensitive reader? A better teacher? A better writer? The commonplace gives Jack a nurturing writing relationship that is not overwhelming. He has company with others who have experienced incarceration. But, his lines were his lines. He has grown as a writer but also as a reader. He isn't scared of being enveloped whole and scarred by the text, but uses it to write his own life. Like Jack, can I learn to read and not be enveloped, to read and not disappear?

His commonplace marks the development of Jack as a writer. He writes to process, to empty himself of overwhelming experiences, like the threats of prison life and his father coming to visit him drunk. His book becomes the form life needs.

*I poured myself into that book, and it poured itself back into me... I had come all the way to prison to realize that what I had in my past was so much richer than what was before me. (p. 185-186)*

It was so gratifying to read this passage. Gantos has given us closure through Jack's identification as a writer. It also validated me as a reader, as if I was finally able to say 'gotcha' Jack; he diagnosed what the (this) reader already knew: that his younger self was too impatient, too hungry for fantastic experience to write through his own.

Jack's story has a bittersweet ending. On one level, the reader feels a sense of completion. Jack gets out of prison because he is accepted into college; this convinces the parole officer that Jack is fully rehabilitated. In his writing classes, he writes his way out of his past and into what Lacan would probably appreciate as his "future-past." He writes his way out only to write his way back in – to times more beautiful and nurturing.

*I wrote brutal stories about prison, about New York street life...And then one day I got tired of all the blood and guts and hard lives and hard hearts and began to write more stories about my childhood. (p. 198-199)*

My experience as a reader was mostly one of speechlessness. I wanted to say something, to have ideas for reading and teaching – surely this was a significant moment. But my margins largely failed me. I underlined important passages and wrote, over and again,

this is a really beautiful part. But I'm a little out of words right now. I'm so full, I can barely respond. I wish I could explain.

I also had to respond to the end as a fellow writer and reader. Jack loses his copy of *The Brothers K*, official prison property. He is not allowed to leave with it. I did not know what to say.

*The guard picked up the book by the spine and tapped it on the table as if he were shaking sand from a shoe. Nothing came out. "This is a prison copy," he said. "It belongs here." I couldn't say anything...My heart was beating wildly...My entire identity as a writer was in that book. (p. 195)*

I wouldn't know what to do if I lost my commonplace. This is so sad. It's like I've lost a part of myself reading this. The book is discarded with such finality. I think I'm going to be sick.

*[I] turned away when he threw it in a return bin. I heard it hit with a thud. That journal was the one and only thing I loved about prison. I knew I'd always have my memory but my heart was in that book. (p. 196)*

This loss is so beautiful. It makes me want to fill this book with beautiful things. But I am so crushed that Jack lost the book. He seems so different without it and so I too seem different because my relationship with Jack has changed.

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I was surprised by how much I identified with Jack. I was like his younger reading self, so open to the text to make one feel hollow in its absence. His lost book made me profoundly sad and I began to wonder what importance books, particular the commonplace book, had for me? Perhaps I believed that reading and writing in the book would serve as a guide for me on how to read, how to write, and how to teach. I read in the first moment (writing stories) a desire to make a home out of reading, of writing and of teaching despite feeling variously *out of place* as reader, writer and teacher – if not all at once, then certainly each in their own (un)timely-ness. Perhaps the seduction of the *English Patient* and Gantos's copy of *The Brother's K* is an abiding conviction that books contain in their abundance who I am, how I should live, and what I should be. The loss of such a book would be a loss of self. Jack's loss reverberated through my own anxieties, ones felt during that particular moment, including the sudden (dis)identification with Jack – my repulsion and mourning coupled with the uneasy connection to the possibility of losing my own book. Part of me cannot help but read Jack's loss and my reaction as an echo for larger anxieties. For example, I react with rage and anxiety when I find myself reading, writing (and teaching) my way into cracks, fissures, lines of confusion I must straddle. One way to read the Eliot and Strand poems that populate this chapter is to view them (particularly Strand) as an expression of solitude, even loneliness, and as compensation for the impossibility of a future.

I can also read a desire to start over and recreate the world in one's own image (or as one would like it to be), a world without in-betweenness, confusion. This anxiety – about the present and future – was piqued by Jack and who I became reading (about) him: a lover of books, with desires to be guided by them, but also someone a bit lost, not quite

sure of who I was, what I was doing here (as a researcher) and what I would or should do with others, as a teacher. The seduction in Eliot's work, of being the last (wo)man in a broken, empty world, is that one can impose form, the first order. Jack, however, cannot erase the world. Jack is belated and struggles with his belatedness – particularly with how to write when the world has already, it seems, been spoken. I, too, am belated, arriving late to a world that is not always so neatly ordered. Like Jack, I wanted to find a place of belonging, particularly as a writer and teacher. Using Eliot and Strand was one way to express the impossibility of order, even as I tried to order my experience in writing.

For now, I will silence this particularly anxious meta-reader, and return to performing the reading selves of the second moment. I knew, felt that the *Brothers K* did miraculous things for Jack. My anxiety at reading his loss meant that part of me hoped *Hole* would do similar things for me. Contained within it were ways of reading and teaching that I could live with. I was not just a reader. I was also a teacher when I read Gantos's book, and had plenty to say about the students and ideas for teaching. But, before I begin, let me give away some of what is to come. I wish to discuss two other readers: the pedagogical reader and the last reader. As I describe and re-perform for you the pedagogical reader, I will introduce and elaborate on some important terms, including *pedagogical doubt*, *aesthetic time* and *pedagogical time*. This will prepare me and you for a discussion of *the last reader* – an echo of the possessed reader I described in my story of "Possession." Unfortunately, he returned.

### **The Pedagogical Reader**

He is not wholly separate from *the reader past, present, future* that I described earlier. At times, the first reader was alone in/with the text. One can read this aloneness in

the above textual construction. While reading is always a thankful gathering of texts, times, and places together, at points the first reader read in pedagogical solitude, making no explicit mention of the students or of pedagogy. Further, both Steven and I experienced this solitude when reading particularly quick or dramatic parts of Gantos's text. We were caught up in *the what next?* of the story, what E.M. Forster would call *the plot*. Especially during these quick textual episodes, we needed to read without thinking about pedagogy.

*The pedagogical reader* uses aesthetic experience as a bridge to pedagogy. This reader reads and writes his way into potentially fruitful pedagogical questions and was led there by his own question, engagement, feeling or identification with the text. This reader bridges the ostensible separation between private and public readers that Atwell-Vasey (1998) describes in *Nourishing Words*: that aesthetic reading is rich, ambiguous, rewarding and reading to teach lifeless, barren, reduced to what is objective and measurable. The pedagogical reader is invigorated by finding common ground, or imagined similarity, among his own feeling, thoughts, questions *and* pedagogical questions that might benefit others. This reader, at times, traverses the text with pedagogical conviction; he's convinced about what students need to learn. This reader is a *robust* pedagogical reader. There is also a downside to the pedagogical reader that I will mention now and give fuller treatment to below. This reader, at times, projects his own reading of and identification with Jack onto the students that he does not know. He assumes a similarity among himself, Jack, and the students. This projection, while possibly justifiable, is at bottom a (necessary) misreading. The pedagogical reader, thus, populates his own textual journey with others (the students) who are on a similar journey:

this makes pedagogy possible but also comes with negative consequences, as we will see. He populates his journey with close friends with whom he has no history; at times, this reader is aware of and made uncomfortable, even vulnerable, by their strangeness.

The downside of the pedagogical reader appears in other contours of the reading experience. At points, the reader is overcome with pedagogical doubt about the relevance of his aesthetic engagement with the text to the task of pedagogy. Doubt seemed to arise from writing and reading our way into interesting but disconnected corridors. The reader, while fascinated with the text he has spun for himself, sees/imagines no connection to others. While otherwise satiated, he is pedagogically alone, and has no answer to pedagogy's questions – what should I say about the text? What should students learn? Pedagogical solitude, importantly, is a possible defense against one's speechlessness and against the others in the text. Students, at times, became an imagined threat to the reading self, as they held the power to ignore, refuse, or misuse the text that we have grown to love and the reading selves we present through pedagogy. Now that we have a map, I want to add texture to the pedagogical reader by looking into the notes journals, commonplace books, and interview data. One last note: all of the data used in this chapter was recorded before we met the students. The one exception occurs near the end of this chapter when Steven and I had one additional conversation about the texture of the first reading experience after teaching the students during one class session. I will note specifically when I use these conversations.

I will begin with a few vignettes from the *robust* pedagogical reader. The first, in particular, echoes the “imagined convergence” of the reading experience – a (mis)reading

of satiety, assurance, even friendship in the journey of reading and writing a life. But, the reader maybe wonder, do my companions, the students, want or need to accompany?

As a reader and teacher, I gravitated to the idea/theme of *misfit* from the start. Gantos titles the second chapter “Misfit,” allowing the reader to see Jack contemplate his existence through its prism. Jack often finds himself as a misfit: not quite fitting in in high school, never feeling confident as a writer, feeling adrift, never identified as a writer by his teachers. He tries to find his writing voice, which he’s never, early on, quite able to do. He seems uncomfortable in his own skin. He slides easily in and out of environments because he maintains little attachment (except to books) but this also means he has no home. He’s restless and never quite sure what he wants but always sure he’s not satisfied with where he is. He’s searching for a place of belonging in many ways. What do the students think of this? Wouldn’t the idea of discontentment and misfitting resonate with them, with me, with everyone? Don’t we all want a place of belonging? Do we all have *disease* in our lives, where there’s a part of us searching for home? Don’t we search for that? Where is that place for the students? To this end, I imagine some sort of creative writing prompt that addresses belonging. This would help them make the connection between Jack’s experience and their own.

My pedagogical imagination gravitated to writing and *creating* writers. I felt most confident when projecting “the writing life” as something the students wanted for themselves. I quote several extended examples. Writing became the vortex, the imagined future for the students.

With Jack, there was this deferral of creative energy which bothered me but only because he reminds me of me. Maybe he’s afraid of what writing will bring? What could that be for him? for me? He starts keeping the journal but can’t write down his own ideas for novels; his body freezes and he has a confidence attack. His favorite part is copying the words of other novelists but when it comes to his own contribution, he backs away. So even his journal is a book of betrayal. I didn’t mention this in the commonplace but I’m just noticing the connection between school and his writing insecurity. He’s not “smart enough” to enter the arty classes. He’s been told by others most of his life that he’s not talented. Why was I putting so much blame on him before? There’s a strong connection there. I wish he would stop trying to find something juicy to write about and just write. Everyplace he goes for inspiration, he always wants a little bit more. As if St. Croix holds the key to his writing life.

Why does he wait for something to happen to him? Why does he escape into drugs? He says it’s time to stop running away from writing and to face it head on. Is he afraid of failing? He life seems interesting enough already, so why wait? Living in a

welfare motel for his senior year of high school doesn't happen to everyone. I was upset that he thought his life wasn't good enough. I guess if there's one message I'd like the students to get from Jack, it's that your life already has the fodder for writing. It's up to you to make the facts interesting! Maybe the message is that great stories don't happen to you, but it's what you make of and how you tell the ordinary events that have already happened. This brings us to the question that I'd like us to consider. Do you have to live an interesting life to be a good writer? In general, I think the book communicates a lot of interesting issues about the writing process (the necessity of patience, confidence, the discerning eye for a story, writing about the ordinary) that could be/should be communicated to students.

As a hopefully reflective practitioner, I can appreciate in this scene how pedagogy emerges organically from the memoir itself and is imagined to extend to the interests and concerns of the students. In other words, pedagogy (the version I imagine) emerges from the connection between the students' lives and the curriculum. This is the lesson Dewey (1906) taught us: that curriculum is the dance between reader and culture, experience and tradition. However, my imagination also presumes an emptiness, a void into which pedagogy arrives to bring the fullness and abundance of writing. I assume that the students' experience and Jack's experience are the same – they have lives to write but are not quite able to do so. I read the assumption as a defense against the pedagogical anxiety of having nothing to teach. Steven and I interpreted this anxiety through writing anxiety. If the world does not need another fiction story, there is nothing for you to write about. The fictional word emanates from the writer. Admittedly, this is a very solitary way of looking at the relationship among the writer, the world and the imagination. Similarly, we thought, with English there is nothing *one has to* teach. Unlike physics, for example, there are no laws of English. Steven was particularly tuned into this source of disciplinary anxiety. Plus, we were not teaching in an atmosphere of rigorous, accountable standards. He was responsible for his curriculum. Enter Peter Taubman's (2009) work on teacher's (un)easy capitulation to standards. Rigorous standards and scripted curriculum become



more palatable, Taubman argues in *Teaching by Numbers*, because they relieve anxiety, doubt; they spare us from encountering the potential nothingness of pedagogy, the fear that teaching is meaningless. Standards and the authorities that endorse them provide a source of worth, recognition, and value. They also protect us teachers from facing our inadequacy, particularly of our imagination and creative capacity. Without standards or standard curriculum, the lesson fails because my imagination as a teacher is inadequate.

Steven and I did not have rigorous standards to abide; if a moribund curriculum – scripted to the letter – robs one of creative satisfaction, an open curriculum is vulnerable to doubt, to the adequacy of the one’s imagining it. We had a blank canvas, in a way – an incredible opportunity to satisfy our creative energies. But, it also came with consequences – doubting the quality of our readings; that there was always more to say about the text; that we had not said enough; that there, in fact, was nothing to say. Echoing Sumara (1996), we were laying down the path of pedagogy while walking, never quite sure we were heading in the right direction, towards the right people. This short diversion from the robust pedagogical reader, re-performs, I think, the texture of our first reading experience. Even in the midst of confident steps, the ground underfoot gave way. Below, I continue with more examples of the pedagogical reader at work.

When nothing in Jack life's brought him alive I thought of a David Whyte's poem: "sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of aloneness to learn that anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you." The world is too small for Jack's ambition, talent and wonderful spirit. I kept wondering if the kids are beaten down, like Jack, by the exhaustion of life.

At one point, I wrote, "right now I'm looking forward to teaching this text because it seems very accessible and also because this memoir is about having dreams and dealing with disappointment and finding our place in the world. I'm still trying to figure out these questions for myself (what is my story?) and so is Steven. I imagine the students are too. I imagine them writing some sort of memoir fragment of this phenomenon of finding one's place. I'd enjoy writing one too."

Part of Jack finding his story was getting settled in a somewhat “homelike” environment at King’s Court. He got settled back into a writing routine. I loved it when he talked about his reading and writing in his journal. My heart broke when he flipped through his journal and rejected his novel ideas. I wondered here whether or not he was reading too much?! Relying on other voices instead of his own? Would he ever consider his own life worth writing about? And I think that's what I want the students to understand. You don't have to have lived an exciting or eventful life to write and maybe this is the philosophy behind the memoir assignment, if some of them are hesitant or reluctant. It's what you make of your experience that matters. It's so frustrating for me to read about Jack and his waiting for something exciting to happen to him. Maybe we could ask the kids to keep a journal during the semester like Jack kept? Or at least find a way for them to talk back to the text, like their own commonplace?

At points, my imagination was both confident and reluctant, particularly around passages that resonated deeply with my experience. I was not sure how to talk about especially moving moments with the text, or how pedagogy could extend the abundance of solitude.

How do the students feel about quotes from Gantos that speak deeply to me and my experience? Like the passage on page 61 about Jack wanting books to lead his life, to not just read them but be changed by them? And his dream to become such a writer? Will they pass over it? Will they underline it and reflect on it like I did? The rich echo I experienced from this passage just might not be there for students. What does the text become then? Just a plot with events and no resonance? We could talk about dreams and aspirations I guess...maybe that would form the connection for them, but I don't know. Or we might ask: Have books ever made you do anything or desire something? We might have students bring in a kind of show and tell of important books, music, poems, etc...This would invite a connection between their experience and Jack's. They could also write something based on these relationships.

Jack's identification with Martin Eden was so moving that I intended to pick up Martin Eden and read it myself. Why was he thinking about suicide? Going crazy on the boat? This entry was totally engaging and moving; there's no doubt that he's growing into a writer before the reader's eyes. The reader would never believe he doubts himself or his ability. What is the lesson for students? If you want to be a writer, you have to practice and give yourself over to the writing. Jack is on the boat, and there's nothing else to do but write. The message might be that to be a writer requires that you spend time in the practice of writing, for better or worse.

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The part where he sees the *Brother's K* for the first time almost made me cry. His writing begins, I thought. After all the silence, the crises of confidence, the missing words when he most needs them (at the sentencing), the words pour out. I also thought of writing as a practice, a discipline. A way of life. He can't escape writing now. He can't drink or go out or anything. All he has is writing and all he can do is write. Jack's writing may not be good at first but the first step he must learn to take is putting pen to paper. I must learn this myself. Again, I think, this is something the students should know too. If one of the central messages of the unit is that you're life is worth writing about, this adds the necessary ingredient of practice.

*I read the book first. Then I began to record my own lines between his lines. Naturally, his were better. But mine were mine, and it didn't take me long to find out I had plenty to write about.* (p. 159)

Okay, since journaling and commonplace practices are so important to Jack and his growing identity as a writer, I think it's pretty clear that this is what students should be doing with their books. But we need to have a good reason, not just because Jack is doing it. Perhaps the justification will come by doing the practice itself? Maybe the students will understand what journaling gives Jack by doing it! This would provide a nice interpretive connection between the text and their life. Is Jack becoming someone else during this scene? Does writing make you become a different kind of person? What selves will students become by engaging in this practice? Should there be any explicit instruction about the commonplace journal? What should or shouldn't go in? Or does this defeat the purpose?

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On page 185, he charts his own growth as a writer. He could never, he tells us, while at Kings' Court have written about something so unsettling as what he sees in prison because he didn't have the patience to sit still and nurture ideas properly. He finally understands that he had plenty of material to write about in high school. I bet our students do too. I bet I do. Is the lesson that to make writing happen, we have to learn to be patient? To believe that we've lived plenty of stories, we just have to notice them? And how do we do that? Is the message for students to learn to sit still and be in the mess of writing?

I probably don't have to say this but I was crushed when Jack couldn't keep the *Brothers K*. It's like I'd lost part of myself as a reader. Jack seemed different without that book and so I seemed different because my relationship with Jack had changed. After making one, I wonder what students will think of this loss? I think this will get us into an interesting discussion of what journals or commonplaces do for the selves that make them. One thing we could do pedagogy wise is have the students "perform" an entry from their commonplace book. Maybe a dramatic reading of a story they wrote or a response they had to the text.

I thought of this idea when Jack said that he poured himself into the book and the book poured itself into him.

From these passages, it is clear that, pedagogically, keeping a journal, commonplace book practices, and creative writing were comfortable to imagine. I was comfortable with these thoughts because they connected to how I (and Steven) imagined myself pedagogically in the first moment stories: that I could teach creatively; that I did not need to rely on over-reading; that I could teach without killing the text; that I could relive, re-perform, reproduce those pedagogical acts that I felt were strangely successful from my past (e.g., students creative portfolios that melted in my car). My imagination also connected to our earlier conviction that we wanted to teach “organically” and not feel compelled to “nit pick” the text. This was one way, it seemed, to perform Dewey’s (1906) dance of bringing the child and the curriculum together. Steven, like me, expressed an attraction to the idea of journaling, his in terms of a co-journey:

One project which I feel strongly about so far (regarding “Reading to Teach”) is a project involving the students writing inside their own copies of “Hole in My Life.” The book seems to be about “reading to write” (a third category?) and it feels only natural to have our students mimic Gantos’s journey in their own experience of the book. In particular, I believe we could use Gantos’ description of four exercises for budding writers described on p. 21-22: journaling, favorite passages, vocabulary building, and book ideas. I feel this project will help to build the creativity of our students and also their interaction with the text.

Our discussions confirmed what we both wrote separately; if we wanted to incorporate creativity into our pedagogy, allowing students to journal and write creatively would help them read Jack and themselves. It also offered a pedagogical space where something unpredictable could happen: where we did not feel compelled to play *Thucydides* as readers and teachers. In short, it allowed enough form for a new story to emerge – something we as teachers craved and, admittedly, feared.

I mentioned earlier the “imagined convergence” of the pedagogical imagination. This was savory to imagine, as the convergence of reading selves formed among myself, Jack, and the imagined students meant that nothing felt out of place or out of step. It provided relief from the mystery of the students and from the anxiety of having nothing to say as a teacher. I thought of it in terms of an *aesthetic braid*:

The “imagined convergence” mentioned above comes with a bit of danger too. I kept making connections between my life, Steven’s life, Jack’s life, and the students lives. I wrote that Jack is trying to find his “storyline” as a writer. He bumps up against particular obstacles in his journey...school, alcohol, crises of confidence, a job that saps his energy, internal malaise, a general comportment of feeling adrift, not being supported by others around him. In short he has big dreams but isn’t quite sure how to realize them or the effort it will take to do so. Anyway, I kept thinking about my life as a researcher and how I’ve had crises of identity all along the way, very similar to Jack’s. How I felt adrift as a teacher and even now as a researcher. I thought about my imagined life as a writer and how Jack was inspiring me to pursue writing even as he was helping me see the obstacles I was placing in front of myself. Then I remembered Steven’s pursuit of being a writer and what I remembered of it. I wondered if he felt adrift teaching...if he had big dreams like Jack but felt stalled by particular obstacles, teaching included. Then I thought about the students. What storylines are they pursuing for themselves? Do they feel adrift at this school? Like they are just passing time? Are they having crises of identity and trying to figure out themselves? In making these connections (the imagined convergence), I had to project a lot of information onto Steven and to the students. Counter to my assumptions, maybe the students feel quite at home at the university. Maybe they had a great high school experience, know exactly what they want to do and are using this time to purposefully pursue that dream. Maybe the deck isn’t stacked against them but in their favor. In my notes, I had them positioned as I positioned Jack and myself – talented but feeling a little bit lost in the world, waiting/wanting to somehow find themselves. This is a pretty big assumption. But it is an assumption with benefits. Many times when reading I thought, wow the students can really identify with this! So, in my mind, they could totally get into Jack’s character because, PRESTO, he’s just like them! Again, that’s a very big assumption. Does it have to do with them being not-so-strong students? But why read this book if the students are already like Jack? Is that really the goal of reading literature? Doesn’t reading literature also allow us to get outside the self and normal experience to see the world anew through another’s eyes? I guess one benefit to assuming a similarity between Jack and the students is that I did indeed think about the “hidden talents” and passions that these students bring with them. Jack’s read more books that I’ve ever even seen, yet his teachers know nothing about it nor do they seem to value what he does or doesn’t do in his free time. I

don't want to repeat the same mistake. In reading to teach, I found myself making these "life weaves or braids" – while aesthetically it might be interesting, it also has faults because it forces the students' experience to conform to the character's – which, of course, may not be the case.

The weave, the braid, made among myself, Jack, Steven, and the students is one way students can be/get caught up in the stories readers weave in and through the text. On the one hand, I must read the convergence positively. The students are present, not invisible, in the text. The students emerge from the ground of the reader's aesthetic experience, serving as a partial response to Atwell-Vasey's (1998) criticism that public teaching divorces teachers from the rich connection that they have to texts as private readers. This separation, she argues, creates pedagogy that separates readers (students) from their bodies, feelings, emotions and rich connections to home and community. Readers (students) then become the subject of/to paternal authority – rational, objective, efficient, predictable.

Of course, there is another reading. I cannot see past my own nose. The text, pedagogy, the students are subsumed – all difference flattened – in my own fantasy of artistic becoming, in my eventual arrival into aesthetic plentitude, in my journey of becoming with/through/in spite of anxiety. We will *all be writers*. I was also imagining pedagogy *as if* it were writing. The imagined scene of pedagogy became my canvas where materials serve a particular vision. But the form of teaching is not the form of writing or of painting. Other people are not words or malleable objects. Inner wish is not reality. And, as much as I wanted to hold out otherwise, teaching is not writing. My fantasy of artistic arrival and plentitude was playing out in quite a different medium. With very important consequences.

### **Doubting Pedagogy**

Steven: I laughed out loud when I read this in your journal. “Is this an interesting issue to pursue with students or is this only something Steven and I will be into?” I remember you said that constantly [hard laughing] and I kept laughing because I was like “yeah, *will they* find this interesting?” I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. [we both laugh]

Brandon: I wrote that probably five times in the journal, didn't I?!

