

Class readers: exploring a different *View from the Bridge*

... the written word travels gratifyingly farther than anything else and can be invested with surprising new meanings, some that illuminate the writer to himself (Miller, 1987/1990: 350)

Very often a child writes badly because he has nothing he wants to write about (Vygotsky 2004: 46)

Within the academy, there is now, by and large, an acceptance of the fact that different readers read the same text in different ways. Texts, likewise, are not what they used to be. No longer stable repositories of authorial meaning, they have become slippery shape-shifters, holding up a mirror not so much to nature as to the reader. Reading is semiotic activity, the construction of meaning motivated by the interests of the reader; reading is a process in which the whole subjectivity of the reader is implicated. Each reading is thus necessarily gendered, racialised, historicised: the product of a specific historical subject, reading in a specific historical context.

What happens, though, when different readers, different readings meet? At worst, there may be sound and fury and little else, as rival theoretical positions and idiosyncratic interpretations bounce off each other like marbles in a jar. Richard Levin (1979) long ago poured scorn on the academic competition to produce new readings of old texts. At best, however, a new reading can illuminate for all of us aspects of a familiar text that had previously escaped our notice. Edward Said's (1983) reading of *Mansfield Park*, say, enables other readers to attend more carefully to Sir Thomas Bertram's trips to Antigua – and to grasp the significance of geography as an organising principle in Jane Austen's novel. Said's reading stands, moreover, in an explicitly dialogic relationship to Raymond Williams' reading of Austen in *The Country and the City* (1973). Said argues that Williams seriously underestimated the extent and importance of global imperialist concerns in English literature from the sixteenth century onwards (and also that Austen's morality is not, as Williams maintained, separable from its socioeconomic basis). That there might be a relationship between Said's own history and his desire to broaden the horizons of Williams's analysis is not reductive of either's contribution: it is to recognise the particularity of each reader's interest, to understand each reading as necessarily and inevitably motivated.

Are some readings, then, better than others? Are some, indeed, permissible and others illicit? And if so, what are the criteria by which they are to be judged? Plausibility? Internal coherence? Impact? Other, more tacit criteria? Just as important, whose criteria are to be used, and how do these criteria operate?

I want to explore these questions in a context outside the academy, the context of an urban secondary comprehensive school. I draw on observational data gathered during the 2005-6 school year, in a Year 10 (14- and 15-year-old students) class in a school in East London. Before I do so, however, I want to indicate some possible parameters of this discussion by reference to an incident that occurred over twenty years ago, at the boys' secondary school in East London where I had just started working as a teacher. In an end-of-year examination, students were asked to read a poem by Robert Service (1989):

Yellow

One pearly day of early May
I strolled upon the sand,
And saw, say half-a-mile away
A man with gun in hand;
A dog was cowering to his will,
As slow he sought to creep
Upon a dozen ducks so still
They seemed to be asleep,

When like a streak the dog dashed out,
The ducks flashed up in flight;
The fellow gave a savage shout
And cursed with all his might.
Then I stood somewhat amazed
And gazed with eyes agog,
With bitter rage his gun he raised
And blazed and shot the dog.

You know how dogs can yelp with pain;
Its blood soaked in the sand,
And yet it crawled to him again
And tried to lick his hand.
"Forgive me, Lord, for what I've done,"
It seemed as if it said,
But once again he raised his gun:
This time he shot it - dead.

What could I do? What could I say?
'Twas such a lonely place.
Tongue-tied I saw him stride away,
I never saw his face.
I should have bawled the bastard out:
A yellow dog he slew;
But worse, he proved beyond a doubt
That - I was yellow too.

The students' reading of the poem was assessed through a series of comprehension questions. Even at this distance, it is possible to reconstruct the reasons why my colleagues had chosen this text: it has a strong narrative line, dealing with guns, dogs and death; there is nothing complicated about its poetic form; its language is, for the most part, accessible. At the same time, there is an introspective quality and an emphasis on moral responsibility, both of which could be construed as instantiating central values in the experience of reading within the school English curriculum. So, perhaps, the choice of text both implies a set of values and assumes a particular subjectivity in the reader(s): the choice constructs the (adolescent) masculinity to which the text is supposed to appeal.

