

Immersion, Transformation, and the Literature Class

Cristina Vischer Bruns

Many readers have had the experience of finishing a novel or short story and feeling that they would never be quite the same after having read it. The *Chronicles of Narnia* may have been my first taste of that experience when I read them in middle school. More recently I've felt the impact on me of Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, *Jane Eyre*, and, I'll confess, the Harry Potter stories that I read aloud to my children. I expect that many of us can point to works of literature, to stories, that have in some way affected us, that have stayed with us long past our reading of them. In this essay I will claim that this sort of transformative experience is a valuable capacity of literature and that we as teachers of literature should do what we can to make experiences like this possible for students in our classes.

The best explanation I've found for this powerful encounter between reader and text comes from the work of D. W. Winnicott and the object-relations branch of psychoanalytic theory, which offers both a conception of the mechanism that produces such a literary effect and an understanding of that effect's significance. At the heart of this theory is the concept of transitional space, a middle state between self and world, in Winnicott's words, "an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (2). Winnicott developed this concept as an explanation of the means by which infants initially establish their own sense of separateness from the world around them and also their relationship with that world. When the infant can perceive external objects, a teddy bear for instance, as if they are her own creation or of herself, that illusion allows her to inhabit temporarily this intermediary space between self and world. This transitional space makes it possible for the infant to move from symbiosis to individuation—to begin differentiating between her self and what is other—gradually, without an unbearable experience of sudden separateness. For a period of time an infant needs to be allowed the illusion that this bear or blanket is at the same time "me and not me." Through this means the infant can tolerate beginning to experience herself as separate.

Beyond this initial work of infancy, opportunities to return to the transitional area of experiencing are still essential. Winnicott explains "... that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)" (13). Temporarily returning to transitional space in adulthood—when the illusion is not challenged but is tolerated that an object or experience is both "me" and "not me"—allows the reformation or adjustment of an individual's boundaries between self and what is other, an on-going work that is crucial to remain responsive to an ever-changing environment. Any engaging and creative activity where the distinction is blurred between inner and outer realities enables a person to enter this intermediary space, whether listening to a piece of music, playing a sport, watching a movie, or participating in a religious ceremony.

This blurring of inner and outer worlds makes possible two valuable outcomes.¹ One is that the tangible shape of the activity or object becomes available to give form to inner states of being of the individual—self-states, moods, or ways of being that are unconsciously part of one's self but would otherwise remain inaccessible to conscious awareness, as when a song provokes sudden tears at some unexpected, even uncanny resonance. The other outcome is that the shape of the activity stimulates a reworking of the usually fixed boundary between self and world producing a more responsive way of relating across that boundary. Both outcomes result in a changed or even transformed sense of the self, as formerly unconscious moods or states become available for self-knowing and as the object or experience encountered in transitional space leaves its imprint upon the self's way of being in the world. The human need to experience such moments of fluidity across both the boundary between the conscious and unconscious in the self and the boundary between the self and the other can produce in us a sense of craving for activities that foster this kind of transitional experience. This process also operates on a cultural level as well as an individual one as a culture's practices take place within the transitional space between a collective self and other.

This kind of transitional activity depends upon periods of time when an individual releases himself into the experience of the object, temporarily letting go of his sense of himself as separate from the object and immersing himself in it. According to psychotherapist Christopher Bollas, the subject must project a part of himself into the object, to invest it with psychic potential, in "a type of erotic action that must be unconscious and one in which the person is not being, as it were, thoughtful," but must be "a rather simplified consciousness, even out of touch with himself for a moment" (22). With a return to self-awareness and differentiation, to being a complex self again, a person is able to reflect on the experience of the object, much like she ponders a dream upon awaking. A return to a state of separateness allows for normal functioning, but it is immersion in an activity like literary reading upon which its transitional potential depends.

While any kind of practice in which a person becomes fully engrossed can provide transitional experiences, the reading of literary texts is especially well suited for activity in this intermediary space. The process of reading requires constant interaction between self and text, between inner world and outer, as the reader must create in her imagination the world that the words on the page call forth. These worlds that we create are experienced entirely in our own inner world but arrive there at the prompting of the text which has a way of presenting its world, a shape, feel, and even sound that is wholly other and external to us. Yet in the moment of immersing herself in the literary world, the reader becomes a part of the text as the distinction between self and text blurs. That literary reading demands from readers greater effort and creative activity than other pastimes, like watching movies or listening to music, and presents an additional challenge to its popular use. But it also means that a work of fiction or poetry has the potential to blur more thoroughly the boundary between self and other, between inner and outer worlds, as the reader must invest more of himself in the process. This investment means that literary reading makes possible an especially potent form of transitional experience.