Steven: it kept happening. But it's true, though. You keep thinking, “is this interesting to me or is this interesting to who we will be talking to, to a larger audience?”

The robust pedagogical reader that I have described above was also, on occasion, overrun with doubt. I read and wrote my way into aesthetic corridors that were interesting and abundant, but, I worried, too isolated from the (imagined) interests of students. In a way, I was Steven's double, reading my way into attachments and experiences that I found difficult to share. Earlier, I wrote about Steven in this way:

Literature was so precious, so needed, his texts so uniquely his texts, that they could not be shared or, if shared, could not be kept.

Does pedagogy destroy the bond between reader and text? Or strengthen it? I assumed, following Atwell-Vasey's (1998) work, that the answer to an impoverished pedagogy was finding bridges from an abundant private imagination to public teaching. I tried to leave the phenomenon of reading to teach open to inquiry; I tried not to assume the abundance or poverty of the experience; but, of course, I wanted reading to teach to be full of abundance and creativity, unlike how I had experienced it in the past. I did not expect, however, that the pedagogical reader to become speechless, full of doubt and fear, at the prospect of using the ground of aesthetic experience to create pedagogical questions. I begin with my stories from the reading journals.

Jack's reads his prison file and discovers how he has been read – uncooperative, unwilling to tell the truth, lacking the ability to articulate who he is. This must

certainly have been a crushing blow. But I wondered: is this what writing is for, finding the secret? The so-called truth about an experience? What does Jack use writing for? This is an honest question. And I want to explore it more with Steven and with the students. During this section of the text, we read about four particular times that Jack turns to his journal: after the encounter with the Muslim brothers, to recall his childhood, to reflect on his dad's visitation and after the broken light bulb incident. And I just wondered what does the externalization of writing do for him? To process traumatic experience? To empty himself of a happening he'd like to let go of? To redefine himself? To reflect on confusing, unbelievable, interesting experience? If he had someone to talk to, a confidant, would he feel the same urge to write? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he's writing...but I just wondered what it does for him. Does writing give a subject a needed or felt sense of control? Of needed distance from the scenes described? These are ongoing questions for me that I find fascinating. But, I wonder if the students will? This might be just me.

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Around page 25, I realized that this kid [Jack] really does read all the damn time. Or at least that's what we are led to believe. He's quoting more books than I ever heard of at that age. It's sort of no wonder he can't write with all those voices in his head. Although I envy him and how much books mean to him, I can only wonder about the relationship between reading and writing? What is the optimum balance between these two activities? Is this an interesting issue to pursue with students? This might be something only Steven and I would be interested in (?).

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I wasn't sure if St. Croix would offer Jack the adventure he thinks his writing needs until he decided to interview the Black Panthers. I was proud of him for doing that and "letting books lead his life." I was seduced, as well, by the image of the moldy books in the library. I fixated on it for quite a while and imagined Jack spending his days in a dark corner of the place engrossed, almost swallowed, in the moldy volumes. Seems like an ideal day really. This connected with Paz's quote<sup>6</sup> [you'll see this too, Steven] and the life of the craft object. In fact, I have been thinking about death a lot while reading this (the slow death of the material book as just one instance) and I guess spending your days consumed by moldy volumes would be a certain kind of death as well, at least according to *Zorba* [Steven's favorite book]. So maybe there's a tension between wanting books to

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<sup>6</sup> "The thing that is handmade has no desire to last for thousands of years, nor is it possessed by a frantic drive to die an early death. It follows the appointed round of days, it wearies little by little, it neither seeks death nor denies it: it accepts it. Between the timeless time of the museum and the speeded up time of technology, craftsmanship is the heartbeat of human time. A thing that is handmade is a useful object but also one that is beautiful. An object that last a long time but also one that Slowly ages away and is resigned to doing so. The craftsman's handiwork teaches us to die and hence teaches us to live" (Paz, 1974, p. 23).



lead your life (into the world) and, at the same time, wanting to be surrounded, even consumed, by them. This brings up, to me, a tension within the book, within Jack's life and even mine and Steven's life: the bibliophile wanting to be a man of world, a man of action. It seems like these two don't go together so easily. Jack lives in his head, in the lives and stories of others – likely compensating for the impoverishment of his own life, his own lack of courage, his un-worldliness. So, what is the relation between a love of life and love of the book? Might this be an interesting question for students to pursue? Or is this issue only interesting to me?

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I guess my interest picked back up slightly with the mention of all the seafaring books Jack brought on the boat. I intended to read (and still do) *Martin Eden* but haven't gotten to it yet. But I wondered why he says, "I wanted to write while sailing, and I was more than willing to come under the spell of books." If you want to write, then write! Stop reading! right? I know there's a relation but there's a time for creative productivity and not for reading someone else's thoughts. I want to explore this more with Steven. I'm fascinated by the relation between reading and writing ...taking in and producing. I don't see this issue popping up in the course but who knows? I guess this brings up an issue: how do I address/think about/ignore this gap between my own curiosities and it translating into pedagogy? My interest in reading/writing seems entirely idiosyncratic. Right now, I can't imagine it being interesting to the students.

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"Everyone's got a getting caught story" kind of quickened the pace of the first 10 pages for me as a reader. Nice move, Gantos, heightening the drama. It was difficult for me to think about anything else but the events. I didn't write this in the commonplace book, but the absence of writing suggests I was "the dark watcher" caught up in the action: The hippie van, the crooked house in the woods, the car chase in the rain, imagining all that hash near the anchor. It was difficult to think about what to teach or how to teach because I was so absorbed in the determining "the what." Maybe imagining students/teaching requires a slower pace or more authorial introspection? As far as the opening device, I was a little puzzled as to how to frame it (what purpose does it serve??), to what degree it sets up the reader to be absorbed in "the what" that follows, and if it's even worth pointing out to the students. The voice shifts from Jack in the told to the Jack that tells the told. From Jack as character-narrator to Jack as commentator on his own story. The time of the original tale is suspended from above by this different Jack who's in total control of the story (and this is how I got caught) – this voice that's in control is very different from the Jack in the story, whose about to have his life unravel, and be the one to tell us about it. Again, I find these shifts fascinating and want to understand more about them and the many characters that populate autobiography and memoir (author-character-narrator relation) but I'm not sure if this is necessary for the students to understand. This is a problem that I've

elsewhere addressed in these entries: how to address the gap between what might be a private, unusual interest and the interests and needs of the students. Does this gap even need to be bridged or do my interests remain *just my question*? Reading to teach seems to carry with it a demand, a priority: *Where do you put your intellectual energies? What lines of questions are idiosyncratic? What will be kept or pursued for teaching and what will be thrown away?* And what does even mean to throw a line of questioning away in this context? One of the reading selves is interested, right?

There is more than one way to read passages like these. Here is one way in: pedagogical doubt, as it surfaces in these passages, is related to the difference, the tension between the experience of *aesthetic time* and *pedagogical time*. The work of Hunsberger (1992), Rosenblatt (1994), and even novelist Michael Ondaatje (1992) helps us understand the iterative, messy, ambiguous character of aesthetic time. As I described earlier, Hunsberger (1992) notes that aesthetic engagements with literary texts balance outer and inner time. Outer time, for Hunsberger, is literally clock time – time as broken down into orderly units – *and* represents those demands of the outer world that pull readers out of story worlds. Inner time is marked by the merger of reader and text, the reader and story world; it is the emotional, psychic investments one makes with and in a text. Both kinds of time are needed to read. Aesthetic time lies on the border between outer and inner time; as Hunsberger suggests, aesthetic time can be characterized by confusion, merger, excitement, reflection, and disorientation. The aesthetic reader in the above passages is immersed in the abundance of the reading experience. He is not suffering from madness but neither is he ready to tell the world about his experiences with Gantos.

Up to now, I have tried not to use our conversation or marginalia from the second reading to interpret the first, but this is an opportune time to do so. Steven later claimed that, as a whole, his second reading of Gantos was “quite aesthetic” and far less “pedagogically oriented” than he thought it would be. Based on his distinction, we

discussed a potential difference between the aesthetic and the pedagogical. Whereas pedagogy is grounded in the lives and concerns of others, the aesthetic floats and need not explain or justify itself. I quote a brief exchange between us. The hint of shame, and the character of aesthetic and pedagogical questions are relevant to the present discussion.

Steven: the aesthetic has a superfluous feel to it [okay] that the pedagogical doesn't.

Brandon: say more about that

Steven: When I read something aesthetically, what I'm saying in some aspects is that I can't teach it because there's -- I would feel, not ashamed of teaching it -- but I would feel lost teaching it. Uh, maybe ashamed and lost.

Brandon what do you mean? That's very powerful

Steven: Aesthetic things are hard to -- sometimes it feels like you are talking about thin air. Like when we talk about his writing style or those kinds of things<sup>7</sup> -- to us we find it interesting. Could we form a lesson about that? Maybe not. We could only form a lesson about it if this were a writing course and they were trying to write. Maybe they would find it interesting and see some relevance. Other than that, I don't think they would find it interesting, because it's so, it's so, so... -- I feel like pedagogy is usually related to people's lives somehow or pedagogy tries to relate. It does more of a job of holding people's hands and relating, than aesthetics, which doesn't seem to relate. It seems to float. And it's okay with that. And when we have conversations about aesthetics, we are okay with that and don't have to explain ourselves as often about aesthetics. We don't have to give answers that are perfect. Where in pedagogy, typically we want people to be more lucid and to say logical things. In aesthetics we don't. I can say I really like the line "the sun buttered the clouds" and you're not obliged to say why. I don't have to say why in the aesthetic realm. I think in the pedagogical realm, I have to. I shouldn't mention it, unless I can. You don't ask questions that you can't answer in

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<sup>7</sup> Both Steven and I were fascinated with Gantos's spare prose style and came up with a two dimensional "prose axis" to try and place his style in relation to others. On the "Lean" end was Hemingway and on the "Ornate" end was Faulkner, with Fitzgerald in the middle. We located Gantos somewhere between Hemingway and Fitzgerald. This led to an interesting discussion on the relationship of plot and aesthetic language, particularly in the context of other stories Steven teaches. He was dismayed that no student found stories by Marquez interesting. He concluded that he didn't think students appreciated or were moved by aesthetic language, or the turn of a sentence. Students were more concerned with plot than how a story was told, he thought. He didn't know how help them appreciate this kind of language. "I just don't think they hear it." This problem is germane to the present discussion in the text.

the realm of pedagogy. But you ask questions that you can't answer in aesthetics.<sup>8</sup>

I did not realize at the time how much Steven's distinction offered me a language to interpret my own reading experience from the moment before. My pedagogical loneliness was related to the abundance of my reading experience. I was exploring rich questions: the relation between reading and creativity, the complicated relationship an artist or writer has with literary tradition. In some way the question I always asked, "but will the student find this interesting?" marks both the abundance and poverty of the reading experience. I read and wrote my way into exciting and rich corridors. But, the time of the aesthetic is not, as we embodied it, the time of pedagogy. I was asking questions that had, I thought, rich possibilities and no definite answers. The abundance of the aesthetic question, for me and for Steven, refers itself to some future time of potential understanding. The present opens out into a future of potential; thus readers can imagine themselves along a trajectory of becoming, of understanding better the messy questions raised in the present. Pedagogy, again as I experienced and imagined it through the text and as Steven talks about it, ruptures the aesthetic encounter and demands an application, an immediate relevance to the imagined scene of teaching. What are we going to say about this? How does this relate to students? Will they find it interesting? Do they actually, really, need to know this? *We'll I, I don't know*. In the aesthetic realm, the not quite sure is a mark of plentitude; in the pedagogical realm, it marked our anxiety, lack, and loneliness.

In my journals and as Steven hints above, there is a hint of aesthetic shame that

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<sup>8</sup> This line makes me feel so impoverished and small-minded. It makes me think about the figures of Herodotus and Thucydides. Steven and I cannot shake the appeal of certainty.

makes it difficult to imagine pedagogy from the ground of our reading experience. Steven was reluctant to write in his commonplace because he did not want to admit the ordinariness of his own thoughts, his incomplete, half-formed notions. When I read back over my commonplace, I too felt the regret of claiming certain memories, identifications, and ideas in ink. When I read back over my journal entries, even the ones I just quoted, there is a hint of embarrassment: that I am a bibliophile, for example, and what business do I have teaching anyone anything about the world?

While, on some level, there is a genuine interest and curiosity about how to extend the aesthetic encounter into the pedagogical, it could be that pedagogical doubt is a self-protective measure. By imagining pedagogy from the ground of our reading experience, there is no one to blame but ourselves for a “failed” lesson. There are no standards or prepackaged curricula to point to as impoverished. This is Taubman’s (2009) point about our collective capitulation to standards – relying on a source of imagined (but all too real) authority outside ourselves, we are relieved of the burden of creativity and of the responsibility for what we make. Our circumstance shows that even when we are makers – and even though we want to give out of our own creative capacity – certain psychic and emotional forces make this difficult. We cannot fault the poverty of standardized curriculum. We are to blame. The possibility of failure caused us to withdraw from the pedagogical questions we were asking. It is better to have nothing to say than to have one’s questions fail.

Furthermore, if we became “lovers” of the text – I admittedly grew more attached to Gantos than Steven did – then the thought of pedagogy presented certain risks. What if the students hate the text? What if my reading experience is not good enough to help me

teach? What if I have nothing to say about the text? I am, then, not a maker? What if students do not read the text as I read the text? These questions presented unknowns that threatened the relationship already established between reader (me) and text, and the reading selves formed during that relationship. The imagined students present the uncomfortable possibility that the object of affection, the text, will be presented (reflected back) to me in an unrecognizable form. In this way, the imagined students presented a threat to my history of reading, the object of my affection, and to the story I wrote (about myself) with the text.<sup>9</sup>

We also doubted pedagogy at a more fundamental level. We feared that students would not read the text and, worse, that we would alienate them from reading. We acknowledged earlier that “creating readers” – turning someone onto reading – was a powerful fantasy at play in our teaching practice. This played out in later moments, but in changed form. I quote a few passages from my reading journal.

In this section, I realized for the first time how dependent my reading is on prior knowledge. Jack mentions a book he's read or uses it as a metaphor many, many times. But do the students know these references? What does the text become without this knowledge? I can't even imagine it and that bothers me. Do they feel 'outside' the text when this happens? I guess context can supply some of the meaning but not all of it. Because reading is so important for me professionally and personally, feeling outside the text is one of the worst feelings I can encounter. Do the students experience the same sense of helplessness? How can we minimize it?

I mentioned earlier that Gantos's text teaches us to read in a certain way. I framed reading as a thankful gathering of texts. Gantos's text highlights the intertextual and autobiographical character of reading. We worried that students might not be prepared for the task and were not quite sure how to help them. Before reading the memoir, we

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<sup>9</sup> A similar phenomenon occurs in Atwell-Vasey's (1998) *Nourishing Words* with one of the three teachers who participated in the study.

thought it might be appropriate to lecture “on the side” about certain texts that Jack reads, especially *The Brother’s Karamazov*. This coincided with our conviction, as discussed in the previous chapter, that pedagogy can be like pointing toward the open door of literature, especially literature that is not the primary text. However, Gantos’s use of these texts did not seem to fit with the side lecture approach. He mentions so many texts, and some in passing, that we did not know how to frame these as open doors. We were resigned to hope that context would be enough for the students. What had been such a thankful gathering for us, we worried, would be an unbridgeable gap for the students. Following the work of Scholes, I framed “outsideness” as a necessary condition of reading, but being too outside the text makes reading impossible. Ongoing waves of skepticism were certainly not constant during my first reading of the text, but were most prominent when I, too, felt a little too outside the text to keep going.

Parts of Gantos lost my interest. I was mostly engaged when he was on the island [St. Croix] but a portion of the “Bon Voyage” chapter was hard to read. It felt like I was taking in details as a passive observer rather than engaging with them in a way that made me thinking about teaching. I forgot the students from about page 73-81 and kept writing “where are the students?” and “What came first, me losing interest in the story or me losing the students?” Part of it might have to do with that fact that I have never been attracted to the sea or to sailing, and maybe I felt outside this part. Maybe I’m not interested in anything that doesn’t involve Jack pursuing writing, but even this section mentions all the books Jack brought with him. I’m not sure why I was so disengaged. One of the books was *Billy Budd*.

How could I forget teaching *Billy Budd*? It was probably the worst teaching experience of my life. What was I thinking? I’ve never really had an answer. Melville was so incredibly dense, maybe one kid out of 20 read it. I guess deep down I fear that kind of experience will repeat itself here. That feeling in the pit of your stomach when you’re standing before the students and just know that it’s all, all wrong. Will our students even read the memoir? Or will we be, like Jack, in a ship at sea without a compass or wind? Just bobbing aimlessly until time runs out? I’ve repressed that fear in my commonplace, but it appeared for the first time on p. 75. I want students to read this book. I don’t want a second *Billy Budd* experience.

Steven experienced a similar problem, especially when teaching difficult texts and authors like Borges. “That always goes horribly wrong, but there’s usually one person who’s like ‘hmmm, this is interesting.’” He seemed committed to teaching particular texts, even though they were largely refused, as a matter of disciplinary conviction. “I want to show them where literature goes.” Modernism, Borges’s work being one example, is one fork where literature goes, even though students may not want literature to go there or to read it when it does. I was continually puzzled why Steven continued to teach texts “that don’t work.” Was he punishing them? Was he nobly committed to *that one student* who gets it or wants to see where the rabbit trail goes? Steven would later acknowledge, on an explicit level, that the answer was a mixture of pleasure and laziness. He got something new out of Borges every time *and* was reluctant to re-do the syllabus because of the significant time commitment. Even though he admittedly loved Borges, “The Garden of Forked Paths” was part of the textbook, lending his personal attachment a hint of official validation – a mask for him to wear, a higher authority outside himself to validate curriculum choices. He maintained he had never actually taught anything he really loved. We admitted that one of the pleasures of reading to teach was getting to know (and being forced to) the text better. But we also knew that reading to teach, while it demanded we make something, and generate the new word, also surfaced the anxiety of having nothing to say and of the feeling that analysis cheapened the experience. For this reason, Steven was not sure if he would find the process “resentful or good” with a book he really liked. His reluctance to bring his “loves” to pedagogy helped us notice and talk about the risks of reading and teaching, especially the repulsion at the prospect of shattering what you hold dear, both in yourself and in another.



Teaching made Steven ask the question “why read?” Not for himself, but for this students. I was not accustomed to asking this question either for myself or for students. Reading was self-justifying. Steven had trouble justifying why reading literature was important, not for himself, but for everyone else. Because he spent a good portion of his life “not being a reader,” he thought reading had to “hit you personally or it seems superfluous.” He claimed that while early readers naturally think reading is important for everyone and “of course we need to read stories and teach them,” because he arrived late to reading and to literature, he thought of it as an intensely personal activity, and hard to justify to others.

When you begin to ask “why read?” to yourself, that’s scary. If I started asking that question, I think I’d be at the end of my rope with reading. It would be hard to renew the faith of reading. It took me so long to get that faith, to renew it would be terrible. With teaching, I don’t know why it comes other than I see the dripping skepticism of my students. That’s what makes me ask it. I pretend to be one of them. Otherwise I wouldn’t ask it, but I just put myself in their shoes, and that’s the place it comes from for me.

Ironically, he discussed his classroom as a place where, unintentionally, people who otherwise liked reading came together only to be repulsed, to be alone and wait expectantly to leave.

You’re teaching English literature and even people who like reading, they begin to wonder what’s up, why are they in class. That makes you end class early sometimes, you’re like, I don’t know, why are we here? What are we studying? Because I feel like there are certain readers in the class that I would hope would read for some sort of love of literature. But I don’t do that, I feel like I reinforce the opposite, I reinforce some kind of “there are things you get out of this and you don’t get them out, therefore you’re not reading well,” kind of thing. I don’t meant to do that, but it’s sort of what happens, I think it’s one of the dangers of reading to teach and teaching is that you’re going to alienate people who like to read.

Our conversation echoed earlier anxieties and fantasies about *turning people on to reading* and Steven’s love of reading occurring outside the influence of a teacher.

I think the danger of teaching is that you're going to turn certain people who might not need, like if they're already reading, they don't need you. You're much more in danger of turning people off than on. Which is weird. I don't feel like I've ever turned people on to reading. I feel like I've turned people off to reading before, but not on to reading. I can't think of a single instance where I've turned people on to reading.

Steven's doubt extended to our particular class, after we had met them. Even though there were "readers" in the class, he felt like he was pushing them away from literature. One student in particular was reading Vonnegut on the side, but Steven thought he was not even connecting with that student with his pedagogy— "I am even turning that kid off."

The potential alienation of the students connected to my own anxieties about pedagogical reading, especially opening oneself up to the abundance and risk of having one's textual loves validated by others. Interpreting reading from the students' point of view helped me read my own anxieties about pedagogical reading. Read this way, for both teachers and students, pedagogy can threaten our attachments and the stories of ourselves we have spun through others and through texts.

Brandon: from the student's point of view, I guess there's something about having something you like or love [texts, literature] presented to you as something unrecognizable. I imagine it's very distasteful.

Steven: Yeah

Brandon: I have felt like that too, as a student. It's almost like you've been duped, because you've fallen in love with something that, it turns out, you didn't really know in the first place. You've cultivated a relationship with whatever it is, reading, writing, literature, and it turns out you don't know shit about it, or other people's versions of what you love isn't

Steven: Isn't what you thought it was

Brandon: Isn't what you thought it was, right. I wonder if there is shame associated with it? You think you're an insider to something and you come to find out you're an outsider now, so there is hurt, it's almost like a relationship, it's almost like breaking up...I don't know.

The tension between school-based literacy and out-of-school literacy was playing itself out in our imaginations about how students experience class (Compton-Lilly, 2006). And we did not quite know at the time how to bridge the gap. Steven remained committed to his syllabus yet frustrated at the skepticism of his students. He had not yet negotiated the space between the *child* and the *curriculum* – more apt terms might be self-other, private-public, local-tradition. We stared straight at our love objects (the curriculum) and were dismayed that the students did not love them back. We had difficulty imagining, at the time, how to create bridges between the reading and writing they were already doing and what the curriculum, as cultural-traditional text, might offer them. Without knowing it, Steven may have been asking students to read their way into selves they did not want (Silin, 2006). As teachers, we were mirroring the students' reluctance whenever we doubted the translation between our interests and theirs. Both parties were protecting themselves from a potential threat. And we were reading our way back into teachers we thought we had left behind.

Our pedagogical imaginations were plagued by doubts about the adequacy of our own interests. We also doubted the students' desire and ability to read *and* to be trustworthy keepers of what we held dear. Without recourse to ourselves or to the students, I turned to the only place left from which to imagine pedagogy: the text itself.

### **The Last Reader: Ghostly Objects**

A goal of this study was to more clearly understand pedagogical modes of reading: what is the experience of reading to teach like for those that undertake it? My first reading of the text was abundant. While there were moments of pleasure, insight, (mis)understanding of self and other, bringing together and creating worlds in the

commonplace, there were also moments of self-destruction, of dangerous movements inward that destroyed the text, the world, the students, and the reader. The stories from the first moment (the previous chapter) help me understand this second moment. Particularly interesting and troubling was the return of the overwhelming anxiety found in my story “Possession,” a story about reading for another and having something to say. I want to reference a few lines from that story here. A passage quoted twice never means the same.

*There is a little demon in us who whispers I hate, I love.*

The voice won’t shut up, so I press harder, make the underlines thicker, the doodles more strange, the repetitions more urgent. I end up memorizing large chunks of text to quote during the day when opening the book isn’t possible.

(obsession giving life the runaround)

I rest.  
Stop reading.  
Put down text down.

No  
more lines.

(it begins again)

FIGHT BACK. Keep it at a distance. Or, even better, close it and keep it close by. Near but not given over to. Close but not haunting.

One night, I cried  
to my wife  
I’d been reading the entire day:  
8 pages.

Scholes says we are ‘always outside the text’ – meaning there is no such thing as a perfect reading. But that’s what I wanted. The text wasn’t out there, but inside. It had become me.