When I came to mark my students' exam papers, I encountered a problem. Most of the students in my class were of Bangladeshi heritage. Some had been born in the UK; most had not, and a significant proportion were relatively recent arrivals in this country. In the context of the bizarre literacy practice of the examination, where students were expected to commune in complete isolation with a previously-unseen text, they had encountered a false friend, the word "yellow." For my students, yellow

denoted a colour: connotations of cowardice were a thing unknown. The more confident, adventurous readers moved from initial attempts to link the title with the location (the yellow, sandy beach) to theories of the salience of racial identity: perhaps, they speculated, the poetic persona was Chinese. For all of them, though, their ignorance of the intended meaning of “yellow” rendered futile their attempts to arrive at a meaningful reading of the poem. There is a long and rather dishonourable tradition, in staffrooms and in the pages of the education press, of mockery of the howlers perpetrated by examination candidates. What had happened in this case, though, is an example of a much more serious blunder on the examiner’s part – an unwarranted assumption of shared meanings that vitiates the whole process of assessment. Another way of presenting this incident is to say that my students struggled because they lacked the appropriate linguistic/cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). What is problematic about this is the fact that lack of familiarity with a single lexical item made the whole text inaccessible – and so the chosen poem was not, in the current parlance, fit for purpose.) Because my students did not know that “yellow” could mean cowardly, they read the poem differently. Although it would be true to say that they made different sense of it, I have to acknowledge that such a statement strikes me as perverse. Their readings were not just different – they were flawed and inadequate. (There is a kind of empirical evidence to support this judgement. After the exam, when I explained that yellow was associated with cowardice, my students instantly discarded their earlier readings: better informed, they read the poem differently.)

The story of “Yellow” indicates a tension that is present across educational sectors in the ways in which the reading of literary texts in particular is framed. On the one hand, teachers value students’ engagement and originality. We want students to make texts their own, to enter into the act of reading on their own terms, to read the text through the prism of their own lifeworld. On the other hand, we know that there is stuff that they need to know if their readings are to be adequate, informed, meaningful. Sometimes that knowledge is lexical; sometimes it relates to the formal and generic properties of the text (how sonnets or science fiction work); sometimes it is about the conditions of a text’s production (Jacobean theatre or Victorian novels, say); and sometimes it is knowledge of wider cultural, social, political, economic and intellectual history: Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* is more, as well as differently, meaningful if the reader knows something of the history of British imperialism in Ireland.

Sometimes, too, we seem to act as if the story of “Yellow” were paradigmatic of all differences in reading – as if all such differences were merely the product of differential access to the right sort of knowledge – as if different readings were simply better(-informed) or worse(-informed) readings. My recent observations of one class at an East London school have challenged such assumptions.

I want to focus on a single lesson, but before turning to the reading that happens in the lesson it is necessary to sketch out some of the contexts in which that reading happens. Indeed, to describe the circumstances of the reading as contexts is itself problematic to the point of being misleading. It suggests that the reading is in some way separable from the contexts in which it occurs, when part of my thesis is that the act of reading is shaped and informed by networks of interlocking, inextricably linked con/texts.

It has become fashionable to make reference to the importance of student voice. What happens, though, when the student voice expresses resistance to the exigencies of assessment criteria and exam boards? How is the teacher to reconcile the imperative to produce coursework, to get through the syllabus, with his principled commitment to education that is open, accountable and dialogic?

At the start of the lesson there is a moment that is both wildly atypical and deeply revealing. It is early March: Nathan, in his first year of teaching, has worked hard in the previous six months to establish a relationship with this very diverse, very challenging group of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. He is trying to convince the students that they should complete – or at least attempt – the homework tasks that he sets:

Teacher: OK, I'm going to say a couple of words about this homework, I've asked Mr B- to come in and say a couple of words about this homework as well

Rebecca¹: Who?

Teacher: Mr B-, he's the head of English, because the last time I set a homework, three people did it, and I didn't get any homework from anyone else after despite asking, this is absolutely serious, the homework isn't optional, I don't know what you think I do with homework but I do not set it just to keep you busy, my interest isn't in keeping you off the street, it's crucial, crucial to what we're doing that you do this bit of homework, hopefully, before the end of the lesson Mr B- will come in and say a few words about what will happen if you don't, but it seems to me that for some reason I have done something with you that makes you think you don't need to do the work.

This is Nathan at his sternest. More than this, though, it's uncharacteristic of his approach that there is an attempt to use the hierarchical structures of the school to persuade his students to produce their assignments. But it doesn't quite work:

Darren: sir, why did you say "*hopefully*" he'll come?