¹ The role of this type of transitional experience in adulthood is explored in two books by Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* and *Being a Character*, from which these ideas are drawn.

Informed by the insights of object-relations theory, we can affirm that deeply affecting experiences with literary works are as significant in their effect upon others as they feel to “readers like me.” Through the mechanism of transitional space, the temporary blurring of boundaries that occurs in immersive reading facilitates a reworking of the self’s relations across those boundaries. If, as Winnicott claims, we suffer from “the strain of relating inner and outer reality,” then relief from that strain comes through opportunities to enter the space between self and other where we can rework those boundaries, where we can gain access to otherwise unavailable parts of ourselves, and where we can try on new ways of being in the world. This effect can reverberate through cultures as well as in individuals. Perhaps this effect of literary reading has been difficult to identify and describe because it tends to be unconscious, producing powerful experiences that can feel diminished when one attempts to put them into words. With its theorization of psychic operations beyond conscious awareness, object relations theory elucidates this valuable contribution that literary reading can make to human life and society in terms of transitional space. But this contribution is realized only when the reader temporarily gets lost in the world of the text.

Do our literature classes invite that to happen in our students? No, when the focus of a course is solely on literary texts as illustrations of the workings of cultures or as instances of the operations of language, or even as works of art worthy of careful analysis. Nor are students invited to read in ways that will allow transitional activity when they know their reading will be followed by any kind of questions they must answer correctly. (They read for the answers.) These approaches to literature instruction exclude from consideration what takes place between the individual student and the text, and they convey to the student that works of literature are not meant to be read in order to get lost, or swept away, or to experience anything at all.

If literary works are to serve as potential sources of transitional experience for students, what is most important in a literary education at all levels is that it must invite and encourage immersive reading as the mode essential to literature’s activation of readers’ transitional space. The more analytic ways of reading that are the typical preoccupation of school then derive their importance as they inform and support immersive reading. One cannot assume, however, that such opportunities to get lost within literary worlds will produce transitional experiences in every student with every text. The resonance required between reader and work for transitional effects is impossible to anticipate (although attention to the characteristics of one’s student population can aid in the selection of texts in which such resonance may be more likely). Nor is it necessary to instruct students explicitly in the operations of transitional space since the process is largely unconscious, and effort and intention may interfere with it. It is enough to invite students to “live into” a work of literature, to borrow a phrase from Gary Saul Morson, creating from the work a world into which one enters as one reads, and then to step back out of that world to write about the experience (355).

The importance of the student’s experience with the text means that the focus of a literary education, especially at introductory levels, is best not placed primarily on the particular texts themselves as objects of study, but on what transpires between the texts and the readers in the class. The transformational value of literary reading is located in that interaction and its effect upon young readers. In other words, what must be of pri-

mary importance to a teacher of literature is what happens for her students when they read an assigned text (a claim much like one Louise Rosenblatt made a couple of generations ago). However, these experiences tend to be excluded from literature instruction. When a student reads an assigned text in order to perform well on a test or to answer the questions at the end of the story, or when she is directed to focus on some particular aspect of the text such as evidence within it of cultural bias or its uses of irony, she is prevented from attending to whatever challenges, resistances, engagements, or reactions her own reading of the text might evoke, thereby removing from her consideration whatever might make the text most substantial or meaningful for her, keeping her from creating any sort of imaginary world from her reading into which she might immerse herself.

The surest way I have found to make space in my own literature classrooms for students' experiences with the literary texts I assign is nothing new, radical, or profound. I merely require students to produce a brief piece of writing about each text they read. This open-ended assignment asks students to describe what happened as they read and to react (not to explicate, analyze, or even summarize, but to *react*) to the experience. When students share with one another their writing in small groups, they discover reading practices and textual experiences different from their own, provoking greater awareness of what characterized their own approach to the text and the experience that resulted, as well as what other possibilities their way of interacting with the text excluded. Then as I read students' responses, I can identify characteristics of their reading experiences and obstacles they face in "living into" the text, obstacles which can be addressed in class as I direct students' attention to those issues for analysis and reflection.