(Maybe reading requires a comfortable distance)

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During our conversations about the stories, Steven and I searched for explanations and also wondered about the relevance of “Possession” for reading to teach. This happened through a discussion of *missing moments* -- important stories of reading and teaching experience that missed the page. Missing from my writing was my first reading of *Catcher in the Rye*, in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I remember being dumbstruck by that book, as if, for the first time, I had found a language for myself. Our exchange ventured into *why read*, the reader’s intentions that motivate the act, and tentative speculations about the character of *reading to teach*. Here is an extended exchange from the first reading moment, one that I think helps interpret the anxiety of moment 2:

Brandon: *Catcher* awakened my spirit in some ways. Even though it’s a somewhat depressing book, I felt like Holden was able to read me [Steven: hmm, right] in a way that I couldn’t really read myself. I haven’t really re-read the book, though. Maybe one time since that first encounter in ninth grade but I remember the first experience being pretty profound. It’s interesting that one of your stories mentions Soren’s [Kierkegaard] thoughts on reading being the desire to recreate an experience but with *Catcher* for me the subsequent returns to the book were somehow diminished. Which is strange.

Steven: but you would categorize yourself as a return reader though? As someone who reads often what they’ve already read, right? or not so

Brandon: I would like to. I would like to characterize myself as a return reader. You and I have talked a lot in the past about the allure and attraction of re-reading. Of enjoying language, textual nuance; having the plot out of the way enables a different kind of attention; maybe more reflective reading. I think part of the allure of re-reading has to do with my growing up in a religious house and the relationship I had, or was expected to have, with the Bible – it being this kind of book that you have to return to, an extended, essential relationship. There’s been academic books that I’ve returned to, for sure; I mean there’s traces of that you can see in the story “Possession” about this manic craving to return even though in that story the urge is destructive.

Steven: do you think the only reason you return read is just to make sure that you got everything you could out of the text? For “Possession,” you’re reading that and your re-reading it until you can say in some aspects, “I got it.” [right] And feel comfortable saying “I got it.” Do you think you read, re-read for that or for other reasons?

Brandon: I think in “Possession” you can see me kind of wanting to mine the text to get everything out of it, like you said. With fiction I think the language of mining doesn’t make as much sense. It’s more about the experience of reading more than the information that’s there [right] and so even though in my mind, in my imagination, I am a return reader and there are these fiction books that are very, very important to me, I think if you looked at my reading practices, seldom do I return to a book [of fiction] and maybe it’s because I feel that first experience can’t be duplicated ... Out of all the stories, I was most reluctant to write “Possession” but that was the one I knew I had to write because I hadn’t written about it before and I wanted to explore this manic obsessive behavior on paper in some way [right] Those are pretty powerful moments that I hope never happen again but I’m sure they will. Anyway.

Steven: I mean these are powerful moments of reading that are also just frustrating. All these are for school, right?

Brandon: yes, in that story, I was reading for something official or important, either comps or proposal. So there’s all those issues of anxiety, you know can I perform and can I do this blah, blah, blah. Those feelings are mixed in with the act of reading itself [right, right] which changes my relationship to what I’m reading.

Steven: this probably has something to do with the project, you know, the tension between reading for yourself and reading for a profession and reading for a grade. Probably what’s so anxiety-ridden about that account is that you’re having to read to perform, you’re going to have to in some aspects regurgitate and re-splice that information in your comps, I mean you already did it, but I feel like that’s part of the anxiety of teaching *and* what the students have when you are teaching is that they know in some aspects that they’re gonna have to, you know, what information do they need to know? In some aspects they can’t really relax with the material because [right, right] they’re always trying to figure out what does it mean or um what am I going to have to do for the essay? It kind of kills the moment of just taking it in and not worrying about how much you remember for next time [sure]

Brandon: I wonder how that might come to bear on our reading to teach performance, right? I hope I don’t read with the same kind of anxiety that I do in “Possession” but it’s sort of a similar issue that you are talking about. You are reading for some sort of public performance. You’ll be held accountable basically [right, right] Your ostensibly private experience will be made visible in some way or held to count. I don’t know, so that will be interesting to see.

Steven: that’s true. I don’t know what will happen. I don’t really feel as anxious when I read to teach as I feel like originally I did when I was teaching the IB, when I was reading *The House of the Spirits*. Again it wasn’t a book that I really enjoyed so that obviously makes it harder [laugh, yeah] but I had to pull out a lot of things out of that book and that made it, you know, it put a lot of pressure on me in my actual reading of it and how I actually experienced it was much more

anxiety ridden because of that. I don't know if it would have been different if I'd actually enjoyed the book or not [hmmm]. I guess the only thing I read [for teaching] that's close enough to a book is something like a play or a graphic novel. So if I read Othello or a comic book like American born Chinese for class, I *do* think it's a little less anxiety ridden because I chose them. So in some aspects it's more interesting to do research on how to teach these or think about what I'm going to say. Or what I'm going to plan. But of course the thing that I never really get over is obviously the students didn't choose the text [laughs] so their experience will be different.

Brandon: very true. The power of choice.

Steven: yeah, that's always a problem

My first days with the commonplace book were quite pleasurable. The text became an extension of my body, collecting the wrinkles and stains (literally and otherwise) of life. I mentioned earlier that I invented and thought through/with many selves in the text – certainly a rich affair. I was surprised, then, that what started out as a rich engagement with the story world as a reader and teacher slowly devolved into controlling, angst-ridden reading that I described earlier in “Possession.” I wanted so badly to refuse this way of reading. I no longer recognized the reader summoned by the text but was compelled to perform him anyway. In Jane Hamilton's novel *A Map of the World*, her protagonist begins the tale by giving the moral away: that calamity can be gradual. We do not always “lose our stomach” in the fall but, slowly, over time, find ourselves buried at the bottom of a heap (p. 3). I felt buried, debilitated. I spent hours re-reading a section of 10 pages, hunting for meaning, searching the text, second guessing its arrival. In Rosenblatt's (1994) terms, I was taking an overly efferent reading stance, desperately seeking the *what*, the truth, in the text. The quality of my own experience, pedagogy, and the students disappeared.

I was compelled to be a master of what I did not create. I was especially drawn to Gantos's period of artistic doubt, his crises of confidence. I read them over and over

again, trying to understand the basis for his anxiety and creative impotence. Steven consoled me when I confessed to my relapse into obsessed reading.

I'm sure there was a kind of identification with the character. Jack is certainly part of it. Like you said earlier with this idea of mapping. We are tempted to think we have to be masters of the book. As if you have to know exactly what causes what or you have to know why he writes about this at this particular part. That's part of the dangers of teaching, you feel like you have to be the master, even though how can we master something if we are just like the students in some aspects? We're just an observer to the text. So there's a level not of fakeness but of inauthenticity of being the masters, of knowing how someone else constructing something.

To find the answer to pedagogy, I wanted to force my way *inside* what will always be outside. I wanted to bridge the impossible gap between reader and text. Writing inside the commonplace helped keep the relationship between reader and text mutually influencing and complementary, not engrossing (Sumara 1994, 1996, 2002). It was during dry periods of writing in the text that I became overly reliant on *the text itself* for answers. In my reading journals, I commented on Jack's discovery of the ship's log – I was overjoyed that he now had the opportunity to write and record his boat's history. This moment occurs in the context of being lost and drifting at sea. Their dilemma of being lost without maps or place-markers paralleled my own reading experience at the time. I had lost interest in the text and had forgotten about the students. As a reactive measure, I turned back to *the text itself* for answers, sacrificing the aesthetic dimension of reading experience and the students imagined presence. Jack records the history of the boat and is spared the madness that overtakes Hamilton, the boat's captain. I wrote:

Jack's relationship with the ship's log made me think of writing as a way to stave off insanity. Is Jack's immunity because of his writing? His recording of history? And of course I thought of this book that we are making. How, over the last week, I have felt a little insane myself, renewing my obsessive habits, being consumed by/consuming the text, which only makes my anxiety worse because I'm not able to think about pedagogy. It's the kind of madness that disconnects one from everything except the text. Total engrossment.



I searched for images that represented my experience. I found the trunk of a beech tree with several visible knots that looked like eyes: the multiple eyes appealed to my sense of inhabiting different roles simultaneously (reader, teacher, researcher), and a growing sense that, as a pedagogical reader, I had to account for everything in the text. In his seminar on Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan (2004) suggests the aphorism *a letter always arrives at its destination*. In the context of Poe's tale, the meaning of the letter has no stable interpretation, but varies with those who possess it. Like Lacan's reader, the abundance of eyes seemed intended *just for me*. To the image of the beech trunk, I added my reflections on my anxious experience of reading pedagogically.

3/31/2010

Printed off this photo several days ago but am just now getting to a response. I think I wanted to wait because my feelings were so visceral and bodily last weekend. I was in full-blown obsession mode, particularly in regard to Jack's creative deferral in p. 40-54. The feelings were very similar to those described in "Possession." I wanted to understand Jack's desires to write and his reluctance to do so. I wanted to understand when and why he wondered/wandered. Why did he feel empty? It's hard to describe, but I wanted to "map" the order of when he felt inspired to write, what books inspired him, why he got down on himself, etc...why did he think his life wasn't good enough? Why did he want to wait for the juicy story? I must have read those passages a million times, okay maybe a hundred. Pages 39, 40, 47, 48 – I wanted to make sure I understood *why* he was running away and when he felt those urges. I think that I tried so hard to understand because I didn't want to understand. I tried to get down every detail of the why behind his anxiety, his desire to travel and see the world, that perhaps I ignored the main thing I was supposed to understand. That I am like Jack. Even more frustrating was that I felt I wasn't really helping the students. I had become a vortex. I spent all day thinking of Jack's lines about writing/not writing, repeating them in my head, and trying to understand the why behind them and the vicissitudes between hope and despair and finding a juicy story.

I was completely given over to the text. I had neglected Lacan's aphorism – a letter always arrives at its destination. A text that always arrives makes possible creative interpretation, as it suggests that the beholder of the letter, the text, bears some

interpretive responsibility. Almost paradoxically, it reduces the burden of absolute interpretation, as it suggests that meaning is always just arriving, one reader and reading moment at a time. That particular reader (me) searched for *the* meaning, not a timely meaning. Again, here is Scholes: “to read at all, we must read the book of ourselves in front of us, and we must bring the text home, into our thoughts and lives, into our judgments and deeds. We cannot enter the texts we read, but they can enter us. That is what reading is all about” (p. 6). By reading texts as fixed objects, I was ignoring human agency, creativity and the capacity to learn and reflect from aesthetic experience.

So why my dejection, why my despondency at this kind of reading? I began this project wanting to refuse a history of perfect reading, to be intentional about interrupting the past and performing a more ethical reading and teaching history. I began this chapter by “starting close in” and ended up *too far* into the text. Starting close in was a reminder that ordinary experience was enough – that our questions are important and good enough to be other’s people questions too. The last reader would be admonished by David Whyte – he has given up on, well, everything. He cannot trust himself as a reader to create pedagogy; he cannot trust the students to either read the text or to receive his readings; he turns to the only thing left – the objective text, a ghost which does not really exist.

I was also ashamed that pedagogy and the imagined presence of students were not always a gift to reading. Their presence was at times a potential threat, the catalyst for reading into a textual vortex: the world, the students became invisible in my game of perfection. In these moments of reading, I stopped writing in the margin, stopped talking to myself, to the text, to the imagined students, to the pedagogical space I wanted to create. A more ethical, attentive (and more pragmatic and effective) pedagogical reading

would question the sanctity of the text; it would demand that readers (teachers) read creatively, in a way that recognizes that a reader's outside-ness is not a limitation but a condition of possibility for timely, relevant, attentive reading. Misreading thus becomes the starting point for the world and the students to re-appear in the text. I am reminded of Linda Pastan's (1995) poem "Vermillion" that beautifully speaks to these concerns. In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker claims that the artist Pierre Bonard would sneak paint and brush into his own museum exhibit and add color (revise) to his "finished" work.

Just so I stopped you  
at the door this morning  
and licking my index finger, removed  
an invisible crumb  
from your vermillion mouth. As if  
at the ritual moment of departure  
I had to show you still belonged to me.  
As if revision were  
the purest form of love. (lines 8-16)

Thankfully, the last reader performed only sparingly. When Gantos's plot quickened and became more entertaining, I was able to "snap out of it." When I was again enthralled with the "what next" of the story, I stopped trying to read perfectly, thankfully distracted by the future that the text promised. E. M. Forster would describe this hunger for the future of the text as wanting the plot and not the story; the "what next" and not the "why."

### **An Afterword: Gifts and Nightmares**

I started reading Galway Kinnell's poetry as an undergraduate. I heard him speak once, and even got him to sign my copy of *The Book of Nightmares*. I have written with a few of Galway's lines in this dissertation. I am drawn to what I think is his way of

bringing an epic quality to ordinary human pleasure and suffering. From him, I am learning that reading, teaching, and even writing is a sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful complication. After reading Gantos, marking the commonplace book and writing the journal entries, I cut up a prized possession (*The Book of Nightmares*) with an exacto knife and glued in a few stanzas of the long poem throughout my commonplace book. Possibility through destruction, I thought. I wanted to deepen my relationship with the text, to perhaps mimic Jack and the English Patient's commonplace books. They filled their books with vital lines. And so would I. After reflecting on the first reading, I was still confronting *the excess* of what had been an abundant and confusing experience. I was thinking about reading and teaching and how both of these seemed to be fraught with tensions between life and death, destruction and rebirth. While I was destroying Kinnell's text, his lines were taking on and giving new life in/to a different context. *Hear* a few of Kinnell's passages that now fill my copy of Gantos. As a reader's epigram to Gantos, I pasted Kinnell's epigram to *Nightmares*, from Rilke:

But this, though: death, the whole of death, -- even before life's begun, to hold it all so gently, and be good: this is beyond description.

Rilke seemed appropriate, as my reading of Gantos was marked by ambivalence, a reluctant giving over of the self to the story world and the potential worlds of pedagogy created in the story, with story, and, perhaps, in spite of story. I pasted the following lines (from a section of *The Book of Nightmares* called "The Shoes of Wandering") on the blank pages before *Hole* began, as if to signal the reader and teacher's journey into text begins with a misstep, when one admits one's blindness:

And I walk out now,  
in dead shoes, in the new light,  
on the steppingstones

of someone else's wandering,  
a twinge  
in this foot of that saying  
*turn or stay or take*  
*forty-three giant steps*  
*backwards*, frightened  
I may already have lost  
the way: *the first step*, the Crone  
who scried the crystal said, *shall be*  
*to lose the way*. (p. 19)

....

It is the foot,  
which rubs the cobblestones  
and snakestones all its days, this lowliest  
of tongues, whose lick tracks tell  
our history of errors to the dust behind,  
which is the last trace in us  
of wings?

And is it  
the hen's nightmare, or her secret dream,  
to scratch the ground forever  
eating the minutes out of the grains of sand? (p. 21-22)

I purposefully did not write a word about these passages during the first moment of reading. It would have been premature to nail down an interpretation. I felt that Kinnell and Rilke spoke to my experience, even though I was unsure exactly how. This leaves me, the writer, to pick up the interpretive pieces and put them into play. This is exactly as it should be; the outsider, not the insider, is the true maker. The poem always arrives at its destination.

In our first reading, we were answering Galway's question of the hen; reading to teach is both the nightmare *and* the secret dream. As I have tried to indicate, pedagogical reading was an abundant experience. The imagined students were a gift to reading. In

placing a demand on us to have “something to say,” we read and wrote our way into surprising identifications, relationships and networks of meaning.

I [Brandon] was thinking about this distinction we are making between reading for self and reading for others; but, it's almost like if the others weren't there, my personal reading experience would not be as rich. The presence of these others causes me to have more to say which in turn enlarges the experience of the book for me. So it kind of doubles back in a way.

These thoughts that I expressed to Steven have me thinking about texts as gifts and pedagogy as a kind of gift exchange, particularly as expressed by Lewis Hyde (1979). Reading and other forms of engagement with art can be thought of as gifts and not commodities. Their value cannot clearly be measured in monetary terms; furthermore, there is a bond created between the producer and consumer of art that differs in kind from the relationship of producers/consumers of goods. Gift economies are bonded together by the spirit of the gift and, as Hyde indicates, survive by *keeping the gift moving*, a movement that forms bonds and attachments among those who give and receive. Keeping the gift moving, however, is not always an easy choice: it involves vulnerability, risk, and trust. Hoarding gifts is often the easy choice but removes the moving spirit of generosity, and the potential social bond. By giving away *the increase*, the unanticipated resources from the gift, one opens oneself up to the generosity of others, to the possibility that abundance will return to you – enriching both you and the community of which you are a part.

To stick with the metaphor, Steven and I hoarded *and* gave away the gift of Gantos's text. As I have tried to indicate, at points we imagined pedagogy from the ground of our reading experience. Maintaining the connection between self and other through the text keeps the gift of reading *moving* through pedagogy to others. The *robust*

pedagogical reader creates pedagogical questions that emerge out of human experience (in the world and with art); he positions reading and teaching *as a gift*, as something with immeasurable – even mysterious – value, that we are only just coming to know even as we give it to others. And because we have given it away (or imagine pedagogy as a giving away of abundant experience), we open ourselves up to receiving return abundance from others. Giving away gifts keep alive the promise of their return. For example, imagining a connection between Jack and the student's desire to write and become writers opens up a potential space for pedagogy to be a place for new stories (of teacher and student) to be told, heard, and written. However, when we give gifts away, we also open up ourselves to loss, embarrassment, and failure. In the giving, we are trusting that resources (material, emotional, psychic, spiritual) will return to us from outside ourselves. Giving relinquishes control, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. The other might not receive our generosity, or might misuse what we have given. This fear, as I read it, is one reason to hoard gifts, like art or reading. During our first reading of the text, we read and wrote our way into attachments that, we feared, were not interesting to others or would be unrecognizable to them -- that the students could not, would not handle with care what we had made and the selves we became through the text.

The hoarding of gifts, for Hyde, robs others and also steals the bonding spirit of generosity from the community who would otherwise be enriched from the gift's circulation. It also diminishes the person who hoards, for it creates a world where resources accrue, are enjoyed or consumed, from one's own sovereignty. A lack of giving cuts off relationships with others and with forces outside oneself. This is one way to read the connection between pedagogical doubt and the last reader that I earlier described. In

this mode, there was no other place to look for answers other than the text. It was as if the pedagogical question was solved through *closer*, more attentive reading. I earlier referenced Stephen Dedalus. He is a prime literary example of what I have just described. He believes that he will only be ready to be an artist when he has read properly the world around him. Only by hoarding the world, he thinks, will he be capable of creative work. It is not surprising that Stephen cannot write or that the last reader cannot read or teach.

The second reading of the text (the third moment of reading for this study) occurred roughly five weeks after the end of the first reading experience. Before our second reading of the text, I should address what happened in between. Steven and I planned our Gantos unit together and I met the students for the first time and became a regular visitor in class. I indicated earlier that we wanted reading journals and commonplace books to be a central component of our unit plan. In this next section, I provide more details about the questions we wrestled with, the activities we planned and the students we drew closer to and pulled away from.



## CHAPTER IV

### INTERLUDE: PLANNING THE UNIT

*Meeting to Plan What and How We Would Teach – What if the Students Kept a Commonplace Book, Too? – Finding the Big Topics to Cover – Ethics – Truth and Lies (Genre) – The Creative Life – Experience Versus Art – Misgivings about Avoiding the Text through “Side Avenues” – Finally Meeting the Students – Slowly Growing Apart – Are We Slipping into Text-Centered Teaching? – Who am I as a Teacher?*

While Steven did not write much in his commonplace book, he did keep reading journals and participate vigorously in our conversations on reading experience and in our planning meetings. In this interlude, I want to describe and interpret our collaborative planning meetings – the conversations where we designed (invented, perhaps?) the lessons for *Hole in My Life*. While we both planned in our reading journals some tentative ideas for teaching, until now in the chronology of the project we had not yet met together to seriously discuss and create lesson plans. Our first planning meeting occurred only a few hours before the first class of the semester where we would meet the students for the first time. We planned over several weeks and several meetings, but I want to spend a few pages describing what we initially envisioned, as this meeting laid the foundation for what was to come.

Our first meeting was difficult, in part, because, as I hinted during the last chapter, we were coming up with the curriculum from scratch. While we consulted sources on creative nonfiction and the genre of memoir, it never crossed our mind that others might have taught Gantos before and that we should consult these materials. Like the good authors we wished we were, perhaps we wanted to write the pedagogical text out of a

void? Perhaps we were taking the notion of *starting close in* too far, to the point of ignoring the wisdom of others. Ironically, if reading was a thankful gathering, then what was teaching? Our pedagogy put up barriers between the present and the past – only so many texts could be gathered together to teach.

In our conversations, we came to know together, in the talking and note taking, about what we wanted to happen in class. It was seldom pretty and more frequently messy: the idea appeared out of the stutter. There were long periods of silence, pen tapping, coffee slurping, “I don’t know...”, interruptions, bad ideas, repetitions of bad ideas. We talked ourselves in circles frequently. Slowly, gradually, even painfully, a framework began to emerge. We had two three- hour class periods to teach the memoir; plus, we knew we could also use two half days on either side of the two week Gantos unit – one to conduct any needed introductions to Gantos, the research project and/or to any large academic unit projects. And one after for students to present final projects, again if necessary.

Steven and I occupied different identities during this study (reader, teacher, author, inquirer); during our planning meetings, we were obviously focused on being and doing teacher and so rarely had time to reflect on how we were reproducing or interrupting our teaching practices, something we had talked about explicitly after writing the stories in moment one. The moments described in this “interlude” chapter point up the difficulties and tensions of participatory inquiry (action research) – one must *do* and *do soon*, with or without reflection, with or without the spirit of *reading and teaching otherwise*. Put another way, we were not always aware of how our intentions to read and teach creatively were playing out.

I will begin by quoting from Steven's reading journal. His pedagogical imagination was very similar to mine in that we both valued journal writing, memoir writing, and commonplace book practices as potentially central to the unit. Commonplace book practices, we thought, would enhance their engagement with Gantos (Sumara, 2002) and we believed that students would value writing that was relevant to their lives, and perhaps see it as a skill they could hone for itself or in relation to other art forms (Tobin, 2001; Atwell, 1998). It made sense to both of us that the students should journey with Gantos to develop as an artist. To echo earlier chapters, we envisioned creating writers. Here are two entries.

One project which I feel strongly about so far (regarding the realm of "Reading to Teach") is a project involving the students writing inside their own copies of *Hole in My Life*. The book seems to be about 'reading to write' (a third category?) and it feels only natural to have our students mimic Gantos's journey in their own experience of the book. In particular, I believe we could use Gantos's description of the four exercises for budding writers: journaling, favorite passages, vocabulary building, and book ideas. I feel this project will help build the creativity of our students and also their interaction with the text.

As I researched Gantos's biography in further detail, I found that "journaling" is a motif throughout most of his works. Joey, the ADHD protagonist, often journals to make sense and get a grasp upon his hectic world. In fact, even Gantos's inspiration to become a writer was journal-based: apparently, he snuck into his sister's room when he was a kid, read her diary, and decided he could write much better than she could. Since then, Gantos has kept a journal throughout his life and, most likely, written more skillfully than his sister. This recurrent theme of journaling strengthens my own thoughts that our final project for our students about *Hole in My Life* should concern some aspect of note taking, writing in the margins, journaling, etc...

My journals were populated with similar thoughts, a conviction that, somehow, journaling, creative writing or keeping a commonplace should be central to our pedagogy and to the 30-point project that would cap the unit. Our journals were keeping the through-line of our convictions in the first moment stories. We did not want to "over-

read” the text – “nit pick” was a common phrased we used – something that both Steven and I had done in the past as we felt this would kill the text (our own experience of reading it) and ruin the student’s enjoyment of it.<sup>10</sup> We wanted to create more open, unpredictable, creative possibilities. We identified strongly with organic occasions of reading, privately and with others. We imagined that engaging the students in creative activities, like journaling or memoir writing, would create a pedagogical space less mechanical, broken up by minutia, and more open to the possibilities of reading and writing stories together. Our initial planning meetings, to my delight, were taking up this through-line.