Teacher: because he's teaching at the moment and it depends whether or not he gets a moment

Darren: so why're you *hoping* that he'll come?

Teacher: [2 seconds] because I think that something that's happened is that you seem to think when I set you work it doesn't matter I want you to realise that it does, so I've asked someone else to come in and tell you that it does

Darren: what, because you can't control us, you have to bring in someone else?

Teacher: is it control, is it a question of control? or a question of you taking the work seriously?

Darren: question of status

Teacher: [1 second] definitely there is status involved, I'm asking the head of department to come and talk to you

[3 seconds] OK, what we're going to do today is we're going to finish reading

Darren, like many of his classmates, is intrigued by Nathan and his way of being, a way of being that is deeply respectful of students' views and identities, a way of being that leaves a space for – indeed, invites – students to scrutinise the usually taken-for-granted purposes and inequalities of classroom interactions. There are, then continuities with past conversations in Darren's attentive discourse analysis – but there's also an edge to it, an impatience with the perceived evasion of Nathan's first response to the interrogation of “hopefully”, a forensic skill in peeling aside the surface niceties of timetabling issues to the heart of the matter: the work of the English classroom, Darren insists, cannot be divorced from questions of power, of status. “What is to be done?” is here displaced by “Who decides what is to be done?” (It is, of course, perfectly possible to see Darren's intervention as nothing more than a disruptive tactic. But what does that mean? What order is being disrupted – and wherein lies the legitimacy of the order that he challenges?)

Before the class can start to read the remaining couple of pages of *A View from the Bridge*, they need to resolve the issue of who is to read Catherine's part:

Teacher: ... so we'll start from Catherine's reaction to Eddie saying this, um [pause] would anyone like to be Catherine – Mutib's absent?

[4 sec pause]

Salman: Mutib will always be here in our hearts

Teacher: Amina, can I ask you?

Amina: No

Teacher: You were a great First Officer yesterday

Amina: I wasn't

And what follows is a discussion, lasting over a minute, as to who is to read Catherine's lines, before, eventually, it is decided that Sarah will. This is a classroom where roles, within and without the play, are negotiated. It is a time-consuming and a messy business. At one point, Susan says, “Sir, you're the teacher, you decide.” But that is not how things are done here. Mutib is absent from the lesson in a fairly specialised sense: he is in the exclusion room, a place where he spends, it would seem, a fair amount of time. Salman's elegiac comment is delivered for comic effect, but the layers of irony cannot quite conceal a truth about the identification of student and role. The part has become Mutib's, and so the reluctance to replace him might be attributable to a sense that to do so would be a theft. I do not mean that students are unable to distinguish between the roles and their extratextual selves – of course not. But there is in their reading of the play a relishing of the opportunity to inhabit the character, and a possessiveness about the role that they have chosen, or that has been allocated to them.

Further evidence of this is offered a few minutes later when Salman, who is reading Marco's part, remarks, with complete matter-of-factness, to the student who is reading Eddie, “No, it's all right, I'm going to shank [colloquial for stab] you anyway.” There is a playfulness about Salman's identification with the role, a relishing of the power that this will give him – and of the impunity with which, in role, he can utter such threats to another student. I wonder, too, how much Salman's cool assumption of another identity in the classroom might be attributable to his familiarity with the

multiple identities of the video games he plays – and discusses with his peers (Gee 2003).

When the hurly-burly's done and the reading of the play is finished, Nathan wants to focus on Alfieri's role. He prompts Matthew to repeat the point he had made in the previous lesson, to the effect that Alfieri reports on Eddie's story because Eddie is no longer in a position to be able to tell it himself. What Nathan is working towards is an exploration of Alfieri's choric role. He re-reads, to the class, Alfieri's final speech. As he finishes reading, Darren intervenes:

Darren: why is it called *A View from the Bridge*?

Teacher: great question, what else could it be called? [5 seconds] based on that last bit that I've just read, what else might you call the play? [3 seconds] whose story is it? [2 seconds]

Darren: Alfieri's

Teacher: Alfieri's story about?
[3 seconds]

Salman: [shouts] Eddie

Teacher: why Eddie in particular?

Salman: snitching

Teacher: it's a story about snitching

Salman: Loyalty

Matthew: not snitching

Teacher: how do you mean, Matthew?