This enables me as their instructor to place at the center of our work together whatever challenges, frustrations, surprises, or sources of attraction they encountered in their reading. These reactions, whatever they may be, become the impetus for critical reflection on the assigned text, driving both the analysis necessary to create more fully a world from the work and an awareness of what the world-making process entails and produces for different readers. In asserting the primacy of this kind of "direct response" in literary education, theorist and educator Deanne Bogdan, in her book on the subject, *Re-educating the Imagination*, observes, "... there is always somewhere to go in criticism, but one can only be where one is" (283). By making their written responses the initial focus of our class interaction about a text, I invite students to be where they are as the ground beneath wherever we go together in reflecting on the text and our reading of it. Even more importantly, space is made both in students' individual encounters with texts and in classroom work together for the experience of immersing themselves in literary worlds, the mode essential for using literature as a transitional object.

Through one student's written reaction to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, I learned that he was shaken by the realization he shared with the novel's protagonist that he had lived as the center of his household, allowing his mother and older siblings to wait on him while doing little to care for them. In another class a student wrote that she was so moved by Virgil's depiction of Dido's grief in *The Aeneid* that she could not find words to describe its affect on her beyond saying that it made her cry for hours. Deeply affecting encounters with literary worlds are a key sign of transitional experience, but much more common in students' written reactions are expressions of frustration or confusion with an assigned text. Transformative literary experiences require an unpredictable fit

between reader and text, and so should not be expected to occur for most students in a given class. (This unpredictability is also reason to offer students, when possible, a choice of texts to explore more deeply in order that they can pursue whatever draws them.) Yet students' reactions to a literary encounter still carry value when they only give evidence of the distance between reader and text. Even expressions of indifference make a significant contribution to class reflection when students point to the sources of their indifference. Turning our attention to the paragraphs of "pointless" details in a Flannery O'Connor story, for instance, or the lines of one of John Berryman's Dream Songs that "make no sense" gives us opportunity to inquire into the role these parts of a text play, what they ask of us as readers, and what our struggle with them might suggest about the expectations we bring to a literary text.

When students in an ancient world literature course I teach offered their reactions to portions of *The Odyssey*, I learned that many questioned Odysseus's heroism because he is unfaithful to his wife, he often weeps openly, and he does little without Athena's help, each of which seem unheroic to many of my students. These objections gave form to the cultural conflict students were experiencing with the world of *The Odyssey*, and they gave focus to our class inquiry into differences between Odysseus' culture and ours, differences in conceptions of a hero, expectations of marriage, expression of emotion, and the relationship between humans and the divine. More significantly, we discussed what entering into the "alternative reality" of Odysseus's world entails. The potential impact for transitional experience of this instructional activity alone was apparent in essays students wrote at the end of the course on what reading texts like *The Odyssey* require of them. I read repeatedly that they learned they had to temporarily suspend their own views in an attempt to understand another world more fully, a practice that some students recognized as necessary to understand difference in any context, not just in the reading of ancient literary works. Whether these students' experience reading *The Odyssey* could be considered to occur in transitional space, I can't be sure, but it is clear in the written reflections of many of them that their experience influenced their understandings of themselves and of others and their ways of relating across that boundary. What made this outcome possible was inviting students to bring into the classroom a written account of their experiences reading *The Odyssey* and letting those experiences raise questions for class reflection.

Welcoming into the classroom students' own experiences of immersing themselves in the imaginary worlds of the literary works on which a course focuses, and using those experiences to motivate and direct critical inquiry into those texts, do not guarantee that reading those works will become a transitional activity for those students. But it will become a possibility. If reading literature indeed gives us opportunity to form and reform our sense of ourselves and our relation to the world around us, then it is imperative that we do what we can to open up for our students the possibility of a transformative experience with literature.



Works Cited

- Bogdan, Deanne. *Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1992. Print.
- Bollas, Christopher. *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. Print.
- _____. *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. Print.
- Morson, Gary Saul. "Bakhtin and the Teaching of Literature." *Research in the Teaching of English* 41.3 (2007): 350-57. Print.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994. Print.
- Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock, 1971. Print.