Our planning conversations weaved in and out of “big picture” things, like the unit project, to smaller thoughts about what we would talk about during each of the two three-hour periods. We knew that we wanted students to keep some kind of journal for a big project – inside or outside their copy of *Gantos* we had not decided. We imagined, as Steven indicated in his journal, our students mimicking *Gantos*’s journey to authorhood by keeping a journal themselves. But, we worried about *making* the journals a major part of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>, as students might not have time to read 100 pages *and* write.

Steven: We could have them just do like a mostly bare-bones journaling of the reading, like underlining words they don’t understand and quoting or underlining certain passages that resonated with them? Something less journaling and more kind of...

Brandon: That would create some sort of engagement. And then later on they can actually do the journal [the writing].

Steven: for the project

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<sup>10</sup> Though “over-reading” usually gave us, as teachers, something to say, in addition to putting us in a place of interpretive power over the students. In not wanting to over-read the text, we were trying to quell these desires and leave pedagogy open to the unknown of what the students might bring.

Brandon: yea, at least then they'd have more time to put their thoughts together. It did not seem organic at all for a reader to save journaling until the end; neither did it seem fair or wise to "require" journal entries while reading; if journaling was a central component of the final project, we would introduce it on May 11<sup>th</sup>, giving the students plenty of time to read, plan ahead, and write at their own pace. We had not yet decided the "rules" for journaling, although the bare bones approach seemed promising. We were thinking about other activities we might do for May 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> when Steven thought of "journaling the day," which lead to our central pedagogical image of the commonplace.

Steven: I remember...you know what would be an interesting assignment? Would be to have them go around in a day and actually journal the day? Like every couple hours have to write something about the day and see how their experience of the day was different than the day that they wouldn't actually journal. You know?

Brandon: That's a great idea. Because Jack does that all the time. It will be great to see if journaling actually changes how they experience the day?

Steven: It'll change their experience of the moment.

Especially in prison, Jack wrote in his commonplace and, finally, "found his story." For the first time, in the writing, he grew confident that he had stories to tell. He grew more reflective as well, taking stock of just how he ended up in prison. In short, his life, while ostensibly out of his control (in prison), came under control. He pieced together of vision of his past, present and his future – particularly as an artist. We secretly and not so secretly held out similar hopes for the journal project – that writing would help students know themselves better as makers and be an occasion to record and create their journeys.

Brandon: so would the journaling the day be introspective or...I mean Jack spends a lot of time observing other people, especially in prison...

We imagined a healthy blend of both. But *where* would the students journal? Inside their copy of *Gantos*? In a separate journal? On sheets of paper that could be inserted in their copy?

Brandon: Okay, so how are we thinking about the difference—if there is one—between journal and commonplace? Because Jack’s transformative writing happens in the *Brothers K* [his commonplace]...I mean, one thing we could do...I could buy them a separate writing journal, or we could find a way to integrate the journal into the copy. Like through separate sheets of paper that could be inserted.

Steven then names what now seems obvious, inevitable: the commonplace as final project.

Inserted at the end or even turned in with it, you know? I mean, more and more I think the final project would be the book being used as a commonplace and also a journal stuck in there, like you said.

Brandon: Right!

Steven: And they turn in their book at the end of the class for the project; and really it will be THEIR book—with what they’ve written on the inside.

Brandon: And list the vocabulary words they found in the book. Important passages. I guess we’ll talk about five or six—we’ll talk about different things they could do just to give them direction, but also give them freedom as well. What about images? Are any of them artists?

Steven: Yea, in fact, we’ll get quite a few people who are into media and animation. I think that would be good. That’s good actually. They could even insert a CD in there or something like that, because some of them are audio people.

Brandon: what do you mean?

Steven: Like a playlist or something like that. Yeah. That’s good. I like that. And it could be even stuff like what you were listening to while you were reading or what you thought about while you’re reading. Or a soundtrack to the memoir.

Brandon: Right. References to that. Okay. Obviously, we’ll make it more specific.

Steven: there are even photography people—that would work, too. We just have to find out what these people actually do. Culinary is hard to fit in there.  
(Laughs)

Brandon: A cake makes a book hard to close. [laughs] We'll think more about it, yeah.

Steven: I like the idea of them just turning in the book and everything having to do with the project will be inside the book. That's not bad as far as assignments go.

Brandon: It has tidiness to it. [touching a regular, bound copy of Gantos]

Steven: I like that.

The commonplace book was the through-line that tied us, Jack, and the students together. In my journals, I had vaguely hinted at the possibility that students might keep commonplace books, but even I was surprised that it might actually happen. It seemed fitting, too, that the creation of commonplace books served as the culmination of the unit and of assessment. Commonplace books restored a sensuous, creative dimension to assessment – part of our vision for teaching *otherwise*. The students would be makers as we were makers. What was also reassuring, to me, was that we were trying to accommodate the literacies of the students even while honoring – well, privileging – our own literacies (a love of the book). One can read this scene through the language developed in earlier chapters – here was the *robust* pedagogical reader at work, imagining pedagogy through his own interests. Reassuring was the imagined possibility that my interests would not swallow the students, but would extend their creative energies. My caressing hand on Gantos can be read several ways. The unity of the codex, the touching of the body, the anticipation of what the students might make, it was an abundant gesture funded by aesthetic unity. The commonplace book was present at all three levels, in the text, in our preparation, and for the students in assessment. The hand touching the book –

I read it as enjoyment, relief even, that we might not collapse the students in *our literacy*, but provide the ground for their flourishing. Was it possible that my love would not destroy what the students loved or who they were?

And yet I had misgivings that were unannounced. Having the students keep their own commonplace book seemed natural, inevitable – but to the point of being ordinary and unimaginative. How creative is it to have students keep a commonplace book? There was certainly a symmetry, unity to it, “announced” by my caress of the book. I began to worry about the potential pitfalls – always privately, never to Steven. Would commonplace books overwhelm the students with our own versions of reading, of literacy. Perhaps the commonplace book would not be the bridge we thought between students and the curriculum. This anxiety was a repetition of one expressed in my reading journal. My interests were too idiosyncratic, too particular, to invite the students in. We were asking students to take risks, asking them to engage in a particular way with literature. But what risks were we ourselves taking? At every turn, it seemed, we were stepping into more known and comfortable territory.

Patti Lather’s (2007) work, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*, addresses the difficult and promising space between certainty and endless deconstruction in social inquiry. The double move of inquiry is the need for continuous critique and self-reflexivity coupled with the stubborn desire to keep moving, to keep writing, to have something to say. Following Lather, I seemed to be practicing a double(d) curriculum – caught between the need to have something to teach and doubting the viability, the innocence, of everything we imagined. Lather’s “lostness” is the demand of post-foundational times, an accounting of the non-innocence and objectivity



of knowledge production, an attempt at reconciliation of the desire to know and putting under erasure what we know. Steven and I were in a unique curriculum situation: we could teach whatever we wanted, however we wanted, and yet there were times when I policed myself vigorously, my ambivalence over the commonplace assessment one example.<sup>11</sup> Yet, we had to keep moving. Pedagogy, surprisingly, put these ethical concerns under erasure. We had to have something to say, something for the students to do. And soon.

We imagined the commonplace as final project, full of journals, music, painting, creative writing. We wanted to introduce the idea of commonplace books and the final project on May 11<sup>th</sup>, the week before they were to read the first 100 pages. But we needed, obviously, to fill in details of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. Our conversations lurched blindly forward, anchored only by what Steven termed in his journals and early in our conversation as the “side discussion.”

*Steven:* when I was reading this book and thinking about lesson planning, I tried to think about giving them side things. Like when I do Poe, I try to talk about language and we create sentences using Latinate words and try to make that into a contest, but I’m trying to think about this...

“Side things” enable a closer reading of the text, but not through close reading itself, but through a kind of lateral reading. Again, Jardine’s (1992) metaphor of thankful gathering is appropriate. Gathering many texts together around Gantos, we hoped, would enable better readings of Gantos, without exhausting Gantos or the reader. The emphasis on side things was analogous to the literature-as-opening-doors metaphor we discussed after writing the stories in the first moment. It was our way of thinking about how we could

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<sup>11</sup> Taubman (2009) via Lacan would call this the internalized big Other – performing one’s own stringent authority in the absence of external authority.

teach without exhausting the text. Exhausting the text killed the story and, we imagined – again almost ironically – would discourage attachment, decrease relevance and heighten student anxiety. Here is a portion of our exchange referenced in chapter 2:

One of the things that came out in our last interviews was just how much we prefer organic reading that's not really obsessive and not overly concerned with knowing every little detail. [right] You mentioned that with your reading of Shakespeare. So that's been on my mind -- how can we create an experience for the students that's less broken up by minutia and still find some way to assess them over something.

Steven: I agree. I think one of the things we could do is like you said try and come up with a creative writing project, like a memoir. That makes it less minutia about the actual book and more like “take the form of this and do something of your own with it.” That makes it less just analytical it also adds creativity to the analysis. Another thing is if we do bring up allusions to other books. That might not be nit picky that might be just us showing them what doors -- we can use that analogy that we both like. The idea of like each book in some aspect opens up different doors. You can go through those doors if you WANT and can lead you different places. This one could lead you to Brothers K or other places. I'll have to read it and see where those other places are but this idea of a book as in some aspect a house with a bunch of rooms.

We discussed breaking down the allusions to other books, and, in this way, pointing the students towards these potential doors. We even wanted to approach the idea of travel and adventure, since *On the Road* seems to seduce Jack with promises of travel, surprise and discovery. Perhaps the students could discuss their own *On the Road* adventures? What about style? Steven's prose axis could be useful and help the students understand tone, voice, style and genre. Could students imitate different styles of the authors in the course and, therefore, acquire a facility with language? What was the connection between style, sparseness, “honesty” and the memoir genre? We explored these questions and, while we found them intriguing and would even work some of them into the unit, they did not provide a solid “side room” of pedagogy to occupy. Thankfully, we stumbled upon a pedagogical structure that might work. The main topics of discussion for day one:

1) Memoir-as-Genre 2) Relationships of Creativity; and for day two: 1) Ethics 2)

Experience v. Art. Below, I elaborate on these categories.

### **Ethics**

Steven especially gravitated towards ethics. In particular, we wondered about the ethics of Jack's decision to smuggle hash and put himself and potentially others in danger. At his trial, one piece of damaging evidence presented by the prosecution is from his writing journal, where he claims that he is not sorry for what he did (smuggling hash), only afraid of the consequences. Plus, there was the epigram to Gantos's text from Oscar Wilde: "it is not what one does that is wrong, but what one becomes as a consequence of it." Wilde frames the whole memoir in these terms; Gantos, we thought, wants the reader to think about actions, consequences, and choices. What puzzled us was the fact that while Jack "grows up" and matures into a reflective artist who apparently knows himself and the world, he does not say one word in the end about his choices. About any regret or misgivings about stealing the hash, lying to his parents, ruining their lives and (almost) his. His imprisonment and ability to write seemed linked together, leaving the reader to only assume that because he turned out alright, because he learned to write in prison (and likely would have continued to flounder had he not gone), everything is justified. We found his silence and (un)reflective posture a little troubling. Perhaps the tight narrative structure could not accommodate this kind of tangent? We honestly did not know, but wanted to explore this issue more with students.

As I mentioned earlier, ethics was the "side topic" that Steven and I latched onto early. But, in the end, we would have the most trouble coming up with something to say about it and facilitating conversations about the ethics of Jack's decisions. Our difficulty

at coming up with something to say manifested itself later in preparation of discussion questions and activities for this topic. We had to impose “philosophy” on this particular section; specifically, we discussed three schools of ethics: Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and Virtue Ethics, and then asked students to apply each school’s philosophy to Jack’s dilemma of smuggling hash. The three schools of ethics provided structure – and a potentially shared language – for student’s personal beliefs and intuitions about “right” and “wrong”. I was never quite “at home” with the side discussion of ethics. On the one hand, it gave us something to say; on the other hand, this particular side avenue took us far away from the story. For someone who ostensibly valued the particularities of stories and reading experience, it was a surprising and unfulfilling choice for me. It also forecasted a conclusion about teaching literature that we would later make. Side avenues – like philosophy or ethics – may be entry points into knowing a story; but one potential danger is that they mark entry points into something entirely different from the story. They become relief points for the teacher who does not know what to say about the story; one can teach the story, in other words, without teaching the story.

### **Truth & Lies (Genre)**

Steven: People want the truth, they want things to be real and if I wrote a story, and someone says, is it real and I say no? We can contrast that with older forms of storytelling. No one asked Homer, “did this happen?”

Brandon: That’s a great discussion because with some stories it doesn’t matter if it happened or not. The point of it is something else.

Steven: Something else in the story besides the truth.

Brandon: or it’s another kind of truth

We discussed at length what, exactly, we were reading. Memoir? Autobiography?

Fiction? We struggled over the similarities and differences between these terms. This

discussion emerged out my journal entries where I expressed frustration at Gantos for what I thought was his attempt to lure us into the “truth” of his account. The opening pages of the memoir are populated with photographs of young Gantos in prison. I read these critically. Why did Gantos feel the need to include these “artifacts” from real life? One answer is to convince the reader of the truth of the account. “What you are about to read really happened and is entirely true.” My frustration was that this betrayed the playfulness of writing, how the process of writing shapes who one becomes. Laying out the historical truth of the story robbed story from us – how stories shape the teller, not just report or tell a life. Gantos, I thought, was being unfaithful to writing by framing writing as a recording of a life, not a tool to create one. This bothered me.

What is a memoir? What is an autobiography? Our tentative speculations were that memoir had an obsessive quality, a desire to know about the past that writing fulfills or resists. Autobiographies seem to be a more neutral recounting of a life rather than a focused excavation of a particular moment. While Gantos’s text was specifically classified as a memoir, it seemed to bear many similarities to autobiography. A somewhat cool and distant narrator frames writing, in writing, as the inevitable trajectory of Jack’s life. We began to read the profuse number of references to other books somewhat suspiciously. *I have always wanted to be a writer, I have always loved books*, these references seemed to say. The narrative structure lent Jack’s life a naturalness, his journey to become a writer, telos. *Of course you became a writer. It’s only natural*. Did *Hole* perform a life in such a way to relieve the uncertainty of life for Gantos? To reassure him that, indeed, he made the “write” choices all along?

We found these questions fascinating and, thankfully, imagined that the students would enjoy thinking about them as well. Why is creative non-fiction so popular? What does it give readers that fiction might not? Do we still have uses for stories that are, explicitly, fiction? What kinds of “truth” are we looking for in memoir? In fiction?

We also thought about the difference between experience and story, particular how memoir writers make choices of what to tell and how to tell it. Inevitably, we thought, there is crafting, shaping, leaving out, compressing, combining – all in an effort to make an experience intelligible to others (and oneself) through story. How does a demand to communicate shape what and how one tells (creates) oneself? What is the tension between making up and leaving out? What counts as a fabrication in a memoir? Should we even care if some parts of a memoir are “made up”? Why write them? Why read them?

To get the students into a discussion of memoir, I remembered James Frey’s (2003) *A Million Little Pieces* controversy, Oprah Winfrey’s outrage, and a very public discussion of what reader’s demand from memoir writing. We thought this scandal would be an interesting way into discussing a reader’s craving for “reality,” how we understand the value of a fictional experience, and into defining the genre of memoir. It dawned on us after we were far into our conversation that we were, unintentionally perhaps, converging with Steven’s course expectations about centering literature around genre – defining it, showing how it works, showing students how they can use similar generic devices in their own creative work.

Steven: I mean that's just an interesting question, just trying to define stuff

Brandon: The whole “Truth.”

Steven: Truth, right, right.

Brandon: I think that's the big defining a genre kind of thing

Steven: And I think that works well with what I've been doing. I like to define the genre. Like the first paper is all about defining genres — and even the second paper. The first paper is all about choosing something like magical realism or sci-fi or modernism or horror or something like that. Choosing one of these genres and defining what they are and what their capabilities are. And why people use them and why, like—what are the rules to that game? And what are its advantages? So you can talk about it with a memoir, what are its rules? And all those discussions can come out, trying to decide what's—you know, how memoirs work.

We also returned to the possibility that students might craft a memoir — a particular memory — on their own. Though we had not yet mapped out the details of this creative assignment we imagined that it would help students understand the demands of the memoirist: what to say, how to say it, what to leave out, if and when to fabricate and to what effect. I was looking forward to writing one and discussing the process with the students. And I was relieved that we were creating a lesson, a structure — something to grab a hold of.

Brandon: The memoir writers I'm reading, they're very loose, or they are very epistemologically loose with truth, but they are committed to facts. We're always committed to facts, but it's the point of memoir to explore what the facts mean, so it's always interpretive. That makes me think that why we read memoir isn't for the facts of that life; it's for what the facts meant to that person as an experience.

Steven: That's always in conflict with people feeling like something has to be authentic, like you can only interpret it if you went through it.

Brandon: I'd love to get into that discussion with the students because I'm actually in the process of finding out what I think for myself.

Steven: I think they will find that, actually, interesting. It is a good question.

Brandon: But all these different...facts, truth, artifice, different kinds of truth.

Steven: We can even do a side discussion about philosophically about truth.

We thought that a discussion of “truth” might accompany our introduction to the memoir genre. We mentioned several names and concepts that might be brought up:

Kierkegaard’s subjective truth, pragmatism, Nietzsche, objective truth. Steven would confide later that he often turned to philosophy to anchor his discussion of literature. A brief turn to philosophy would be interesting, we thought, as an accompaniment to the story. Our urge to discuss genre and even retreat into these useful, but somewhat hidden, side rooms – like philosophy or style – would return in the next moment and bring up questions, discomfort and anxiety about pedagogy. What did our interests in these more abstract concepts tell us about our pedagogy? Was it a retreat? And, if a retreat, what were we running from? What promise did genre or philosophy hold that story – Gantos in particular – did not? Although I was initially uncomfortable with the ethics lesson, I gravitated, like Steven, to philosophy and genre for something to say.

### **The Creative Life**

Steven: What else [can we talk about]? I guess maybe just like the youthful—like going on the adventure. He wants to go on an adventure. He wants to...maybe we could just talk about...? Maybe we can break down some of the allusions in the book, like *On the Road*? *Heart of Darkness*? [Long Pause] Or what about what you were thinking? Like the idea of reading and writing, the difference between...

Brandon: Relationship?

Steven: Yeah, between creativity and like sources of inspiration for creativity?

Brandon: Like input and output, basically?

Steven: Yeah, they could think about it even for visual majors. They’d have to...they might enjoy watching animation or going and seeing paintings or pieces, but at the same time they have to produce. How much are the two necessary and what’s a healthy balance of the two?

Brandon: You think they’d get into that?



Steven: I think that would be interesting.

Brandon: That's funny, because I initially thought they wouldn't care.

Steven: They DO want to create things.

Steven and I brought a fascination with the creative life to our reading of Gantos. In my journals, I was puzzled by Jack's inability to write and while I admired his passionate attachment to reading and his efforts to be inspired by others, I wondered if this was not preventing him from writing. Perhaps the writers he loved were overwhelming his own voice. I was asking questions about the balance of reading and writing, or consuming and producing, in the creative life. During our planning discussion, I also realized that I had not taken the students seriously as artists, as makers, in my first reading of the text. In disconnecting my interests from the students, while I earlier indicated it as a form of protection, it was also unnecessary solitude. Steven was convinced that, in fact, they would find the topic of the creative life interesting and relevant for their own lives. I, too, was fascinated by the potentially overwhelming presence of culture, tradition, artistic idols, to the creative process. I was reading *belatedness* into Jack's anxiety, Steven's writing life, and even mine. How can one write a story of one's own when there are so many other stories that preceded you? What can one do with one's late arrival?

Brandon: Reading is almost part of the problem, his crisis of confidence, having to measure up to the books that he's reading. He finally comes to realize, at the end, he's like, "Dostoyevsky's lines are much better, but mine are mine."

Steven: I agree.

Brandon: others are a necessary part of the apprenticeship, but in the beginning it's kind of a blockage.

We wanted the students to think about the idols in their field of inquiry – who were they inspired by and how did they related to them?

Steven: I think that would interest them. What is one's relationship to what they're inspired by? Obviously, you can't create what you're inspired by. But at some point, it seems like it becomes a burden, and at some point it's a muse. It's so good that he can't do anything about it. It's so good that it's paralyzing.

Jack is a kind of non-self early in the memoir. He is completely taken over by what he reads – as shown by the scarred barrenness that Jack feels when finishing a text. Reading is only a temporary escape from being, well, no one. He is the temporary accumulation of other voices.

Related to our discussion of the creative life, of the sometimes precarious balance of consumption and production, we discussed the importance of creative routines. How must one live, what must one do, to write or create? Reading is part of the equation. It was also our conviction that in order to produce, one needed a predictable process – which perhaps operated as a defense against the disorderly chaos of creative production. We wanted to know the absurd things that one should probably not want to know. How do you write? And where? At what time? With how much coffee or tea (or wine?)? We were both fascinated by the “behind the scenes” of creative production and wanted to share with students “famous routines” of others writers, composers, makers. For example, Brahms began each writing day with a small pot of strong, black coffee – nearly undrinkable by others' standards. And we wanted to share our own routines with the students as well.

For his novel, Steven writes by hand and revises continually until he can no longer read the copy (because of “scribbling” out the original lines). When he has no more room to revise, he types it out. “I could show them my pages of black scribbling.” Steven had never revealed to any of his classes that he was a writer. The prospect of his revelation excited me. And I volunteered to tell them about my relationship with Natalie

Goldberg's books on writing, particularly *Writing Down the Bones* (1986) and *Wild Mind* (1990). When writing, I read a small chapter from her work everyday before settling into the computer. I have found the cold plunge of the page too much to handle without reading from Natalie that writing is a process, that words are not me but flow through me, and that it is okay for drafts to be just that, drafts. We wanted students, too, to think about their routines or, if they did not already have one, to try one for a week and see if adding structure or predictability helped their creativity or productivity. By sharing with each other our routines, we hoped to humanize the creative process, to add a dash of oddity, frailty, humor, and structure to the creative life. We hoped our students would engage with their own work with more promise and vigor.

### **Experience versus Art**

*Does the bad start necessarily cause the bad end? Jack seems to have a rough beginning, but that kind of turns things around for him. I was just thinking about the transformative effect of experience, I guess. To get his life together in writing and all that stuff. So, I mean, there's that, you know, the idea of ancient Greek drama—like you learn wisdom through suffering. — Steven*

We thought we needed one more topic of inquiry for day 2, to accompany the ethics. The memoir is Jack's record of learning, of coming to know oneself, find oneself. At the end of the memoir, perhaps naturally, Jack "looks back" to see the lesson's learned, particularly that a bad start does not equal a bad end. He learns that "ordinary experience" is good enough to write through; when Jack trusts that his life is worth exploring in writing, he comes to understand it more clearly. Steven and I stumbled on what we thought was an interesting line of questions related to experience and art. How much does one have to experience to learn something? What qualities does an experience need to have to be transformative? What qualities must someone possess to learn from an

experience? We discussed experience and theatre, particularly Aristotle's notion of catharsis – theatre was a safe place to experience unsafe things. But was art alone truly transformative? Not for Jack.

Steven: Well, I wonder, you know, how much does he have to experience before he is in some ways transformed? In some ways reading doesn't do it for Jack. In some aspects the theory breaks down with him, because he reads all these books and those don't actually transform him, you know? The only thing that transforms him is actually going through a similar experience, you know, instead of reading it. Almost like the limitation of...

Brandon: Books.

Steven: ...Of literature.

Brandon: The Limitations of art...

I was dumbfounded with this irony: that a book about the importance of reading would undo itself. But was that all? Was art empty and experience full, the only teacher? What did this mean about pedagogy? Was it, too, an art? A virtual experience and thus a poor substitute for "authentic" engagements with the world?

Brandon: I mean, I think the last section [of Gantos] was my favorite part. You would think I would just be bursting at the seams with something to say about it.

My lack of "what to say" pedagogically performed the tension we were describing between art and experience. Was our reading experience meaningless? Was our dearth of words a sign of no learning? We suspected not. Steven reminded me of the difficulty he imagined teaching his favorite books: "just because there might be less to say doesn't mean there's less to experience." Perhaps we were reading Jack, reading, art, Aristotle harshly. Like us, Jack was not yet ready to give shape to reading experience through writing, and thus not yet ready to give a measure of form, fixity to what is still forming. We fumbled around for what we were thinking.