Matthew: like the story about Billy whatever

Salman's take on the play as a tale about snitching has a history (and a morality) attached to it. When I started observing the class, they had finished reading (and watching the Baz Luhrmann film of) *Romeo and Juliet*. Discussing with other students on his table the question of who was responsible for the lovers' deaths, Salman was vehement that Benvolio was to blame. "Why?" I inquired. "Because he grassed Romeo up to the Prince." As far as Salman was concerned, what Benvolio had done in providing an accurate account of the fights in which Mercutio and Tybalt had died was, quite simply, wrong – a fundamental breach of ethical values. To divulge to a representative of judicial authority – of the state – information about violent acts that one has witnessed is not, for Salman, the duty of every citizen but rather the behaviour of a reprobate: it is an offence against the code of loyalty. I could not tell how much Salman's reading of the play was influenced by Luhrmann's representation of the Prince of Verona as an American chief of police. But his reading cannot be dismissed as aberrant or wilful, particularly when it is a reading that took place in a city where so many citizens lack confidence in the forces of law and order.² What this earlier moment also suggests is that the class has a collective history of exploring issues through their shared reading of texts, and, perhaps, particularly through texts in which ethical conflicts are realised in and through drama.

(After the lesson, Nathan explained that the interpretation of Benvolio as the villain of the piece had not originated with Salman but with Claudia, a girl who had since left the school. In class, she had reacted with outrage to the scene in which Benvolio talks to the Prince, expressing the same views which I had later heard from Salman. Rather oddly, none of this judgement survives in her writing about the play: in her exercise

book, responsibility for the tragic deaths is attributed, more conventionally, to Friar Laurence and to Lord Capulet. One might speculate whether Claudia was aware of “mainstream” interpretations, and of the desirability of conforming to them in written assignments. Or was it that it was harder for her to explain, in writing, a reading that drew its strength from a moral code that she might assume was not shared by her reader, the teacher? Or had she just changed her mind?)

Qualifying Salman’s “snitching” with his suggestion that Miller’s play is a story about “*not* snitching,” Matthew is emphasising that this is, in his view, a play with a moral. This is the significance of his reference to the story of Vinny Bolzano (“Billy”), told to Catherine by Eddie and Beatrice as a warning of the dire consequences of speaking to the Immigration Bureau: Matthew proposes that *A View from the Bridge* carries the same message.

The space provided by this conversation allows students to explore, assemble and develop their readings of the play.

Salman: it’s a story about how it was in those times ...

Teacher: can you relate that to Darren’s question?

Salman: what was Darren’s question?

Teacher: what was your question, Darren?

Darren: what does *A View from the Bridge* mean?

Teacher: what does it mean to give somebody a view?

Sarah: like, their point, your opinion

Teacher: your point, your opinion

Salman: no, a view, something for them to see

Teacher: OK, so keep thinking about how this works, your point, your opinion, something for them to see, Darren, what do you think, so you think this is beginning to answer your question? [4 seconds] a view from the bridge, this is how things are from [3 seconds] this is how things are from the Brooklyn Bridge, it’s *a* view from *the* bridge, there’s only one bridge,

Matthew : they’re talking about what the view is, like it’s an everyday thing

Teacher: sorry, Matthew

Matthew: it’s like it’s an everyday thing ... it’s like this is what it’s like, it’s an everyday thing [shrugs shoulders]

Teacher: thanks, Matthew, do you know what this is reminding me of? Our very first lesson on this play, where we were talking about Eddie coming home, taking off his cap and jacket, and Gavin was saying, that’s just a normal thing, it’s the normal thing he does, and I wrote on the board, “normal, everyday thing” [miming the act of writing]

There are important things going on here. It is worth emphasising Nathan’s skill in orchestrating the discussion, his tolerance of the long pauses that are signs not of boredom but of the necessary spaces for thinking, his ability to reflect back to the students the length of their engagement with the play. He seizes the opportunity presented by Darren’s question about the title of the play and uses it as another way of thinking about how the story is told, about Miller’s dramatic technique and the mediating role of Alfieri. And, equally, we should pay attention to the students’

contributions, to what they know and to the serious intellectual work that they are doing. As Nystrand *et al.* (2003) argue:

In an ideal dialogic learning environment, especially in open discussion as opposed to tightly cast recitation, teachers treat students as potential sources of knowledge and opinion, and in so doing complicate expert-novice hierarchies (2003: 140).

And yet, Darren still is not satisfied. As Nathan continues to explore the significance of the title, Darren interjects:

I think Alfieri makes no sense, man, he don't make sense to me.

What Darren means by this needs to be unpicked carefully. One strand of his response concerns the issue of narrative and dramatic technique. At first, his position might appear to be one of naïve realism – an attack on an implausibly omniscient choric narrator. “How,” he asks, “does Alfieri know all this detail?” How can Alfieri be privy to events that occur behind closed doors – the closed doors of the tenement where Eddie and Beatrice live? But Darren’s dissatisfaction with the title re-emerges here in a form that reveals more clearly its origins in his problem with Alfieri:

Teacher: ... so Alfieri talks about it all as if it is in the present tense, he appears, narrates something that's happened, he was involved because he bailed out Marco and Rodolpho, he was involved because he was there at the end, he was involved because Eddie came to see him

Darren: way you was talking like he was there in the house

Teacher: he was, wasn't he, /so what does that mean?

Darren: /he weren't, weren't in the house, so this this title don't make sense then if your view, you're viewing from the bridge, you ain't seeing no detail are you?

Teacher: sorry Darren

Darren: said, like, if they're saying it as a view from the bridge, if you're viewing from a bridge, it's not much detail is it?

What my transcript fails to capture is the way Darren speaks in this part of the lesson. There is an angry urgency about it that explains the interruptions of Nathan here: he's not, in these exchanges, trying to be rude, or to challenge Nathan's teacherly authority: he is struggling to communicate his idea – and what he is challenging is not Nathan's authority but Alfieri's. It is, in part, the intensity of Darren's interest here that makes me reluctant to construe this as merely a discussion about dramaturgy. What Darren is contesting, I think, is not only the question of verisimilitude (how could Alfieri be privy to these events?) but also – centrally – Alfieri's privileged perspective. Who's telling whose story is, for Darren, a class question. When he complains that Alfieri “makes no sense, man,” the words he uses draw attention to Alfieri's speech – speech that marks him out as different from, detached from, the other characters.

Darren's problem with Alfieri is explored further as the discussion about the title continues:

Teacher: Darren, what if it were called a day in the life? A day in the life of Eddie Carbone? What might that mean?
Matthew: everyday things that Eddie does
Darren: it would make more sense, innit
Teacher: how, how would that make more sense? [4 seconds]
Darren: cause, I dunno, it would just make more sense than this

“Make more sense”: Darren’s words here echo his first attack on Alfieri. Despite Nathan’s promptings, though, he does not expand on or explain what he means by this. I will return to this point later, but first I want to track the continuing discussion:

Teacher: these are really/
Amina: why the bridge, anyway?
Teacher: anyone got any ideas?
Salman: yes! A view from the other side of the side of the world from the Brooklyn Bridge, I mean, like bridge, a lead way into this is my city, a view from the bridge, you don’t, not, it may look good, but that’s not the half of it
JY: so, Salman, what’s on the other side of the bridge? If where Eddie and the rest of them live is what the play is looking at, what’s on the other side of the bridge?
Darren: Sicily
Teacher: if you call out you’re denying Salman a chance to think
Darren: I’m not denying
Salman : immigrants looking at ... in the beginning, the other half of it
Teacher: Tariq
Tariq: on the other side are people who are rich, yeah, so I think when the immigrants come from Sicily to New York they pass under it, so that’s why there’s a view from the bridge ...

Amina’s question is unusual. Her interest in the official business of the lesson is often, it would appear, fairly minimal; again, what the transcript does not capture is her tone of voice, which might best be described as insistent, almost angry. In the various suggestions that are made as answers to Amina’s question, there is an awareness of the gulf, economic as well as geographical, that separates Sicily and New York within the world of the play. But there is also, less fully articulated, an exploration of New York as a city divided along class lines. It is this sense of the bridge that Nathan brings to the fore by asking students to consider the two different cover illustrations on the edition of the play that they are using:

Teacher: thank you, Tariq, we’ve got two totally different book jackets here [holding them up for the class to see] I think that these book jackets give us two different sides of the bridge, have a look at them, you may have one in front of you ... what can you see on one side of the bridge?

The cover of the newer edition is a photographic image. In the foreground is the water, beyond it a waterfront with high-rise buildings; the point of view is only slightly above the water line, and directly underneath the bridge, which looms above. The whole image is monochrome, variations in ochre – almost as if the landscape were bathed in a soft, golden light. The older edition represents a “classic” tenement,

with its lattice of fire escapes; above there is a blue sky, while in the foreground intersect two huge black steel girders. It is reminiscent of Miller's description of the set for Peter Brook's 1956 production of the play:

The play began on a Red Hook street against the exterior brick wall of a tenement, which soon split open to show a basement apartment and above it a maze of fire escapes winding back and forth across the face of the building in the background (Miller 1987/1990: 431).