Like experience, lessons in experience, but also...Like experience versus art (can art be an experience?) like direct experience versus indirect experience?

We slowly discovered the position of writing as that art that gave form to experience.

Jack learned from the marriage between the two. I also learned that Steven viewed writing closer to a “real” experience than I did.

Steven: I mean from the beginning, obviously he’s always reading, as we said earlier. And he wants to create some kind of experience for himself that’s other than reading. An adventure. And then this idea—he seems to be transformed at the end, kind of liberated. And it only seems to have happened because he actually put the pen to the paper and experiences incarceration and all that stuff. So he seems different because he went through those experiences. As opposed to going through the experiences of characters, like Jack Kerouac. Reading it didn’t really transform him...

Brandon: But it seems like the transformation is like an interplay between experience and art.

Steven: I agree. Because the art is...

Brandon: It’s not just the experience, it’s the writing about it.

Steven: Well, yeah, that’s a good point. Because even when he experiences driving down to Hemingway’s house, that doesn’t do anything for him because he can’t write about it. Or even when he does a peer experience, like he goes to the Black Panthers or something like that. He doesn’t get anything from it because he doesn’t write about that experience. So maybe...that’s really good. So maybe the idea of the marriage of the two in some aspects being like—something like a three-dimensional experience, but some kind of like, you know, adding another level to it. Doing and then the reflection as well. You know?

Brandon: What did you just say?

Steven: I said, “Doing and reflection.”

We both viewed the memoir as commentary on the potential of writing to give form to reading and lived experiences. Our discussion of experience and art firmed up our commitment to using the commonplace both in our preparation and in assessment. If

Jack's experience was any guide, the student's commonplace book practices would help their engagement, enjoyment and (self) learning.

### **Meeting the Students**

Our section of English 102 met once per week, for three hours, 6-9pm. Our classroom was on the sixth floor of a nine story building. The classrooms were spacious; there were two large whiteboards at the front of the room, a computer, and projector. Everything about the room felt new. Our room had about 30 desks, though our enrollment was only (officially) 15 students. One side of the room had two large windows that overlooked the street, letting in a lot of natural light. The room was carpeted and several signs warned that no food or drink were allowed. Despite this restriction, it was, overall, a pleasant space.

I have nothing miraculous to say about the first day of class, the first time I met the students. I did not have much time to engage with any one student, only to listen to Steven's course introduction and their response to questions. Steven introduced the class, the syllabus and his policies. That first lesson concerned fables and parables, which were short enough for us to read and discuss in class together. My impressions coming away from class was that the students were interesting and had interesting things to say about literature. They were engaged with the fables and parables, eager to puzzle aloud and to themselves what the short tales might mean. As an outside observer, I did not sense any of the reluctance and distance Steven had attributed to students in past quarters. They seemed interested in literature and each other. The class was vibrant, full of diversity – along lines of age, race, gender and areas of interests. We learned from an opening game of “two truths and a lie” that many students in the class were interested in video game

design, graphic design, culinary arts and fashion design. In that way, our particular class mirrored the interests of the larger student population. I came away from that first class excited about what we might make together with this group.

### **Coming Together, Growing Apart**

I did not attend the second or third class meetings. I was scheduled to attend class the 4<sup>th</sup> class meeting and all subsequent meetings during the quarter. Steven and I met online for a conversation after the third class meeting to explore more fully the nuances of the first reading experience. In that conversation, Steven reported that his students were growing, well, restless and that this class was becoming a repetition of what he had come to expect. The first class meeting was a kind of honeymoon: 15 students attended, almost all of the roster. They were engaged with the material in small groups and in whole class discussion. During the next two weeks, Steven noticed a dramatic decrease in attendance and participation. 8 to 10 students showed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> weeks. They did not seem engaged with the material. They became more silent and more reluctant to respond to discussion questions. This was consistent with how he had described the students and the rhythms of his earlier courses. Many students would drift in and out of the course without dropping it. Only a handful, 7-8, would regularly attend and even fewer would engage in conversation about the texts. The same seemed to be happening in our course.

Because we had earlier discussed the importance we would place on “creative practices” and routines (for artists, ourselves and the students), I had been seeking material that might bolster such a conversation and had picked up from the library a book about the secret lives of authors. It was a collection of photographs of writing spaces,

fetishized writing objects, and the material-spatial manifestation of routine. Our exchange below highlights how Steven's students and the course had changed.

Brandon: a lot of what I'm finding now would be side entertainment kind of stuff.

Steven: I feel like a third of teaching is side entertainment. Half of teaching is throwing in a joke just to keep them alive [laughing]. So, yeah. The past two weeks have been difficult for teaching. I don't know, just been very...the level of energy is pretty low.

Brandon: for you or the students or both?

Steven: I'd say more the students than me but it effects me obviously. If they are low then I am low.

Brandon: maybe it's the start of the quarter blues or something?

Steven: I don't know what it is. I don't know. It hasn't been horrible. I think it's just English and they don't want to take it. That's the key. It's hard to get people into it. For 102, I thought it'd be more interesting with some of the stories than with 101, but still. It's hard to get some people into it. I mean, there was one guy for last night for our class that we'll be teaching, one of the smarter guys actually, Brian, he was like, "god, all four of those stories were *horrible*." Almost everyone thought all four stories were horrible.

I noted the gaps that were imagined between us and the students in the first reading of the text. The gaps seemed to be growing the more Steven interacted with them. Among the stories that the students thought were "awful" was Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." Steven felt burdened by the student's disconnection and pondered a gap he did not know how to bridge.

If you show those stories to most people they would think they are kind of interesting. You know what I was thinking about on the bus though? As far as seeing beauty in sentences, I don't think they see that. In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," the language is really beautiful. Not so much with Kurt Vonnegut and his journalistic style but with a magical realist story, even with a Borges story, there's so many sentences in there that catch my eye. They have just a, maybe beautiful isn't the best word, but there's some kind of visceral reaction or mental reaction you should have with some of the sentences. Like, "wow that was really well phrased," or "something's amazingly articulate about that sentence." I don't think they see that and I just realized that I don't know how to



teach people to see language, to see you know inventive or creative language. I don't know how to do that.

He reasoned that the students did not get into the stories because the language did not resonate and it was merely “what happened” in the story that had to hold their attention. Books like *Twilight* were so popular, again to Steven, because they were *pure plot*, relying on event instead of language to hold the reader’s attention. “So it's just what happens in the story. It's the only thing that is interesting to them. Not how it was told. And if it's told in a difficult way, therefore it's difficult and that's going to impede their enjoyment of the story.” He lamented the aesthetic quality of language that the students seemed to be missing. Neither of us knew quite how to help the students with reading stories that seemed to offer more than the events that drive them.

Perhaps our frustration was due to asking the wrong question. “Why don’t you love what I love? Or see what I see?” I learned from observing Steven’s class that his pedagogy was somewhat-to-very traditional. Most of the time, he lectured on the topic and occasionally invited their participation or reply. While he tried to engage the class in conversation and group work, he centered the curriculum around a canonical text, did his best to explicate its features and make it interesting.

*What do you love? What do you write, say or imagine?* Steven was having trouble engaging the students’ literacy practices and trying to connect these to the curriculum. He worked very hard at presenting the text as best he knew how and hoped for a connection. In this space, the teacher was the bringer of literacy (Bruns, 2011), an approach that led to frustration, speechlessness, and, at the same time, the feeling that the teacher was solely responsible for animating the pedagogical space. In response to listening to a lecture and to reading a text that likely seemed foreign and alien to their lives, the

students stopped responding.

As the students grew more silent and more detached from a curriculum that they were not interested in, we continued to ponder and wonder about the pedagogical anxiety that we had experienced during the first reading of Gantos. I equated dimensions of “doubting pedagogy” to something analogous to writing anxiety. We were creating a curriculum from scratch, a creative opportunity certainly, but also, on occasion, a menacing void that reflected back our lack of imagination, our lack of words for a situation that demanded them. The students grew more silent, less engaged, because of Steven’s devotion to the text. When I returned to class to observe during the 4<sup>th</sup> week, I was astounded at how much the feel of the classroom had changed. I wrote in my journal a phrase that still seems apt: *we came together to be alone*. Steven admitted that he felt like he was “talking to himself.” During lecture, the students barely said a word, even when posed a question. When Steven offered group work time to the students, many of them chose to work alone instead. The only voices I could hear in the room were mine and the student I was working with. I took advantage of group work time to participate with the students and hopefully get to know them a little better. The fact that we were the only “group” talking made me feel even more alone.

The distance that seemed to now exist between the students and the curriculum and, for that matter, between the teacher and the students only served to make our anxiety at preparing to teach more present. We were the source of *all the words*. Steven’s observation below concerned his teaching experiences in general. Silently, I worried that it was coming true for this class as well.

Certainly in teaching you can get exhausted if there's nothing else being brought to the table. If students aren't bringing anything and you feel like they're almost

begrudgingly doing your class then that can cause the anxiety of “what am I going to say?” because you have to think of ever more exciting things to say because they are not excited. You have to be their excitement and your excitement. Which is hard.

Steven was asking students to be excited about something they did not choose and likely did not see as relevant to their own creative lives and practices. We had forgotten that curriculum is the dance between the text and the students. Dewey (1906) taught us that that curriculum is the movement between and across the child and the disciplines of knowledge. Perhaps our love of the text was blinding Steven (and me) from seeing the students. This raises the interesting proposition that *loving* the text might impede good pedagogy. The teacher, blinded by his own attachment and even assuming the attraction as natural, fails to create bridges between the text and the students. In a recent study (Ellis, 2003) of secondary English teachers’ motivations for teaching, *love of literature* was cited as the number one reason to enter the teaching profession. Our experience was testing the viability of *loving the text*; a teacher’s attachment to literature and the identity he forms through those attachments may blind him from seeing that the student’s literacies and interests are not his own (Goodwyn, 2002). Further, when he does realize the peculiarity of his attachments (for example, the aesthetic qualities of language mentioned above), the gulf is perceived as impassable.

We had not yet named this gap nor theorized that the reason the students were so quiet, the class so dead, was because the pedagogical center was the text, not the relationships between students and text. But, we did know (how could we not) that the students were quiet, disengaged, and relatively uninterested in the course material so far. We were encouraged because the tentative lessons that we had designed, we thought, would interrupt this pattern and offer the students a form of engagement. The

commonplace book project, we thought, would restore students engaging with the text on their own terms – through music, drawing, creative writing. If Steven’s previous pedagogy was focused exclusively on the text, our lessons added the students. Although we still planned to incorporate discussion questions and group work, as Steven had done, our pedagogy, we imagined, would bring the students’ (creative) lives back into the picture.

### Looking Back

When I read over this work, I keep thinking about Kinnell’s (1971) hen.

Is it the foot,  
which rubs the cobblestones  
and snakestones all its days, this lowliest  
of tongues, whose lick-tracks tell  
our history of errors to the dust behind,  
which is the last trace in us  
of wings?

And is it  
the hen’s nightmare, or her secret dream,  
to scratch the ground forever  
eating the minutes out of the grains of sand? (p. 21-22)

Is it our nightmare or our secret dream to make the text the pedagogical center, where the teacher announces his interpretation, unraveling the mystery, showing how it was put together? Is this our own kind of belated authorship? We did not write the text, but we can tell you what it means. We can animate the pedagogical space with the *new word*, our word. I have framed this way of teaching as something we both wanted to escape. I do not want to teach like Dr. Kay, for example. I flee from him into another kind of pedagogy. Yet, in reading this chapter again, I realize that the direct, text-centered mode is so easy slip back into – assuming authority over a text; positioning explication as *the pedagogical* activity. In part, I have the blamed students for slipping back into this mode;

their silence leads teachers back into the text for ever more exciting things to say. What if the students (and their silence) are just a prop for what would happen anyway? What if dominating the text is, really, what Steven and I wanted all along? What if Dr. Kay is who I wanted to become? And fleeing into other pedagogies a temporary resistance, disavowal, of his dominating influence? And what if I never wanted to teach otherwise; what if dominating the text gives me the secret pleasure of undoing what I will never create. Steven claims to be an accidental teacher. Am I one too?

## CHAPTER V

### READING WHILE TEACHING, PART 1

*Reading the Text Again Before Teaching – Wanting to Be Alone with the Text – The Invisible Student in the Text – Finding the Text, Craving Its Body – Did Writing in the Book Ruin Reading? – Aesthetic Time and Pedagogical Time – Imagining the Time of Teaching as the Time of Reading – How to Leave a Hole in Reading, in Teaching*

#### **Re/reading Gantos, Re/turning to Solitude**

Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you... Ultimately we read – as Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson agree – in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. We experience such augmentation as pleasure, which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists... the pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination... there are no ethics of reading. – Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, pp. 19, 22, 24

Last week, I spent a lot of intellectual and emotional energy just thinking about what to say and I started wondering, even though I didn't want to, "well, who is this for?" I didn't want to let my thoughts drift into "well, are they even going to be listening?" Because, you know, I like the class and the students and, um, I guess my teacher DNA maybe won't allow my thoughts to go down that path. But I did have the thought in the car and several other times that "well, if it's not for the students, it's for me." I want to do the material justice and I want to prove to myself that I know this. I think that's the ultimate test of knowledge, you don't know something until you teach it. I don't want to say this or admit it but yeah maybe it was more for me. That's the dark side to it. – Brandon

I destroyed one of my favorite books of poetry after the first reading of Gantos. I took the same exacto knife I used to cut up *Hole in My Life* and cut stanzas from Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*. I pasted them into the margins of Gantos. I was selective about the stanzas I cut – many, as the reader will see below, reference blindness, loss, error, and failure. But with language that is beautiful. In the sentence, the line,

Kinnell seems to gather human limitations into possibility, recuperating failure and absence as that through which we learn. At least that is what I wanted to read in his lines. *The beauty of error, of failure*, had been on my mind after the first reading and into our preparation, lingering, never fully revealing itself to my consciousness but present nonetheless. I wanted Kinnell to play with Gantos *and* with reading itself, to *cut* in the grain of certainty a poetic reminder that reading is never finished even as certainty is never found. I knew the poems and the intertext of Kinnell-in-Gantos would not immediately exhaust itself. Interpretation, in other words, is timely and creative. Absence is the hole through which desire, (an)other reading comes. As my relationship with Gantos changed, so would my reading of Kinnell, Gantos, and their intertext. It was also, admittedly, a risk to destroy something dear to me. But I needed to deepen my relationship to my commonplace book. If this was a text that contained my reading and teaching history/autobiography, it needed genuine pieces of my reading past, something tangible attached to the subject. Destroying Kinnell would invite more interesting, lively interpretations of Gantos. One text invigorated at the expense of another. I also hoped Kinnell would re/kindle my attachment to *Hole*, as my reading identity had, as shown in the previous chapters, been threatened by what I called *the last reader*. I had to teach this text. I could not abandon it, even though it contained selves and reading I wanted to retreat from. The commonplace read and wrote a history I already did not want. So I read, wrote, and cut my way back in.

Our second reading occurred several weeks after the first. I read most heavily after we introduced, on May 11<sup>th</sup>, commonplace books and the final project. Steven and I re-read the first 100 pages in preparation for the May 18<sup>th</sup> class session. The students

were responsible for reading the same page range. We read the text a second time as they read the text the first time. As we had done during our first reading, we noted in the commonplace book the dimensions of our reading experience – this time in blue ink instead of black. We were to materially represent our reading experience, our thoughts about teaching, how we imagined the students in the text, and notes about reading to teach. Replicating the first reading moment, we also wrote “reading journals” that were more reflective and organized, but still based on our commonplace engagements. The following chapter is based on our reading experience of the first 100 pages of Gantos’s memoir, as written in the commonplace book, our reading journals, and expressed during our conversations about the re-reading experience. Both Steven and I, in returning to the text, held tight to the text. The students and the very thought of pedagogy, unexpectedly, receded from imagined view. I suggested earlier that each moment of reading could potentially re-read other moments – our second reading helps re-read, even un-read the first. What went missing in the second reading – the presence of students and the demands of pedagogical time – suggests what *could have been had* and what was lost in earlier moments.

### **Missing the Students**

In my first reading, my margins were full of questions about the students. “What will they think of this?” “Have they been through a similar experience?” “How will they react to this part?” “How will they read me?” Questions like these were a product of absence, of literally not being sure *who* we were teaching, but wanting to know all the same. They were one means of mis-mapping our way as a reader of Gantos and as a teacher of the text. I was surprised that questions about the students stopped during re-



reading. As I will elaborate below, I thought about pedagogy *some*, specifically what subtleties could be added to the lessons. But I did not think about the students. I thought this second reading would be a vigorous re-reading of pedagogy and the text in light of the students we know “knew” – that their voices would be a stronger presence. I expected a heteroglossic text, full of the other’s presence and voice. Bahktin (1983) describes a *zone of contact* as a meeting and clashing of different discourses, of literacies, of speaking, writing, and thinking the (textual) world. I expected my second reading to be such a terrain of contact, even discomfort, of confrontation with the imagined (and somewhat known) other, the student. How would their voices interrupt my reading, the simplicity of the text? My identity making? The pedagogy that I had previously imagined? In reading the other in the text, would I read the other in me? Many of these imagined, anticipated questions were suppressed simply because the *other* seemed, well, to not be there. The second reading experience of the first 100 pages, instead, was focused on what I, the private reader enjoyed, and, to a lesser extent, what extra insights I might bring to the lessons. I read in solitude. When Steven and I discussed the mysterious absence of the students in the text – Steven experienced a similar absence – we agreed that the student’s silence in class was a mediating factor that might explain it. They did not say much and so we had no basis for imagining what they might say, based on this particular text. Steven largely taught and talked at them. While he invited interaction and discussion, students as I indicated earlier grew more quiet as the quarter wore on. Since we did not yet know their presence as engaged by text, their presence did not surface in our re-return reading of Gantos. But there were other reasons.

I described the first reading as an “imagined convergence” between myself,

Steven, and the students. The second reading was almost exclusively a conversation between me and the text, a thankful, reflective gathering most closely allied with aesthetic experience. It was not a weaving, a braiding together of lives, real or imagined. The second reader needed to have a different, more intimate connection to the text during re-reading. Perhaps the students were “kept at bay” in the text because their presence was formerly a threat to the reading self and to the text and “selves” he had created and held dear.

Another interpretation for the students’ absence is the character and nature of creative work. Steven and I talked at length at the beginning of the project about reading and teaching “creatively” and not mechanically, by rote, as standardized curriculum sometimes requires. These conversations, as the reader can probably tell, were full of optimism and a near disregard for what creativity might mean and actually *do* in the context of reading and pedagogy. Hansen (2004) has described a *poetics of teaching* as that which includes even the carefully and diligently prepared lecture or, more predictably, involving the students in making, writing, speaking. He describes it as the fluid dynamic of content, context, teachers, students, and the relationships among them. Under a pedagogical *poetics* he also includes the ability of the teacher to be open and responsive to the students, which has little to do with what kind of content the teacher brings to the lesson and more to do with her disposition towards questions, desires, lines of inquiry that are pursued, perhaps unpredictably, by students. *Poetics* is a weaving together of the predictable and the unpredictable, creating curriculum of form but not foreclosure – in other words, full of enough holes to invite the other in as a welcomed guest. The *poetics of teaching* envisioned by Hansen is not quite the same as a *poetics* of

pedagogical reading and preparation, but it does connect.

Pedagogical reading is a kind of art-making, thus beautiful and difficult work: reading the text, reading the selves of reading, imagining the students, fashioning lessons from scratch. Re-conceptualist curriculum work, especially has envisioned by Pinar (2004), has been lauded, even praised, as a complicated conversation, especially in its refusal to boil curriculum work down to measurable standards, to the preparation of able workers and professionals. However, the experience of curriculum as a complicated conversation has its limits. At certain points, one wants only simplicity. If pedagogical reading is a kind of creative art-making, then one sign that *it is*, is the depletion of resources from those that read and prepare to teach. Ignoring, forgetting, missing the students was one way to repose, to hold back what we did not have, what we had already spent. I longed for the simplicity of aesthetic experience in my return reading and so retreated from the students, whose presence would have undoubtedly been a complication, a demand to teach *otherwise* than we had already planned.

Our teaching plans were largely based on who we wanted and imagined the students to be, particular as writers, artists, and people on a journey of becoming. Missing the students is, to read absence another way, a tactical forgetting that not only granted us repose – and allowed us to reconnect to the text and thus preserve/perform a reading identity – it preserved the integrity of our artistic, pedagogical vision, embodied in the lesson plan. As teachers, the thought of ignoring the students is unethical, an abandonment of our duty to listen and care. As artists, ignoring the students preserved the integrity of our vision, and thus the long-for omnipotence of our inner wish affecting outer form (Milner, 1990; Block, 1995). After all, the lessons have been written (the

frames purchased, the paint delivered). We read our missing students as a mysterious absence, easily explained away by what the students *do*, specifically what they *do not do: talk*. But the missing students at once hides and allows for the *teacher's wish*: to read aesthetically, to turn to the text without the demands of pedagogy or the students, to carry out one's inner vision in practice, to not expend any additional psychic and emotional resources planning the lessons. In short, to be relieved of the pedagogical world after its creation. (Un)intentional forgetting allowed us to be alone.

### **Missing Words, Finding the Text**

During the second reading, Kinnel's cuttings helped me understand a potential difference between the first and second readings. On the same page as Oscar Wilde's epigraph, I pasted these lines from Kinnell (1971), which you have read before.

Is it the foot,  
which rubs the cobblestones  
and snakestones all its days, this lowliest  
of tongues, whose lick tracks tell  
our history of errors to the dust behind,  
which is the last trace in us  
of wings?

And is it  
the hen's nightmare, or her secret dream,  
to scratch the ground forever  
eating the minutes out of the grain of sand? (p. 21-22)

The mood and tone of the *Book of Nightmares* resonated strongly with my first reading of the text, filled as it was with both desire and anxiety. As the first reader, I felt like the lowly tongue treading the ground, trying to make a map of where I was, both as a reader and teacher. I read blindly, stuck in the mess of the territory. Iser's (1978) conception of reading as the fragile holding together of memory and projection describes our first reading, but doubly so. I was not only reading but trying to imagine pedagogy as well.

This helps to explain why I made so many comments in the text. Each one had, I hoped, the potential to set me on firmer ground. The first reading, I realized on the second reading, was a kind of production through absence. The many selves of reading, that I discussed earlier, emerged from the void – even the threat of the margins. I have said many times that I read and wrote my way into interesting reading and pedagogical identities – some helped me imagine pedagogy and some I kept to myself. The second reading (even the second reader) was able to observe this elaborate production from the outside and, through his own comparative repose, bear witness to the angst of the first reader. I do not want to suggest that the second reading was not productive of certain reading or teaching selves; but, overall, there were fewer unknowns, variables, whether those be the students, the text, or ourselves in the text. Scholars like Sumara (2002) and Hunsberger (1992) help us understand that re-reading is an opportunity to pay attention to nuance; it is a slow, disciplined, process of noticing, paying attention, adjustment. One is not so much occupied with the what, but the who and the how. Re-reading is reflective reading, in other words; even from a theoretical level, there is much less to say moment-by-moment; this does not mean insights cannot be made, only that thought is perhaps more focused and deliberate.

Consistent with theories of re-reading, both Steven and I found re-reading to bring a calmer demeanor. I did not need to comment in the text as frequently since I already knew where the plot goes *and* the general direction of our lessons, which supports further the claim that my initial commentary was, in part, a defense against nothingness -- of the anxiety of simply having nothing to say as a teacher. Reading my commentary from the first reading + Gantos felt frequently like stepping into an exclusionary conversation, one

had between two parties that one is not quite privy to.

I was both outside(r) and inside(r) to Gantos as a return reader; an overall decrease in commentary, I found, led to closer reading, understanding of and identification with Jack. It was pleasurable reading, private reading. We almost ceased to be teachers. In our own words, we were reading for ourselves. This was surprising, as I suspected that re-reading would feel more like a job or task with teaching so close at hand but I, like Steven, actually felt closer to Jack and his experiences. I was listening to Jack instead of thinking of what I was going to say, making my return more intimate. Because the comments were less frequent, the story had a more natural and organic flow – not all the stops and starts of our first reading. I found the second reading more pleasurable than the first, as did Steven, most likely because we were not as preoccupied with turning a reading experience into communicable knowledge to others. We were free, or felt free, to wander in thought.