The newer cover might, then, be construed as the city as aspiration: seen from afar, its towering buildings signify wealth, development and opportunity. The older cover is, in contrast, Alfieri's view of Eddie and Beatrice's tenement: it may have prompted Darren to start thinking about Alfieri's perspective and positioning, the outsider who is somehow allowed a privileged view inside the tenement – and even inside the psyches of its inhabitants.

Prompted by Nathan's question, students report what they can see:

Sean: crap buildings and good buildings

Teacher: OK, crap buildings and good buildings, all right, what did we call this kind of housing?

Amina: That's the view and /that's the bridge

Darren: /poor side and the rich side

Teacher: good, and which side are we on? which side are the characters living on?

Amina: on the other, the blue side [referring to the dominant colour of the older cover]

Teacher: that's right, do you remember the tenement housing, all the housing that's crammed in, people living in no space, illegal immigrants, very little space

And Sarah, picking up the thread of a conversation from an earlier lesson, reading the scene in the first act where Marco explains to Beatrice about sardine-fishing, reminds us of the possibility of reading the sardines as emblematic of the constrictions of life in the slum:

Sarah: like sardines

Teacher: like sardines, thank you, to go back to that bit of the play, sardines, you never think sardines swim in the sea [3 seconds] it's, I feel that my job at the moment is a bit difficult

Matthew: I think I know what he means by that

Teacher: Tell me, go on

Matthew: I think he means, you wouldn't think that many people could live in these small houses

Teacher: good, that's exactly it, they're squished in there [gesture to demonstrate the packing of sardines in a tin]

Amina: Like sardines

As evidence of learning, evidence of Nathan's success in creating a classroom environment in which talk is productive, in which students can engage fully with the

play, in which meanings can emerge over long spans of time, this is impressive. Nathan's practice recalls that described by Suzanne Miller:

Teachers who mediated the discussion successfully listened well, providing support carefully when it was needed – after waiting to see whether other students might provide a next step or move. These teachers showed continual respect for students' emerging new abilities, allowing room for students to take responsibility for posing and pursuing questions (Miller 2003: 296).

Within the lesson, it encourages Nathan to elaborate an account of the play, and of Alfieri's role within it, that provides students with a context of theatrical history:

I've not figured out how to do this, but a lot of the reasons for the things we are talking about is to do with Greek tragedy, erm, which Tariq picked up and mentioned in the introduction, I'm not sure how to open this up, Becky, can you stop that, but the ancient Greeks, a bit more than two thousand years ago, they kind of invented drama, instead of just reading out poetry they had people acting it out and they had certain rules for where it was and the person, like the prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*, who explained what happened, also took part in the action, just like Alfieri does, he narrates it, and he takes part in it, in Greek tragedy all the action happened in real time I think .. so you'd see this play, Salman, where there were no breaks, no leaps from one time to another at all, it all happened [gesture] and it would be about immovable objects and unstoppable forces, people coming to terms with something they couldn't come to terms with, and *A View from the Bridge* is written like that, as a Greek tragedy.

What is happening in this moment is, from one perspective, the transfer of cultural capital. What Nathan knows about the history of Western drama enables him to place Alfieri's role – and Miller's intentions – in a specific context. There would be a way of presenting the students' responses to the play as partial, naïve, uninformed: thus what Alfieri says "makes no sense" to Darren because he does not understand the mediating (and simultaneously distancing) role of the chorus, because he is not reading *A View from the Bridge* from a position of knowledge about a set of (very largely uncinematic) dramatic conventions. Nathan is, in this account, filling in some of the gaps, thereby enabling his students to acquire a useful sense of context in which their reading of the play can be filled out, deepened, informed.

But there are also other, more pressing imperatives motivating Nathan's intervention. The GCSE examination board provides clear and detailed guidance not only on the texts to be read but also on the coursework tasks to be completed:

Texts chosen must be of sufficient substance and quality to merit serious consideration, and tasks must conform to the specific requirements set out below. ...

The range of coursework tasks should enable candidates to show their understanding of literary tradition, and to show their appreciation of social and historical influences and cultural contexts (AQA 2005a: 26).