Steven expresses this sentiment well in his distinction between pedagogical and aesthetic modes of reading. Because we had already planned to teach and designed lessons, he described his second reading as more aesthetically oriented, instead of pedagogically focused. He offered this explanation of the difference (referenced earlier as well).

The aesthetic has a superfluous feel to it that the pedagogical doesn't. When I read aesthetically, what I'm saying is that I can't teach it because there's – I would feel...not ashamed of teaching it -- but I would feel lost teaching it. Maybe ashamed and lost. I just mean that aesthetic things are hard to - something they feel like you are talking about thin air or you are bullshitting. Like when we talk about his writing style or those kinds of things -- to us we find it interesting. Could we form a lesson about that? Maybe not. I think we could only form a lesson about it if they were trying to write. If they were trying to write, maybe they would think it's interesting and maybe see some relevance. Other than that I think they would find it not interesting, because it's so, it's so, so -- I feel like

pedagogy is usually related to people's lives somehow? Or pedagogy tries to relate, it does more of a job of holding people's hands and relating than aesthetics does, which doesn't seem to relate. It seems to float. And it's okay with that. And when we have conversations about aesthetics, we are okay with that and don't have to explain ourselves as often about aesthetics. You know we don't have to give answers that are perfect. Where with pedagogy, typically we want people to be more lucid and to say logical things. And in aesthetics we don't. I can say I really like the line "the sun buttered the clouds" and you're not obliged to say why. And even if you do say why, I could just tell you "I don't know, I just really like that line." I mean I could tell you a couple things about it. It's original. I like taking a noun and making it into a verb. I could give you some reasons but at the same time, I don't have to in the aesthetic realm. I feel like they are different realms. In the pedagogical realm, I have to. I shouldn't mention it, unless I can. You don't ask questions that you can't answer in the realm of pedagogy. But you ask questions that you can't answer in aesthetics.

He felt the freedom to muse, ruminate in his second reading, to read and not have an immediate answer or something perfect to say about the text. We both felt the pleasure of having ill-formed, not quite thoughts about the text, and letting thoughts come in the time of reading, not necessarily the perceived immediate time of pedagogy. We both read in aesthetic time, not pedagogical time, partly because the *event* of pedagogy was less threatening (because we had already lesson planned) and partly because our urge to write in the text, to nail down meaning, a question, a direction, was muted in favor of the more open-ended, floating nature of thinking/reflecting without writing. Below, I would like to reference two extended examples that emerged from our reading journals about the second reading experience. Perhaps the text was most pedagogical when pedagogy disappeared.

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In between my first and second readings, I re-heard Borges's "The Poet's Creed" (1967/2002) – a lecture that changed my perceptions of Jack and influenced my re-reading of the text. I thought of these lines from Borges in particular.

I think of myself as being essentially a reader. As you are aware, I have ventured into writing; but I think that what I have read is far more important than what I have written. For one reads what one likes -- yet one writes not what one would like to write, but what one is able to write. (pp. 97-98)

And more:

The central fact of my life has been the existence of words and the possibility of weaving those words into poetry. At first, certainly, I was only a reader. Yet I think the happiness of a reader is beyond that of a writer, for a reader need feel no trouble, no anxiety: he is merely out for happiness. (p. 100)

The idea of being “just” a reader – essentially a reader – was, I thought, beautiful and I began to draw connections between Borges and Jack. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with being "just a" reader, as Borges indicates. Jack is a reader, for sure. An incredible reader, really. Instead of thinking of Jack as a failed writer, I began to imagine him as incredibly fortunate to have fallen in love with books at such an early age. Even if he fails as a writer he will always be -- maybe like Borges -- essentially a reader and awaiting a happy life. I began to see “the reader” as less a stage on the way to being a writer and more of a valuable/essential province in its own right.

Borges helped me see that I had overreacted at Jack's failed attempts to write (in the first reading). If Borges experiences anxiety and false starts, then surely Jack can too. At first, I wanted to shake Jack and say “just write you fool” whereas, in the second reading, I viewed his hesitancy as a natural part of his apprenticeship and perhaps a natural consequence of his love of books. If he did not love reading, if he did not love what others had written, then there would be no pressure, no anxiety, for he would not be participating in something great. But he loves reading. And he loves others who have written. Borges reminded me that with love comes pressure to measure up, as it were, to write something that one would also love reading. I began to see Jack's journey and even



his initial failure as a writer as wonderfully human, inevitable, even beautiful.

I did think about pedagogy, but only as a secondary concern. For example, with my re/reading of Gantos through Borges, I thought Steven and I might bring up the issue of “essentially” a reader, especially when discussing the relationship between consuming and producing art. My aesthetic engagement with the text thus served to fill in the fine shadings of the lesson we had already planned. One important difference was that, in our re-reading, aesthetic time was not subject to the ruptures and demands of pedagogical time. It seemed to obey its own time – what Hunsberger (1992) likens to the merger of outer and inner time – and thus subtly raise questions about the possibilities for pedagogical time.

In the reading journal, I took intellectual pleasure in getting close to the text without feeling compelled to connect to pedagogy:

"I spit up on the grass" (p. 15). Besides being wonderfully spare, this line obeys the adage (oft repeated in class and in the storytelling tradition) of show don't tell. It reminds me of Hemingway's advice that writing should be 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the reading experience, the other 7/8ths being supplied by the reader's imagination. Along this same line, I noticed how Gantos concluded chapters or sections with wonderfully spare and suggestive lines, leaving the reading to wonder what comes next (e.g., "and I was" on page 19). I took great pleasure in noticing these smaller details of craft.

Steven, as well, brought his identity as a writer to his second reading and took notice of Gantos's craft. In addition to claiming that his reading was far more aesthetic than pedagogical (with his ruminations on lines such as “clouds buttered by the sun”) he noted,

After Brandon and I had come up with questions and units which we wanted to discuss and extract from the memoir, this freed us to look at the memoir in other ways, to read unfettered of teaching agendas. Another example of my aesthetic ruminations while re-reading the memoir was trying to analyze how Jack's writing style had changed from his journal entries to the rest of the novel.

Steven was particularly fascinated with the *lack of change* and development that Jack shows from the ship's log entries to his current writing self. Steven pondered this lack of change in relation to his own growing development as a writer. He found that his prose style has changed dramatically in the short time he has been writing (7-10 years), growing from more to less ornate. Jack's journal entries (supposedly from the real ship's log) are somehow less adorned than his current prose. As I hinted at earlier in my gushing description of the *Martin Eden* scene, the prose of Jack's younger self is quite good, leading us to ponder more the psychological reasons for his writer's block. Even more, we wondered about the believability of it all. Are those the real entries? Did the older Gantos "doctor" his ship's log entries? If so, why?

Steven also noticed, the second time around, just how "tightly coiled" and concentrated Gantos's tale is.

What's interesting to me in the re-reading so far is just how much he must be cutting out of the memoir and how much, how concentrated it is. Clearly he found a story arc which was "I want to become a writer." And then so much of the novel is about wanting to become a writer to the point of ignoring everything else. I was thinking about craft and it's just a smart move. But in some ways it made me question, "well, did you always want to be a writer?" Is that all he thought about when he was that age? It wasn't just pure skepticism, I was just thinking about craft.

Steven concentrated his response, in his journal and in our conversations, on the consequence of craft. Gantos's story was so tightly woven that he could not help but notice what might be missing. For example, Steven noticed that *Hole* contains hardly any other characters. Gantos's mother and siblings never appear, though he mentions they exist. Further, if the story is about the growth of a writer, we found it odd that there was no excerpt of any of his earlier writings from childhood or any excerpts from his four-

part journal. It would have been nice, we both thought, to see evidence of this growth, in physical form. Perhaps Gantos should have included an appendix with older journal entries from his childhood? These questions were fascinating for us to think about. Why did Gantos make his story so streamline? So perfect? Was it a matter of readability? Were concentrated tales more likely to sell? Were essentialist lives, like the one Gantos seemed to be presenting to us, easier to swallow, to comprehend? Questions about Gantos's craft emanated from Steven's identity as a writer. He seemed to bring his own anxious becoming to our conversations about the second reading.

Unlike Gantos, I've never had the experience where I thought I sounded the same. I feel like I always change. Hopefully I am getting better. But usually when I look back on stuff [writing in the past], I realize that it was pretty bad. So, with Jack, I was like "wow, I'm impressed." His writing is already very good, so if his earlier stuff sounds good, it's like he's always been good. For me, it's been a process of trying to get good. And I've never in the process been like, "oh, my writing is good now." So I guess that's where it was hard to swallow. I was like, "he hasn't even written short stories, or anything. He hasn't been published and he already sounds exactly like he's been published for 30 years."

Steven wanted to see earlier journals from Gantos because he wanted to see himself in Gantos. He wanted to believe his journey to authorhood was still possible. During our discussion of possible omissions, we discussed pedagogy only sparingly. We needed, as Steven indicated earlier, to simply wander in the text, to graze in musings that may or may not connect to teaching. I wandered in thought as well as Jack was teaching me about reading as a thankful gathering. I have used this concept several times before in this dissertation, particularly in connection to the work of Alan Block (1995) and Robert Scholes (1989), who emphasize the autobiographical and intertextual character of reading experience. Jack was living the theory in his writing, bringing together theory and life narrative into a readable relationship. I wrote,

Jack points the reader to open doors that we can walk through – for the first time or as a return reader. Since reading Gantos, I have read Paul Bowles collection of stories *The Delicate Prey* and intend to read *Martin Eden* and Frank Conroy's *Stop Time*, a memoir Jack mentions during his first night at King's Court. In addition to being educative in this respect, Jack's inter-textual memoir also teaches us *how to read* and gives us a *model of reading* – to read Jack fully, we, too, must read the texts he reads and is nourished by. Reading *Martin Eden*, *Stop Time*, *Catcher in the Rye*, etc, the reader comes to a different, perhaps more nuanced, understanding of Jack and his story. Without knowing these other stories, our understanding of Jack is less than it might otherwise be. Jack, the essential reader, the lover of stories, writes in a way that makes the reader gather texts together. The memoir nudges us to *practice reading in a certain way*. Surrendering to the nudge, the reader understands in this and later contexts that *reading* is a (hopefully thankful) gathering, a piecing together of texts.

### A Reader's Vortex

I was struck by how much the second reading was characterized by pleasure and wandering and not the immediate pressure of analysis or of finding or imagining a relation/relevance between the text and the students. In the margins, I noted several times two simple dichotomies (at the risk of over-simplification):

Logos v. eros  
Insanity v. pleasure

The pressure to have something to say about the text, as was present in the first reading, was muted during re-reading. I was an eager listener the second time around and enjoyed the story all the more for it. In our discussion, I noticed a potential link between Steven's distinction of the pedagogical from the aesthetic and my dichotomy of logos and eros.

That relates strongly to my dichotomy between logos and eros, which is probably a little too simple, but I think it does relate because if you think of *eros* being a union [right] an attraction that you...um...and logos being dependent upon analysis, breaking apart, to separate. But eros being this strange merger of two different parties. There are a lot of different ways to define eros but that might be one of them. This goes back to something that I think you said -- this idea of an inkling versus a thought. You're reaction to the buttered clouds. You don't have to explain that. There's a visceral quality to it that you might not be able to explain or that takes time to understand. You don't have to put words to it immediately.

The oppositions we were thinking through suggested that if a reader's relationship with a text were characterized by *eros* or *union*, then explaining the text destroyed the text, destroyed the merger. "Sometimes the parts of the text don't equal the whole of the text," Steven noted. The whole of the text – our experience of reading – is more than we can analyze, split up, make intelligible. This connects in interesting ways to the practice of commonplace making and pedagogical time as discussed in the previous chapter. The second reading taught us about the first.

Though we readily admitted that the commonplace book offered much in terms of reading engagement, enjoyment and the benefits of archiving, it created a situation that demanded words – a lot of *written* words. My relationship with my commonplace is a particularly good example of a reader and teacher feeling anxiety about not having enough words. The imagined fullness of the commonplace – its excess, its spilling out with abundance – created a productive but, in some ways im/possible and unlivable relationship. I had a lot to say about the text, the imagined students and the teachers the first read through, but was I *connected to the text*? *Did I know the text*? Does a possible absence of connection explain the perceived intimacy and connection during re-reading, when the time of reading was more ambiguous, more aesthetic, when the map of teaching had already been written? Was I more connected to the text when holding back my commentary? Perhaps most importantly, did we lose the story in the first moment? In focusing on the students and ourselves, did Gantos disappear?

We tried to understand the first reading by understanding the second. Both Steven and I tried to articulate an orientation that we had to the text the second time around. As indicated earlier, Steven described his as *aesthetic*, as a turn away from the pedagogical.

I really didn't think that much about pedagogy the second time. I think part of it was just the fact that we had lesson planned and I wasn't really worried about it. We already knew what we are going to talk about. I was thinking to myself, "*if we are going to re-read this, I need more. I need to get more about of this, so I had to turn on the aesthetic radar.*" Because otherwise, if I were just reading for pedagogy, it would have been a really boring read.

I agreed with Steven but could not quite name the orientation. It was a mysterious kind of reverence for the text. A necessary silence. The need to fill oneself with the text. But, unlike my prior images of eating the text, consuming it entirely in an obsessed mode of knowledge accumulation, this orientation maintained a relation, not a threatening consumption, and thus preserved both the text and the reader.

I had the same feeling you did. It's hard for me to put this into words -- but I thought that if *I'm going to teach this, I'm going to have to get something out of it for me*. But I had the feeling, the inkling [right] that I had to put on a different skin with the second reading. And I don't know what that means right now.

Steven: just because you were reading it a second time?

Brandon: well there's that but also there was the feeling that I had to relate to the text differently if I was going to teach this well. And I don't know exactly what that means but it might have to do with the tension I set up between logos and eros, maybe -- I'm not exactly sure.

To wrap our heads around the notion of the aesthetic and "relating to the text differently," we discussed the possibility that, during the first reading and unlike the second reading, we were writing ourselves out of the text and out of thought. Perhaps, like the initial readers we wanted to abandon, we (especially me) exhausted everything – the text, the students, ourselves – in the margins. We left no room for the organic, ambiguously timed nature of thinking, the iterative/recursive character of aesthetic experience. The margins collect their fullness *in time*, not all at once. The way I oriented to pedagogy and the students shaped how I thought of the margins: as that which demands a response, an answer, out of organic time and prematurely. Writing in the text, filling the margins

before their time, unnecessarily sped up the time of reading and forced pre-mature thinking, even thinking that was too committed, too anxious to find the immediately fully thought, to accommodate ambiguity.

Steven: do you think when you read it the first time you were so pedagogically oriented towards it that you didn't have a good connection with it and that would effect your teaching, I guess?

Brandon: I think the first time I felt lost; well maybe that's not the best word. In some ways I was connected to the text and in some ways I wasn't because I was commenting on a lot of things. I felt lost, like the feeling of having to have something to say, but not knowing what to say. That just caused me to spread myself too thin. It's not that I didn't have a connection to the text but...

I read echoes of what I called the “last reader” in this conversation. At certain points, yes, there was a connection to the text, but several reading moments were occupied – as Alan Block (1995) might phrase it – with the obsessive reader hunting, mining for perfect textual knowledge, destroying any hope of knowing the text, the reader, or pedagogy more clearly. The second reading experience pointed to the possibility that the hunting, the wanting of words, of meaning, destroyed meaning. To want “inside the text” put a wall around the text. Steven summoned his experience writing his novel to support this point. His main character, Stubb, is challenged by his father to write an Aesop's fable at the beginning of the novel.

I agree, your own comments can kind of disrupt your understanding of a text or at least can disrupt maybe the holes you can create to let it [the text] seep in. Interestingly, this kind of relates to creative writing for me. I've been trying to write a chapter about the fables. When the main character finally gets his fable right, in one of the last chapters, he writes a fable in which he doesn't put the moral in [at the end]. He finds that freeing because he asks, “how will the moral get through unless I leave a hole for it to get through?” If he writes the moral in, he'll never do the moral in real life. It's too perfect, too closed up. He's already written all about it. But, if he leaves the moral out, he can actually enact the moral in real life. There has to be a hole. And to connect it to our work, I feel like if you write about something so much when you are reading it, it can prevent you from having any thoughts about it. Because you've already, already

Brandon: exhausted your words, right?

Steven: exhausted your words, exactly. In some ways, words are like a wall. Writing so much about the text in some ways walls off the text from yourself. So I guess if we are too immediate maybe with our reactions, that can wall us off from the text. We want to get them down and out. But, it's interesting how things grow gradually on us.

The commonplace and the students imagined presence forced me to *rush to conclusions*, to have the text thought out before its time. This suggests that the imagined students, in the first reading, were, again, threats to the reading self. In previous chapters, I wrote about how the students were perceived as a threat because of the possibility (ultimately imagined possibility) that they would not receive our readings of the text or engage with pedagogical questions that first engaged us. They were a threat to the adequacy of our imaginations and to the integrity of our reading experience. Our second reading, as interpreted here, suggests that the students are the figures that usher in pedagogical time. As a potential puncture to aesthetic time, the imagined students demand an account of that which is not yet thought (out). The students (pedagogical time) demand a reading before there is reading, before the body, full of sentences and moments, is in repose. But, it is important to note that pedagogical time, as noted here, is only the perception, the imagination of such time. It is not the actual experience of time in a classroom. What we experienced in our reading and thinking as a rupture between aesthetic and pedagogical time need not be, particularly as practiced. The students were only imagined as a threat, a position that has more to do with how Steven and I were embodying *teacher*. In the text, we were performing teacher as the figure of certainty, the (be)holder of words and thorough explanation. If teaching is a practice without any holes, then the text must be read *without* holes as well. Teaching *can* and often should center around questions,



inquiry, curiosity, not knowing. Our second reading of Gantos suggested that readers (and the text) would benefit from a similarly open aesthetic orientation. The teacher does not have to have every answer. One cannot read a text perfectly. Yet, I was performing reading and imagining pedagogy as if these were the demands place on me, the text, reading. This was thrown into further relief by the *repose* and pleasure of the second reading and the second reader. I was content to wallow in the unknown, the non-perfection of my thoughts, the healing pleasures of solitude. What if the first reading were more like the second? How would our lessons be different? Would the students still be read as threats?

As I write these words, I keep thinking about *nakedness*. In the second reading, we both took pleasure in the nakedness of reading, the nakedness of thinking, of reading experience that was okay with, as Steven suggests, floating and being relevant or not, of being coherent and fully formed or not. The second readers were okay with their own ordinariness and vulnerability; of writing and reading that obeyed an internal logic and time. I am reminded of William Carlos Williams's (1976) poem "Danse Russe" about solitude and nakedness. The poem is about reading and teaching.

If I when my wife is sleeping  
and the baby and Kathleen  
are sleeping

...

dance naked, grotesquely  
before my mirror  
waving my shirt round my head  
and singing softly to myself:  
"I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!"  
If I admire my arms, my face,

my shoulders, flanks, buttocks  
again the yellow drawn shades,--

Who shall say I am not  
the happy genius of my household? (lines 1-3, 8-19)

Words for the aesthetic come in time. The aesthetic orientation is full of possibility, yet potentially vulnerable to (the demands of) certainty. Reading (in) solitude invites thinking the text and oneself in time. In the first reading experience, we invited the students to participate in our strange dance of reading (what I called the robust pedagogical reader) but, at times, became aware that their presence might constitute a threat to the attachments we had formed to Gantos and, even, to ourselves. The second reading was interesting itself and communicated to me (and Steven) a hunger for aesthetic experience, a desire to once again return to an intimate solitude with the book; there was also the conviction, almost paradoxically, that ignoring the students and pedagogy would be, ultimately, good for pedagogy. *If I'm going to teach this well, I have to get something out of it for me.* This connects strongly to, again, Taubman's (2009) present iteration of re-conceptual curriculum work: that good teachers need to yield to their own intellectual energies, even when these lines of flight take us, ostensibly, away from the *what* and the *how to* of the lesson plan. But the second reading also taught me more about the first. I learned about the pleasures of solitude, of writing with the text in time instead of *all the time*, that sometimes the abundance of words reflects only the poverty of thought. Perhaps, finally, I learned that the time of pedagogy needs the character of aesthetic time. What if words for pedagogy came in time, like the aesthetic, instead of immediately and all the time? What if we allowed the holes in pedagogical reading to flourish? Would this invite the other, the student, in? By filling pedagogy with

endless words, what were we keeping out? If we can think pedagogy ambiguously with others, what might the text become then and who might teachers and students become?

If we are ever to learn to comfortably be with ourselves as readers and teachers, we must learn to be with ourselves *with others*. We cannot perpetually dance naked in front of mirrors. Solitude and repose are necessary, aesthetic reading experience is necessary, but, eventually, teachers will have to share those readings with others. And the sharing will be all the better if we make space for the other in our readings: the otherness of others and the otherness of the unknown, the not yet thought.

For us, ignoring the students allowed aesthetic time to flourish instead of pedagogical time. This orientation to the text perhaps made us better readers – we were able to notice features of Gantos that we had not noticed before. We felt, also, that orienting to the text aesthetically would make us better teachers, if for no other reason than assuming that “good” pedagogy requires a “good” connection to the text. I have not yet explored what happened to the text and our reading of it *after we taught the first lesson*. Did the students appear in the text? How so? How useful, in fact, was our aesthetic repose and orientation? Did it matter for teaching or was it only a matter of reviving our reading spirit? Of keeping us, as readers, alive?

## CHAPTER VI

### READING WHILE TEACHING, PART 2

*How to Teach Yourself Out of a Story – Feeling Naked without a Common Text to Come Between Us – Why are We Gathered Here Together? – Arriving Late to the Scene of Learning – Wanting the Students to Desire the Text – The Lesson is Done but What am I Supposed to Do?*

#### **Openings**

After re/reading the first 100 pages of Gantos, we finally taught the text to the students. As I will try to indicate below, the students were wonderful. They were not as silent as we thought. They participated in class. They brought the personal into the public by discussing what inspired their own artistic journeys and through writing creatively in class. A few even made beautiful commonplace books for their final project. On the surface, our lessons seemed a “success” – they participated, they thought, they wrote.

But, how did we read the second half of Gantos? After we taught the students the first half? I want to begin this chapter with a few brief thoughts in repose. My second reading was full of unexpected joy about, well, being wrong about our students. Far from silent, they were engaged and seemed to know as much as we did about our text. After our first teaching experience, I came away humbled and filled with a strange sense of the sacred, perhaps due to the unreadable nature of the other. Their strangeness, even excess, confirmed that certainty, reading perfectly, was a futile, unnecessary project. Because they participated, we were relieved of having all the answers. In *anticipatory reading*, we envisioned the students co-journeying with Gantos, as if our pedagogy would take them

somewhere they needed to go – as an artist, reader. After the first class, I sensed that they left for the journey before we arrived. Rather than taking them somewhere, they were waiting for us, the teachers, to arrive at the very place we wanted to take them.

Our late arrival to their learning filled me with both disappointment and excitement -- I knew I was participating in something that would change me even as I would never fully understand it. There was little time left to change our lesson plans. The students were doing good work in spite of us. All this provided a strange sense of relief when I returned to the text as a reader. I sensed that reading and teaching were, after all, shared work. The burden of reading, of speaking, of knowing, was not mine alone but bridged between us.

Initially, I was afraid of swallowing students in my interests, particularly the love of the book. I cannot help but think, after teaching them, of how self-important this anxiety seems. Like Natalie Goldberg (1986) thoughts on writing as passing through and not over-determining the self, our pedagogy was only a moment passing through the students. They were strong enough, again I sensed, to withstand any potential engulfment in books, poems, and the objects we loved. While I did not interview all of the students, I learned during and after the unit from a few that they enjoyed the story and enjoyed making things, alongside Gantos, in their own creative key. To worry about engulfing the students in pedagogy or in any one object assumes that they are incapable of learning, incapable of taking what is offered and working it into their already existing life. While I continually worried about the forces of attraction and repulsion with textual objects, the students did not seem to share my angst. They read, participated, created things. But, Gantos and this class was not their life, only a portion of it. They had lives to live and

other things to worry about. Their engagement with the work helped me see just how much I might be engulfed in pedagogy, in Gantos. The students, in maintaining an interest but not an over-attachment to their studies, made me sense that I was looking at pedagogy with the wrong eyes. I had earlier written too many times that this project would change how I read, teach, and *live*. This is due to my over-attachment to Pinar, Grumet and the re-conceptual curriculum tradition – an attachment that I am thankful for but whose claims I perhaps inflate (Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Pinar, 2004). Is every moment a complicated conversation with oneself? Not everything need engage one's learning story. Not every moment is a pivotal biographical moment. We can only remember, imagine, analyze and synthesize so much. Classroom pedagogy is not always a moment of overwhelming importance; but a brief gathering, in passing, that hopefully gives each gathered something useful with which to be on their way. Perhaps classroom pedagogy is not such a serious thing.

In the following chapter, I will begin by referencing a few key moments from the May 18<sup>th</sup> class meeting that influenced how I approached the text during the second reading in preparation for May 25<sup>th</sup>. What did we want out of the text during that “in-between” reading of last half of Gantos? And what we were (un)able to find? Throughout this chapter, I write through failure and ineptitude in my discussion of what we did and did not do pedagogically. This way of writing and thinking cuts against the grain of education discourses that are about knowing, certainty, and *how to do it* (Jardine, 1992; Wallin, 2007). I am writing an *unmethod* by exploring two exciting, related concepts: *naked pedagogy* and *belated pedagogy*. Naked pedagogy is about a most confusing and even threatening prospect for an English teacher: losing the text in class. *Is there a text in*

*this class?* Naked pedagogy takes Fish's question but has a different answer for why the text dissolves in the act of teaching. In short, naked pedagogy aims, to use Dewey's (1906) language in *The Child and the Curriculum*, at the child and the child's interests and, in the process, loses the text. The text disappeared from the May 18<sup>th</sup> meeting, from the ground of our intention, leaving us vulnerable, confused, and desperate to connect with the students and the text and, importantly, to communicate what cannot be said.

Belated pedagogy refers to teachers arriving late to the scene of reading. The belated teacher struggles to come to terms with the possibility that what is most important about pedagogy is giving students an excuse to read – without you, in solitude – making the gathering and the teaching expendable. We were faced with our own ineptitude because we wanted to occupy a redundant, useless, position. Like the author of the text, we wanted to be the *storyteller* – but the story had already been told by Gantos. The belated teacher, because he cannot utter the story and be the primary experience for the students, struggles with what to say, as the belated receiver, about his primary experience of the text. And so he reaches hopefully but with disappointment to “side avenues.” “Side things” are topics related to the text that might improve interpretative connection but are not themselves the text. Side things give us something to say and also spare us from our fears – of lacking speech when confronted with the text. This is one way the belated teacher overcomes his inability to have something to say about aesthetic things yet, ultimately, leaves him unfulfilled as a teacher and reader.

### **Naked Pedagogy: Wanting and Missing the Story**

Before our first class session, Steven and I returned *as readers* to the text. We wanted a closer connection to Gantos, uncluttered by too much writing or too much

thinking about pedagogy. Intimacy was pedagogically necessary. How can I teach something I am not connected to? How can I know something if I am not listening or if I am too concerned about interrupting with my own thought? The intimate return was also needed to maintain our sense of reading identity. I think of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: "[His] taste for books was an early one. As a child [Orlando] was sometimes found at midnight by a page still reading. [His parents] took his taper [light] away and he bred glow-worms to serve his purpose. They took the glow-worms away, and he almost burnt the house down with a tinder" (p. 55). I hungered for the object again, longed to be like the boy reading with a book in his lap. Commonplace book practices and thinking about teaching – these seemed like noise interrupting that longed for image. Following Borges's lead, I was *essentially* a reader. At the same time, it was an indulgence I could live with – and so could Steven – as reading in solitude held promise, or so we thought, for being a good teacher too. Good pedagogy was connected to being a good reader – to knowing and being connected to the text.

After the May 18<sup>th</sup> class period, Steven and I both came away with the feeling that we, as a class, did not talk that much about the story. We did not know, for example, how students felt about Jack, what parts resonated with or troubled them, how they identified or dis-identified with him, how they understood his journey to become an artist and if this understanding shaped their own understanding of themselves. Our interaction over the text seemed silent on these important matters. We did not collectively graze over the text. Part of the problem, we reasoned, was that we were not overly skilled in knowing how to linger with discussion questions. The students answers about Gantos were basically exactly like our own answers – which contributed to our feeling that we had nothing to



teach the students, that they were waiting for us to arrive at the place of learning and say “where have you been? We are already here.” We were unable to twist the question: well, have you thought about this? But what about...? Referring to May 18<sup>th</sup> and the reading and thinking I did in between that time and May 25<sup>th</sup>, we said:

Brandon: the presence of the students was better than I thought. Before we taught the students, if there was a power relationship between me and the students it would have been me on top and them on the bottom, like my knowledge and whatever is in excess of them. But then last week, my impression was...it's almost that poetic moment where you realize things are reversed. [yea, exactly] You realize in the middle of teaching that the students are in excess of you [right] and you have to do something about it but, in way, it's too late.

Steven: I think what we had over them was that we had history. When talking about Gantos, you knew a lot about commonplaces. You know a lot of history. What we didn't have was I guess secret knowledge, philosophic knowledge maybe. We weren't able to give them answers they weren't expecting.

Brandon: I mean they had the same knowledge that we had. It's almost like [answer wise] they gave us the answers that we would have given. So I was thinking, “well, you're right, I have nothing left to teach you. Go forth and prosper.”

The students' answers, combined with our inability to prolong the discussion and to let the text linger, left us with the sense that we did not spend much time on the story. We did not wander in the complexities of plot, character, or our journeys through the text. I felt that I had not communicated *who I was in the text* nor met the students through the text either. This was partly due to the unanticipated excess of the students. They knew what seemed like everything we wanted to teach them.

Secondly, our lesson missed the text because we privileged the students' creative practices (for example, through creative writing and “show and tell” activities) instead of focusing on readings of Gantos. Focusing on the students was intentional as we did not want to “nit pick” and kill the text; but in the process of bringing their own creative lives

into the class, the connections to Gantos went missing. The object disappeared. Lastly, a focus on students' creative lives helped Gantos go missing, but there were opportunities for making interpretive connections between the practices we were asking students to engage in and Gantos. But, Gantos vanished because we, the teachers, *announced* the connection between the students and Gantos and so spoke our way out of any common ground among the text, the students and us. Perhaps Dewey's dance flourishes in the unannounced space between the students and the curriculum proper. We were not leaving any holes for a connection. Let me say more below and fill out the dimensions of naked pedagogy.

May 18<sup>th</sup> began with "show and tell." We shared important books, music, art, or video that was important to us or inspired us. We wanted to begin with show and tell because Jack takes great pains to inspire himself along his journey to authorhood. We thought this would lead into an interesting discussion of how one relates to what one is inspired by. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, we reminded students to bring in something – music, literature, poetry, images, games, videos – that was important or inspired them. Before we began the activity, we made the mistake of revealing to the students too much of the pedagogical architecture behind it. When announcing the connection between what the students were doing and Gantos, we taught our way out of a connective discussion.

Brandon: one of the major ideas for Jack is that he takes great pains to be inspired by other artists. He goes on the road trip to visit Hemingway's house and Stephen Crane's house. So he's always kind of looking to be inspired and looking to writers and what he loves to give him fuel to write. So, in his journey to become an artist, I guess one of the first steps is falling in love with an art form, whatever that may be. And being inspired by people who have come before you. So that's kind of what inspired us to come up with the show and tell project. Um...

Steven: and we like the idea that it's also a journey of an artist and you all are in art school, so there's some kind of art form that you really want to produce and,

you know, what does it take to become an artist? What do you have to do? What is that journey? That is something that is interesting to us. And we thought we'd start off, as we talked about last class, by bringing in something that maybe lead you to your art form. Maybe something that lead you to doing what you want to do. So, did anyone bring in anything?

This pedagogical moment is similar to what we experienced reading to teach Gantos. By writing too much in the text, one can write their way out of having any thoughts about it. In the same way, announcing one's pedagogical intention can ruin any connection a student might make between themselves and the text. We framed "show and tell" and being inspired as one early step in the journey of the artist and even announced how Gantos had done the same. In saying as much, there was nothing more to say. We very well could have asked questions about the connection between what the students had brought in and the connection to Gantos. This, looking back, would have been an obvious way to hear from them how they were reading Gantos, how they felt about Gantos's struggles and if they could identify with them. *Who knows* what went missing here. Our anxiety about the silent students likely caused us to fill in all the gaps in the pedagogical space. We left no holes for the text and the students to meet each other. The text vanished. One irony to note here is that despite our intentions to do otherwise, we were teaching the text, to use Rosenblatt's language, efferently and not aesthetically. We announced facts about the text and so closed up the pedagogical hole for the students to use their experience of reading Gantos to connect to the "texts" they brought to class.

The lesson was very "personal" both for us and the students. But, without the text, we confronted each other on interesting but unfamiliar terms. The students participated beautifully in the lesson. They discussed in "show-and-tell" the art forms that moved or inspired them. Two students, Nate and Katelyn, brought in poetry that inspired them to

write their own. They even read their own work. One student brought in a violin that she played regularly and learned to play from her father. She even made a connection between listening to music and her culinary craft as a chef. Another student brought in a fashion magazine and pointed out styles that she mimicked and adjusted in her own creative work. Steven and I shared important novels that inspired us to read more and view literature a different way (*Cather in the Rye* and *Zorba the Greek*, respectively). It was the first time that semester that either the teachers or the students had revealed so much of themselves to each other. As much as we were present to each other, we were not present through the text – making for an awkward confrontation. Madeleine Grumet (1995) describes curriculum as the “mask of meaning” – the vehicle through which we play and trouble our identities even as we reveal ourselves to others. We play, reveal, choose, hide, protect. As the name implies – show and tell – there is a naked quality to this activity, even an absurd one. While we were getting to know each other, it seemed a little inappropriate, silly, because we had not yet shared anything together – like Gantos. *Where is this going? Why am I sharing this?* This was not the students’ fault. We were confronting each other without masks -- a curricular medium which allows a playful yet guarded coming together.

After the show and tell, we moved immediately to “creative practices” – there was no discussion of the potential relationship between what we shared and how this related to Gantos. So anxious about their imagined silence, we transitioned without reflection from inspiration to creative practices. We filled in the gaps so perfectly that the text and the *students through the text* vanished.

We did, thankfully, construct a curriculum that allowed students to discuss

creativity and be creative through writing. The students discussed their own creative practices with each other and the whole class. To jumpstart a discussion of Gantos and the memoir genre, students wrote a memory of a memorable meal. The stories they wrote, especially under the timed and spontaneous circumstances, were fantastic, full of detail, imagery, color – moderated alternatively by moods of joy and even pain. Such are the vagaries of eating, something we must do, sometimes alone and sometimes with others. I too participated with the students and wrote a short memory of eating with my mother and stepdad. Even though we were making things and “being creative,” we were not connecting this work in a robust way back to Gantos. We intended to connect our own memory writing to Gantos’s craft and our emerging understanding of the genre. Upon reading our memories, we should have asked immediately what the experience of writing them was like and how their understanding of Gantos had changed? What were the challenges that Gantos faced in crafting his story? Were these similar to or different from the challenges that you faced? Why do these challenges matter?

Those would have been good questions, and might have kept our particular text in view. It might have led to a discussion that integrated the students’ creative activity and their understanding of Gantos. Similar to show and tell, we let the students and ourselves repose in the residue of making and divulging without connecting to the text. Another opportunity lost. After the creative writing exercise, we skipped Gantos, and moved to genre with this whole group discussion question.

Based on your reading of *Hole in My Life* and your experience writing a memory, what is a memoir? How does memoir *both* borrow from *and* deviate from fiction?

Not a terrible question, but one can see how *Hole in my life* vanished. Our conversation centered almost exclusively on the genre of memoir, not the particular iteration Gantos

offered. Gantos fully disappeared when we discussed and played clips from the James Frey – Oprah controversy. While this helped us understand memoir, truth, and lies, Gantos was mentioned by us and the students only in passing.

Gantos was the excuse for gathering together but slipped from the common ground of our attention. This was due to the confluence of factors. We viewed creativity as the paramount curriculum concern. We did not want to re-enact our history of over-reading and killing the text. We viewed the students as makers and wanted them to make things. We spent so much time worrying about their silence that we rushed to fill in many gaps between what we were doing (for example, show and tell) and the story. Plus, there was Steven's concern with genre and defining the *rules of the game*.

Unexpectedly, we re-enacted a twisted version Jardine's (1992) technical-scientific-curriculum tale. In his version, the curriculum object is exhausted to the point where nothing need to be said. In our version, the object was exhausted before it appeared in the space we shared together. We named the connection before the students had a chance to connect – we rendered the students invisible *through the text*. Strange silence can be performed in pedagogical spaces, like ours, that valued creativity, students' artistic lives outside of the classroom space, and even allowed students to make things and share them! Connective tissue through the common text of Gantos was missing, thus rendering our space intimate, but on the wrong terms, and so connected but only in passing. Sumara's (1994) *The Literary Imagination and the Curriculum*, like Grumet's work on masks, positions the common text that we read together as the object through which we come to read ourselves, others and ourselves in relation to others. Without the common text, the possibilities of reading ourselves otherwise in relation to

others is minimized, if not lost. Without the common text, we came together to expose ourselves *and be the same*.

Steven and I confessed the strange phenomenon of missing the story. How did Gantos get so little attention? What happened? We were puzzled. This only fueled our desire to talk about the story as much as possible the next week. Even though the class on the 18<sup>th</sup> had otherwise gone well, we were anxious to reconnect with the text *with the students*. Although we wrote things, talked about our lives, discussed the genre of memoir, missing Gantos made us feel like frauds – what had we betrayed? Our preparation, certainly. The students who had diligently read the text. We also betrayed our own pedagogical identities to the point of not, *anymore*, feeling like a teacher. In this particular pedagogical moment, I was a teacher because of and through Gantos. I was bound to the text, as a reader and teacher. Sumara (1994) speaks of the importance of the relationship between reader and text in terms of pleasure and *giving the text away*. He writes,

it is clear that this experience of relationship with the literary text must be a pleasurable one, for it seems that the desire for one's children, one's friends, one's students to form relationship with them goes beyond the belief that reading is *good for them*. Although the reading of literary texts is promoted by some as a way in which to improve reading skills, to experience a particular cultural heritage, or to learn particular facts, it seems that all of those could be just as effectively learned through other experiences. No, it seems that those of us who have experienced what it is like to be *bound* to the literary text have found this a pleasurable experience. We desire it ourselves, and because pleasure is meant to be shared, we wish others to participate in similar experiences. (p. 34)

This urge to share in part explains how we designed the final project to be a commonplace. It explains my desire to see the reading experiences of the students. As a reader and a teacher, I wanted to see them desire the text, as I had desired it, to be fulfilled by the text, as I had been. Desire, fulfillment, even frustration can be witnessed

through the body, through speech, or through writing. *Do you love what I love? Were you moved as I was moved?* We wanted confirmation, through the text, that we had helped others be turned onto reading. We saw very little of the *students through the text*.

Because of this absence and because I entered the space largely bound to the text, I was lost; part of me was lost; not only had I failed to communicate about and share my love of the text, I had not been *read* by the students. I was alone without the recognition of the other.

Finally, we were naked because we were without the object. The love of the object, the book, has been central through this work. It is important for Jack in his journey to become a writer. Our commonplace books were central to our pedagogy, our identity as teachers and readers. We wanted to make them central, as well, for the students by creating the commonplace assessments. The *romance of the object* is something I have difficulty ignoring. It is everywhere. But not in our lesson – that is the inescapable irony. What, exactly, did we miss that I am mourning? During this dissertation, I have tried to talk about reading in ways that highlight the never exhaustible nature of the text. There is no final reading, only a timely reading by particular readers or communities of readers. In not meeting the students over the text, in losing the text, we missed the abundance of reading. One purpose of reading texts together is to learn about the object; by talking about the text with different readers and sharing different readings, we can learn more about the unthought-in-the-object (Sumara, 1994; 2002). While I agree that there is no such thing as an absolutely free reading – that readings are shaped by interpretive communities and the larger discourses that shape who readers are (Fish, 1980; Benn Michaels, 1980)– there is no such thing as an exhaustible text. In losing the



text, we missed a chance to experience the abundance of the text through the students.

### **Belated Pedagogy**

While the above is true, that we learn about texts by talking to other readers, and thus discover the abundance of the text, both Steven and I struggled with how to position ourselves as teachers related to the primary experience of reading a text. Reading the text seemed infinitely more important than being taught a text that you just read. We were struggling with what to do the second class period; we wanted to bring the text back into play, to see the students desire the text, to be moved by it. We were not sure how to make this happen. We were out of time. Or maybe in the wrong profession.

Steven: to me the hard part just keeps going back to literature. Every single time I teach literature, I think it's important to read it. I just think the important part is experiencing it. The important part is not me teaching it to you, it's your experience of reading. And teaching it is just to force you to read it. If you just read it, then that's important. That's what it's about. It's about you reading it, it's about your experience. Like 10 or 5 percent is me talking about it, afterwards.

Again, we were framing teaching as words emanating from our mouths. The teacher as central authority, speaking life into the pedagogical space, is a shared, historical discourse of teaching that we, unfortunately, we never quite able to shake, get outside of, or counter with more student-centered approaches. We were embodying the wrong kind of history, the wrong kind of theory. We were also aware of it. We did not want to *nit pick* the text. The fear that we just might kill reading for the students explains why we disavowed pedagogy's importance. Privileging the private reader lessens the threat of our pedagogical actions and also lessens the burden of not knowing what we are doing.

Our pedagogical confusion about what to do with the students or say to them was due to the tension between an abundant reading experience that had to be shared and finding a way to "get at the stuff" through pedagogy. We did not know how. In my

reading journals, I wrote about this tension, in the context of my concern about the lesson on ethics. If we began class 2 by discussing the three schools of ethics, I worried about venturing far afield from the story. We had already lost the story in class 1. I really wanted to get it back.

I noticed (or felt?) several times in this section the tension between my reading and teaching selves. As a reader, I frequently found myself caught up in the excitement of Gantos's stories or struck nearly speechless at his prose. I wanted to respond to these passages not only as a reader, but as a teacher too – with ideas for pedagogy.

I couldn't say anything. The prison seal [on *The Brother's K*] was stamped in blue in for both us to see. My heart was beating wildly. I had to keep that book. My entire identity as a writer was in that book. Everything I had written was squeezed between Dostoyevsky's lines, as if my words were his discards. But they were all I had. (p. 195)

And later,

I did get the ship's log back. Years later I had Newman request my court records, and the log and files were sent to me. But the Karamazov journal is gone. It was the biggest loss of writing I've ever suffered. Since then I've never lost a journal. (p. 200)

I want to communicate something about these passages to the students, but I'm unsure how to do so. What do I tell them? That I sat in my reading chair speechless for a few minutes? Letting the feeling and impression of the words flow over me? That I almost cried at what I thought were beautiful words? I feel foolish.

But I can't let it go. I continue to think about how to communicate my feelings about beautiful writing to students and have them feel, think about and communicate their own. I could ask them if any passages were similarly moving to them. Maybe we give dramatic readings of our favorite parts? Or, and this is a stretch of the pedagogical imagination, we could find some way – maybe through gesture or body movement, to express or translate our readings to others. We could find another medium besides words to show how our readings felt, etc...[When I write ideas like this down, I feel insecure or unsure about it. Like Gantos, I cross it off the list.] These are the questions and obstacles I struggle with as a teacher. Because I have been so moved as a reader, surely something, something, *something* of this ecstasy should trickle into the lesson. I almost feel like a fraud to do otherwise. Part of me thinks I need more courage or imagination to do something radical with pedagogy. I want to do something pedagogically that

gets at the nitty gritty stuff of the reading experience. Either I don't know how or am afraid to venture into this territory of the unknown. Wow, I sound like Gantos here. No courage or self-confidence. I guess we all have our moments when we think a giant turtle makes for a good story.

I wanted to share but did not know what to say. What this an instance of aesthetic things baffling speech or explanation? Was this a moment when what I wanted most defied how I thought teachers should perform? Was Atwell-Vasey right? Had I been swept up in a way of being teacher that had no room for emotions, for the body, for the unpredictable? Partly so. But it was also a question of wanting "private" experience to enter but not knowing how to let it enter the pedagogical space. I was stumbling onto something in this entry – performing scenes of the tale, reciting responses to the tale – these could potentially get at "the private stuff" of reading experience in ways that provide structure. But, we did not pursue these avenues – mostly because we were, well, late. We were out of time.

Steven admitted that we – students and teachers – needed to talk about how we were moved.

Like you said, it would feel weird or cheapened or false if you didn't talk about it. You know being excited about it or if you didn't talk about passages that you thought were really important and that resonated with you. I agree. I think we somehow have like a duty to talk about those. If literature is about some kind of effect...that it can have on the reader on uh personal level then that would be what we are doing. Trying to convey that.

He worried that our desires to share personal readings and reactions to Gantos would destroy them; that once announced, they would be cheapened and no longer have meaning. Pedagogical things are already dead, whereas "aesthetic things" are still moving in the reader.

for the stuff that we want to talk about pedagogically we can actually kill those things because in some aspects maybe they are already dead. Where the things

that you think are living, talk about them, see how people felt. Keep them in some aspects alive by not talking about them for too long. We're not forcing people to talk about them. It's not that you can't talk about them it's just that we're not forcing people to talk about them. Maybe. I don't know. It's tough for sure.

We had reached the limits of our competence. How do we share what moves us? "Can you teach passion?" Steven asked. We were afraid that talking about the connection would kill the connection. We were also aware that sharing what moved us would make us appear foolish, out of control, even out of knowledge. How do we get at and share our reading experiences? Our plan was not really a plan at all. To the students, we would confess our incompetence by "going meta," a phrase we used to describe when we, as teachers, would reveal our pedagogical desires – to connect with the students over the story, to take a peek at what they thought of the book. Lacking the ability (and perhaps time) to create pedagogical structures – for example, acting out a scene from the book or performing a reader's theatre of their commonplace entries – through which the students could interpret, share, read and by read by others through the text, we would just admit what we most wanted and maybe, out of pity, they would give it to us.

Steven: we should probably...we could just be meta man, we could just tell them about teaching, if you wanted to. We could just be like well, Brandon's project is really about teaching, and we might as well tell you a little about teaching, some of the process. When we read this book, it wasn't just for our personal enjoyment. I mean we might read something that we really love but it's also about what can we convey to other people? How can we communicate to other people? How can we pass knowledge down, if there's knowledge to be gained? And that's something you have to take into account when you are teaching. You can't just teach what you really like, sometimes, because sometimes you can't really say things about what you really like. I mean so then we could talk about why we selected Gantos and we can ask them questions about what they're thinking about it, how they feel about it. I mean we could just be meta, you know? There's nothing wrong with it. I've never been meta teaching, so it would be interesting. I've already given up...see it's interesting, like in teaching, I think you can only give up the sense that you know what you are doing once. Once you do it's just gone. I feel like I've already given up the sense that I know what I'm doing in that class.

Steven felt like a fraud teaching Gantos because, like me, he lacked experience teaching that particular text. He had only read the text one time. Unlike me, Gantos was not his life – he had other classes to teach, novels to write. He did not feel like an expert. I had read about memoir and other texts by Gantos before our unit began. Steven did not and so felt less qualified to make any statements about Gantos. He was faking his way through, performing as knower in front of the students. While he understood, and even shared, my desire to know more about the students’ feelings and thoughts about Gantos – to graze with them over the text – this was like admitting pedagogical defeat. The only way we imagined “getting at the nitty gritty” of the students’ reading experience was by asking them directly. We were yet again naked and were asking the students to be the same. Of course, this approach did not work. The following day, both Steven and I attempted to ask but, not surprisingly, did not ourselves reveal what we were asking students to reveal.

Steven: Another thing we wanted to ask, we just wanted to kind of open up, because last time we did not talk about the story. We talked a lot about different side avenues, so we wanted to open up this time just to talk about the story and see what people thought of the story. If they enjoyed it, if they, what there kind of reactions were to the memoir, as far as a piece of literature. Did you like it? Did you actually like it?

One brave student answered this impossible question. “I did like it...because it was different. Different from the other stuff that we’ve read this semester.” We pressed for more details but not much else was forthcoming. We talked briefly about style, how we would measure Gantos on Steven’s prose axis (spare versus ornate) – the students agreed that Gantos was easier and more enjoyable to read than other texts read during the same quarter. But I would not give up.

Brandon: we wanted to know if you liked it or not because...I guess we will tell you a little bit of the background to the project and what thoughts went into our

choices. We started thinking about this project over a year ago and at first... I then told them a few of the details I wrote about in the introduction. When this project did not include students, we wanted to read *At Swim Two Birds* or *Moon Tiger*. After deciding that I needed to teach the text to someone, we had to consider the interests of others. I told them that we considered a Shakespeare play, a graphic novel and even a series of novellas, but *Hole in My Life* seemed to offer something for everyone.

Brandon: we stumbled on *Hole in My Life* because a friend of mine, who knew about the project, recommended it. And it seemed to cater to our interests, being artists and writing, and also it seemed to...

Steven: cater to your own [the students] interests as well, like it's about a journey of an artist and we liked that because our students, you, are becoming artists. We were like "that's good. We like that parallel."

Brandon: there seemed to be a nice bridge between what we liked and what you might like.

Steven: Jack is smuggling pot which brings up a great ethical dilemma...and it had a very readable quality to it. And I felt like you would get into the book because it's spare but then he has some great similes as well. It's spare but poetic at the same time. So we kind of wondered whether or not it was a good choice. So we thought that we would just ask if it was a worthy choice or not.

A few students raised their hand to indicate that they enjoyed the book. By that point, it felt so pointless to be talking and pursuing it any further. "Okay, well, there might be a few more out there." I laughed and so did many of the students. We then moved quickly to the next activity and away from the story – ethics.

Our attempt to get at the "nitty gritty" of reading experience failed, in part, because we were providing students with no structure, no form. In "opening up" the lesson – these were the very words Steven used – we took away all textual threads for the students to hold onto. Had we asked the students – ahead of time – to act out a scene or dramatically read an entry from their commonplace books, maybe then we would have

“scene” the students interpreting and enjoying the text – inflecting Gantos through their own emotions, bodies, feelings (Atwell-Vasey, 1998). But, we could not structure our desires or the students’. The result was that nothing was said or done, really, about the text – and we remained strangers to the text, to each other, and to each other through the text.

But, we were also unwilling to give an example to the students of the kind of intimate readings we wanted. Where was I? I could have told the students about my profound sense of speechlessness at the end of the book. How I had experienced a profound sense of loss when I read about Gantos’s lost commonplace book and how this had resonated with my own fear about losing my own commonplace book. Would the students feel a similar loss at losing their own copies? Perhaps, like Steven, I would have felt foolish at losing such pedagogical control by being vulnerable, even through the prism of the text.

But, we did have the ethics and other side avenues to rescue us. We could talk about things that were already dead. The night before, Steven summed it up well.

Last night and today I looked at the ethics stuff. I was like okay, this is a path we could take. There's knowledge or categories of knowledge here. I like philosophy but then at the same time this will give us something to talk about. But it is different from talking about the book though. I realize that. But I guess from a pedagogical standpoint, I'm glad we have the ethics part because that gave me something to latch onto, to teach because...I do not know how to teach the memoir. I don't know how to teach the second half of the memoir, with out doing side avenues.

As more solid knowledge, and not the messy, ambiguous stuff of reading experience, philosophy was easier to teach. We began to wonder about the difficulty of teaching literature compared to the ostensible ease of teaching philosophy or even history – as we had experienced teaching these disciplines. What philosophy and history offered were

events and facts that the teacher could animate and make come to life for a class – through narrative structure. As an echo of our opening tales, teaching history or philosophy allowed us to become Herodotus for the students, making difficult or dry subjects come to life through an authorial presence. I thought of my teaching memory of reading *The Things They Carried* to the students. That moment felt like teaching more than any other, I said.

Steven and I were both frustrated teachers. Our pedagogy took us and the students far away from the text. We were caught between three nodes of literature pedagogy – *being the text* through reading to the students (as I had done with *Things* or as Steven did with history or philosophy); ignoring the text through side avenues; or killing the text through over-reading. We realized that we simply did not know how to be with the text with others. We missed reading the text through the students and we missed the students through the text.

Wanting to *be the text* speaks to the larger issues of creativity and the work of teaching. Wanting to be the text, in some ways, relieves of the burden of being creative. Reading to students gives one a kind of omnipotence (listen to my voice, my rhythms, my language) – the omnipotence of Tom Crick in *Waterland*, the novel referenced in my stories -- without the burden of making or saying a single new thing. It relieves the burden of the *poetics* of teaching, as described by Hansen (2004). This fantasy also allows one to not kill the text through over-reading. *Being the text* allows a teacher to honor the mystery of aesthetic experience, letting words fall over the students –with enough holes for the text to get through. It also relieves us, temporarily at least, of the burden of what others think is degrading work (Taubman, 2009). I am not a manager of



data, of kids, or a belated deliverer of someone else ideas – namely the author. Reading to students, in addition to all of these things, allows me to become what I will never, I worry, create.

All of these “benefits”, of course, were impossible to realize in our classroom. The students have already read the text. Our desires to be the text had already been usurped by, simply, the way school is practiced. Students come to class already having experienced what we wanted to give them. In history or philosophy, we perhaps can be the storyteller. But, in literature, we cannot – the story has already been told and read. The pedagogical position of the storyteller, in the case of teaching literature, is redundant – and though it might hide my speechlessness about the text, my embarrassment of sharing private readings, the ineptitude at missing the text through side avenues, it is simply not needed. Our desire for authorship was frustrated because of the object of desire. We mourned the loss of the very thing we felt competent to do. We were teaching the wrong subject.

### **Closings**

“Are stories enough? Or, in order to teach, do supplementary texts have to be used in order to give the book a pedagogical or practical edge?” Steven’s journal reflections led to a brief exchange about wanting stories but retreating from them.

Brandon: your last question is central. Are stories enough or do supplementary texts have to be used?

Steven: I feel like we want stories to be enough.

Brandon: I think they are enough, just in other settings.

Steven: exactly. I think the problem is that if you are teaching them, they aren't enough. Unless you are a great, great, great teacher, maybe.

Brandon: yeah, maybe I'm not a great teacher. My imagination is at the limits.

Steven: well I feel like we don't know; I don't know if we are inexperienced or if it's just not possible. I don't know if it's possible for a teacher to talk about a book without really going into these side avenues.

Brandon: or to nit pick

Steven: yeah or to nit pick

Brandon: I don't think we've really nit picked, but at the same time we didn't really focus on the story. [ah, that's true] So we have to find a balance.

Although I earlier framed reading as a thankful gathering, the “other texts” of pedagogy ended up being a distraction from Gantos. For example, the creative practices, lessons of genre, ethics – all these led us, as a class, away from Gantos. While these texts may have enhanced meaning, they ended up robbing us of connecting with the text via each other and connecting with each other via the texts. The other texts, thus, cut the relational strings of pedagogy and cast a strangeness over our ritual gatherings. We were compelled to ask, *why again are we here?* While reading is intertextual and teaching might involve a poetic weaving of texts together, de-centering pedagogical work from *the text* risks getting lost to the point of not knowing how to find your way back, of exposing yourself through “the personal” and losing the intertextual, hermeneutic possibility of gathering over a common object (Sumara, 1994; Grumet, 1995).

Despite my misgivings, the ethics lesson was, in many ways, the “best” lesson of the quarter. The students got more into our conversation about right, wrong, duty, pleasure, happiness than any other topic. We discussed, as mentioned earlier, Kantianism (duty ethics), Utilitarianism, and Virtue Ethics. Felicitously, we went over the definitions of each school and then gave a few examples of “ethical dilemmas” to test how each school of ethics would evaluate a situation. The students seemed to enjoy these *new ways*

of reading the world, of simplifying complicated moral situations from an outside system of thought. We then applied these theories to Gantos. How would you evaluate Jack from a duty ethics perspective? *He lied, he treated others as a means and not an end, he's wrong.*

Far from eliciting a complicated conversation about the text, these ethical theories, when applied to Gantos, made it so that nothing more need be said about the text. We had reduced rich aesthetic experience as described by Rosenblatt to a thing, an object. Curriculum, as seen from a re-conceptualist perspective (Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Pinar, 2004) is a complicated conversation with oneself and with others about the world, including textual objects. Turning to ethical theories to make sense of the text did not, it seemed, complicate a thing. There were no *poetics of teaching*, as described by Hansen, happening here. The story, the word, was already spoken before we arrived on the scene.

## CHAPTER VII

### READING TOGETHER

*Thanking the Students, Steven – Who are We Teaching For? – The Promise of Dancing with the Students and the Curriculum – Teaching as Immersion in Reading – How to “Midwife” the Text – Being a “Good Enough Teacher”*

Disillusionment, which tolerates and even enjoys interpretation, arrives on its own schedule if it is not to shatter the subject. The achievement of the capacity to tolerate disillusionment enlarges our hopes for the future and for choices because both the past and the present can be more fully experienced, and wishes can be distinguished from reality. Our capacity to think begins with our tolerance of disillusionment. – Alice Pitt, *The Play of the Personal*, p. 91

Think of the repugnance one often feels for a text that is recently completed. There, clinging to all the lines, are shred of the ideas that never quite made it to expression, fragments of the negative example, the other possibility, that the sentence, the chapter, the ideology, the deadline, the habit, the defense mechanism just could not admit. Only time and forgetfulness smooth these rough edges so that we no longer remember what has been left behind, and then the text that has seemed so partial, merely provisional, prevarication, becomes THE TEXT, clear, complete, necessary, and sufficient. – Madeleine Grumet, *Bitter Milk*, p. 145

I write this amidst feelings of profound thankfulness, especially to the students who allowed me to enter their educational worlds for a brief moment in time. From them, I learned that the arts continue to inspire our expression, thinking, and action into new ways of being with ourselves and with others. One student, Katelyn, was inspired to keep a commonplace book out of her copy of Gantos. After I showed the students how I destroyed my book, she destroyed hers, copying the original pages into a spiraled-bound notebook – giving her the margins needed for two worlds to interact and for each to change the other. I asked her what she thought of her commonplace book and of Gantos. After keeping a commonplace book and reading about Gantos’s journey, she wanted to

take up writing again. It had been a few years since she had written and published poems, and she wanted to make writing a more sustained and regular part of her life. I hope she is still writing.

I am most grateful for Steven's contributions to this study. Teaching can be lonely work due to the organizational structures that shape how we spend our time (more immediately demands, more testing preparation, less reflection with ourselves or others) and due to the discourse that conflates apprenticeship with expertise. We have all been students. Therefore, we "know" how to be teachers, so there is no need to talk to each other. I sense, too, that because of a resistance to thinking about teaching as a set of predictable, best practices (Taubman, 2009) we just might view teaching as a creative art. In this case there is less impetus to talk to each other about our practice: teaching is simply too idiosyncratic, situational, and dynamic for sharing and thinking together to do much of anything. So the thinking goes.

Thinking with Steven about reading and teaching and *doing* teaching with Steven was a profound gift. As I have tried to indicate in these pages, our collaboration – complete with small victories and missteps – helped me think reading, teaching and learning differently. Such a space for thinking about one's experience of reading and teaching is unusual in the "audit culture" climate of our schools (Taubman, 2009). Space and time is needed if teachers are to examine their histories and desires or direct their intentionality towards different practices.

Re-reading this work has also provoked my resistance, even disappointment, at what is not here. As much as this project was an investigation in the phenomenon of reading to teach, it was also, secretly perhaps, an intervention – that hopefully I could

somehow, anyhow do better with the text with others. Could Steven and I untie the knot of our discomfort with pedagogy – could he learn to love what perhaps we wanted no part of? And did I face the same question? Could we do and be with pedagogy in such a way that it could fit into a creative life, facilitating those other forms of creative work that we wanted? I have few tidy answers.

In *Bitter Milk*, Madeleine Grumet (1988) suggests that teaching a text to others involves the present moment – *this text, this particular reading, these students, in this room* – but also our past experiences with literature, with learning, with authority. While we cannot completely wiggle out of the past – why would we want to? – an unacknowledged past too much with us can trap teachers and students in (textual) transference. The occasion of Grumet’s writing was her reading a book about literature pedagogy. This text, she writes, ignored the persons and context of pedagogy in favor of textual criticism. When reading a text that ignored her, Grumet felt herself as the undergraduate student late to lecture, waiting to listen about the various contours of inadequacy in her own readings even as the professor gazed at no one in particular. She calls this the phantom gaze: “when we follow the gaze of the Cambridge lecturers we find it fastened not on the children seated before them but on the phallic order in which the identity of the parent has been constituted, and castrated. If this text displays an approach, as its editors suggest, it also displays an avoidance. As each lecture approaches a text, it also petitions the phantom in an attempt to wrest phallic authority from a conventional or established reading” (p. 126). Performing as textual authority is a re-enactment of the scenes of our own helplessness – with teachers, with parents, with knowledge – but with the twist of textual competence as the long-awaited for

compensation. Those primal scenes return in the present, but now the professors (the Cambridge lecturers, even me) have answers. “And if teaching the text calls on us to struggle for the ownership of meaning with our own parents, wouldn’t it be decent to confess that they are the ones we see when we lean across the podium to teach the twenty-year-olds who are our students” (p. 126).

Just who was I staring at? Our efforts to avoid “over-reading” or “nit-picking” the text – to do anything but over-analyze and explain the text – was my unacknowledged way of wriggling out of the transference. I did not want to destroy what had, ostensibly in other times and places, been destroyed for me. When I listen back over the tapes, I am struck by how much of the conversation about the text was between Steven and me – and not the students. This was quite contrary to our intentions. We acknowledged in moments of reflection how challenging it was to negotiate silences and questions with the students and each other. When a question was posed, a student would answer and instead of letting them respond off of one another, one of us would step in prematurely and, many times, affirm the answer or add depth to satisfy our notions of completion. We acknowledged that having more experience teaching together would have helped. Perhaps we would have let more silences linger, creating gaps for students to enter. But I think I am letting the illusion linger. When I hear myself talking to the students, I cannot help but hear, even feel, my deep pleasure of reading and explaining the text. But, who am I explaining (myself) to? Even though the students are present, Grumet suggests that I hope someone else is listening.

If teachers recognize the interpretive struggles that infuse reading texts and teaching others, we must still attend to the students in the room. A continual challenge for

Steven and me was thinking about how to connect the curriculum to student interests and literacies. How does one find or create bridges? This is an ongoing struggle in education pointed to by different names: the poetics of teaching (Hansen, 2004), culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994), currere (Pinar & Grumet, 1976), in-school/out-of-school literacies (Compton-Lilly, 2006), third space (Gutierrez, 2008). To dance between curriculum and students requires that meaning always be “in play,” through an always generative present.

Grumet (1993) noted that this generativity – the play of meaning – is fundamentally a part, and the art, of teaching. Weaving together tradition and the new; the given and the possible; home and school; manifest and latent content is the work of curriculum. These form – or should – the agon of every lesson, lecture, and discussion. As middle places, teachers must look in two directions: the demands of the public world (citizenship, work, even salvation) and those private worlds that students carry with them into every text, worksheet or show and tell.

But this dance is not easy to do. Steven and I imagined that the commonplace books might be an occasion for students to play with meaning, to inflect their readings of Gantos through artistic media that suited them. This worked to some degree. For the final projects, one student wrote a screenplay (that later turned into a video) that adapted a scene where Jack is talking to the prison psychologist. The student imagined Jack’s body language and gestures as indicative of his lack of inner transformation, announced by his telling the psychologist what he thought he wanted to hear. The student’s interpretation of the scene – how he positioned bodies particularly – lent Jack’s conversation a degree of forced unnaturalness that I would never have imagined. The student’s reading helped me



read into the play of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

On my last day at the school – when students were turning in their final Gantos projects – I was sitting next to a student and saw her holding her copy of *Hole* and noticed that she folded sheets of paper into the spine. She seemed to have the final assignment ready to turn in, yet I could not remember teaching this student. She had not been to class for at least 3 weeks – the whole time I was teaching Gantos with Steven. She had obviously been to class at least once during the quarter to pick up her copy of the book and must have looked up the final assignment on Blackboard or received the scoop from a friend. I asked her how she liked the book. She said “fine,” adding that she appreciated Jack’s quirky character and some of the funny parts. “It’s an enjoyable read.” I asked her what she was studying and she said “animation” – but quickly added that her real passion was writing. “What do you write?” My interest was piqued. “I need to finish up some short stories.” I did not know what to say. “And I’ve written some novels too.”

I was thankful for this conversation. But shocked. This student, whose name I did not know, who seldom came to class, was writing. So much for the students having nothing to say. In *The Professor of Desire*, Philip Roth (1977) writes, “[M]any of us survive almost solely on Kafka. Including people in the street who have never read a word of his. They look at one another when something happens, and they say, ‘It’s Kafka.’ Meaning, ‘That’s the way it goes here now.’ Meaning ‘What else did you expect?’” (p. 115).

When I got home, I looked at her copy of Gantos and the assignments she had

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<sup>12</sup> This was one instance of reading the text through the students. Unfortunately, this particular student was not able to show his video or present his screenplay to his classmates as he was sick during the last day of class. I watched his video with a sense of belated possibility about what the sharing of his work could have done for our collective grazing over the text.

turned in. I could tell she made an effort but there were no material signs of engagement – like crinkled pages, marginalia, a worn spine – of sinking her teeth into the book, of letting it take her to unknown places. She had turned something in. She would earn points; but I was not sure if she had learned anything; what of her story did she bring to Jack and what did Jack’s story do to hers? Maybe nothing at all.

But what else did I expect? Schools and curriculum have a rich history of missing, even alienating, students (Pinar, 2004; Slattery, 2006). Steven told me her name was Anna and this was not her first time taking English 102. She had taken it the semester before with another instructor and failed. She had taken 101 twice as well. Anna seemed like a good example of a student who brought into our class a long history of being ignored in the curriculum as a student. She was a writer and yet we were not able to attract and hold her interest. It made me think of Steven’s notion that pedagogical things just might be already dead; perhaps she was wise to keep her writing – what was alive and still forming – away from the place. And yet we want schools to be places and moments of profound exploration, sharing and learning. We cannot, and should not, let it go. I keep thinking about those lines from *Hole in My Life* when Jack wants to read and write books that will change himself and others (p. 61).

Scholars of literature pedagogy (Hillis Miller, 2002; Wilhelm, 2008; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011; Bruns, 2011) continue to think about the possibilities of framing the object, the book, as enticing, as an occasion to get lost in another world and so discover otherness, both in the world and in yourself. Against this mode of engagement, what Bruns calls the “immersive mode,” is critical literacy (Mission & Morgan, 2005). I use the term “critical literacy” broadly to describe a “distanced” mode of reading concerned

with how texts work and the views of the world they reproduce. Hillis Miller (2002) describes these modes as “rhetorical reading” and “cultural studies” – while they are certainly necessary, he is concerned that these modes of criticism might ruin the transformative effect that literature can have on a reader. He writes that “both forms of critique [...] have as one of their effects depriving literary works for given readers, of the sovereign power they have when they are read *allegro* [...] no doubt about it, these two forms of critical reading, rhetorical reading and cultural studies, have contributed to the death of literature” (p. 59). There is a time and place for the distanced, suspicious spirit (Mission & Morgan, 2005). But authors like Burns (2011), Wilhelm (2008) and Hillis Miller (2002) worry that if this is our primary means of orienting to texts – treating them as objects to be de-mystified or criticized, then we lose the potential that some texts have of transforming us. This is the difference between what C.S. Lewis (1961) called “receiving” the text and “using” the text. Receiving a text is akin to Rosenblatt’s (1994) notion of the aesthetic transaction: to read, we marshal our resources under the text’s guidance, allowing it to shapes those resources in new ways through transformative virtual experience. In using a text, we take it to places we have already been and know well. Lewis describes the difference:

A work (of whatever) art can be either ‘received’ or ‘used.’ When we ‘receive’ it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we ‘use’ it we treat it as assistance for our own activities. The one, to use an old fashioned image, is like being taken for a bicycle ride by a man who may know roads we have never yet explored. The other is like adding one of those little motor attachments to our own bicycle and then going for one of our familiar rides. (p. 88)

The aesthetic, receiving orientation is compatible with reading as a thankful gathering that I have described in these pages. It involves an initial submission to the object to let it

do its work upon us. And that work, for Rosenblatt (1994), for Wilhelm (2008), for Bruns (2011) is a drawing out from the reader the texts of one's life into a new space.

The making of meaning in the act of reading involves then a necessary transaction [...] between reader and text, in which the worlds of each give shape to the other. (Bruns, p. 53)

This transaction is the play of meaning, a generative moment, when our immersion in a text makes the boundaries between self and otherness more porous and open to transformation. Critical reading is needed, but if we approach a text with suspicion, the aesthetic transaction is compromised (Bruns, 2011; Wilhelm & Novak, 2011).

Importantly, we do not have to choose between critical literacy and aesthetic literacy. While receiving a text can lead to exciting, pleasurable and transformative transactions, it can also lead to better criticism. Lewis writes, "we must receive [the text] first and then evaluate it. Otherwise, we have nothing to evaluate" (p. 92). In starker terms, Miller (2002) echoes the point,

Unless one has performed that innocent first reading, nothing much exists to resist or criticize. The book is deprived beforehand, by a principled resistance to literature's power, of much chance to have a significant effect on its readers. So why read at all, then, except to satisfy a not wholly admirable joy in destruction, and to keep others from being enraptured, possibly to their detriment. (p. 159)

The aesthetic transaction is beneficial on its own merits, but also leads to better criticism. If readers are wary of submitting their powers for a time to the text, Wilhelm & Novak (2011) advise us to trust the process of immersion; either we will be transformed by the object or have better targets for our suspicions.

And what might this mean for literary pedagogy? Wilhelm's (2008) work shows that not every reader knows how to read aesthetically. Teachers can help prime students to enter story time and story worlds by activating potentially related knowledge, feelings,

and experiences so that students are more prepared to have their own texts called out, even summoned, by the object. Teachers can also initially privilege the experience of reading, the evocation, rather than jumping immediately to concerns related to explanation or more distant, critical modes of engagement. This pedagogical orientation to texts relates to what Wilhelm & Novak (2011) term the “good enough teacher” – a concept related to Winnicott’s good enough mother. The good enough mother allows the child to “play” using transitional objects in transitional space. Pretending a broom is a horse allows the child to act out scenes of imagination, using “real objects” to populate her imaginary world where they retain a new and vital function. The child’s play becomes part of her ongoing world of experience, helping her shape how she sees her world and herself. The good enough mother supports the illusions necessary to maintain the imaginary space. The broom is, in fact, a horse. Similar to Milner’s (1990) practice of painting that I mentioned pages ago, the transitional space and the objects that populate it receive the child’s action and vision; while the world is not-I, neither is the world completely alien or hostile to our interests. Transitional space, through illusion, keeps alive a belief in a world that can receive our action. The good enough teacher, like Winnicott’s mother, positions texts as those objects capacious enough to receive our inner worlds, and, in the merger, change the reader and the text. The good enough teacher sets aside facts and explanations for a time, long enough to help us sustain the merger, the necessary illusion, for us to play and to learn.

I will close by thanking the reader, who has sustained enough patience to make it to the end. I mentioned at the beginning of this work that the reader is in excess of this writer, knowing more than I can say, bringing my work to one’s own satisfying

completion. I love a phrase that Chris Osmond (2011) has used to describe a teacher's *aesthetic* reading of student work: the aesthetics of attending. Instead of reading against a ledger of presence and absence of content, one reads into the gap, the incomplete example, to create a unified work. It is a co-creation, a vision of the possible that might in the future be made through the pedagogical relation. I hope enough is present in the example at hand for the reader to attend to what is not here, to read into the gap, to co-create a work that, with time, I might write into and complete.

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