It is worth quoting in full the specific guidance offered on the “Post-1914 Drama” coursework – the category within which *A View from the Bridge* fits:

This task should enable the candidate to demonstrate their response to the study of at least one play published after 1914. Candidates should respond to plays as drama as well as published texts.

Appropriate assignments might include the following:

- An analysis of how character, language, setting or structure contribute to the dramatic effect of a text and how these aspects relate to literary conventions or traditions, such as the device of the Common Man in *A Man For All Seasons*.
- A study of the significance of a particular scene to the play as a whole in a play such as *The Crucible* which will explore how it relates to its social and historical context.
- A study of the importance of stage directions and effects in a play such as *Equus* which will show the candidate’s awareness of dramatic conventions and the cultural context.
- An exploration of the dramatic effectiveness of one or more scenes in *The Madness of George III* which will show the candidate’s awareness of the historical context and the ability to relate these scenes to the whole text.
- A study of a key scene from *An Inspector Calls* which will explore Priestley’s dramatic methods and explain how an understanding of the historical and social context of the play might help shape audience response to the key scene and to the play as a whole (AQA 2005a: 28-9).

The examination board requires particular kinds of knowledge – knowledge of contexts both sociohistorical and literary – and particular kinds of response – response that is attentive to matters of form and structure and that is able to evaluate questions of dramatic effectiveness. It is these requirements that Nathan attempts to satisfy, and he does this in a very deft and engaging way. I worry, though, about these specifications, firstly because the readers they envisage and assume are so different from the students in Nathan’s class – and from the vast majority of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. Most GCSE students are not in a position to place the text they are studying within a literary or dramatic tradition, nor necessarily to have anything other than the very sketchiest notion of the social, historical and cultural contexts of the text’s production. They are, therefore, reliant on their teacher to do what Nathan does here: to provide potted histories. In itself, this seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate aspect of the teacher’s intervention. But what is problematic is that this potted history then becomes central to the student’s “response”: the good student is the one who digests the gobbets and can regurgitate them appropriately – and we are left with something that looks uncomfortably like an English Literature curriculum for bright parrots.

We might wish to consider, then what kind of literature curriculum, what kind of engagement with texts, would be appropriate for fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, not just in urban schools such as the one where Nathan teaches. The Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, whose words I quoted at the start of this piece, argued strongly that

educationalists needed to pay attention to the vital role of imagination in the intellectual development of adolescents. Those who neglected it, or who associated it merely with development in early childhood, were, he insisted, mistaken:

This false interpretation of fantasy is due to it being viewed one-sidedly, as a function which is linked to emotional life, the life of inclinations and sentiments, but its other side, which is linked to intellectual life, remains obscure. But, as Pushkin has aptly remarked, ‘imagination is as necessary in geometry as it is in poetry’ (Vygotsky 1994: 270).

One might, then, wonder if imaginative and creative engagement might find a place in the spectrum of responses to drama approved by the GCSE syllabus. The exam board’s examples of “good” assignments, however, carry the clear implication that what is being sought is a literary critical essay, dealing with aspects of context and focusing on an analysis of the playwright’s technique. Candidates are invited to show that they know *how* a play is structured, *how* its effects are created, *how* it communicates to its audience. It is less clear whether there is any room in such essays for any exploration of *what* the play might mean – that is, of the meanings that are made by groups of students in their engagement with the play. This leads me on to the second, and even more worrying, implication of the specifications: what becomes marginalized or, frequently, left out altogether. Evidence for this is supplied by the GCSE examiners in their most recent report:

Whilst it has to be said that many moderators are seeing responses to the same small range of texts across hundreds of centres and thousands of candidates, there is a feeling that task setting – at the heart of good approaches to coursework – is continuing to improve. The worst kinds of assignment – dubious creative responses masquerading as analysis; multiple pieces of Original Writing; descriptions of why Tom Cruise would be a better Hamlet than Brad Pitt and why he should wear black – have largely disappeared, ending up, thankfully, in the same bin as Eva Smith’s Diary. Many moderators reported this year that task setting was improving as centres devise tasks which enable candidates to address key assessment objectives (AQA 2005b: 30).

There is a cheery circularity about the process: teachers use the assessment objectives to set tasks that enable candidates to meet the assessment criteria. Outside this virtuous circle lie the unauthorised responses at which the examiners sneer. The examiners are here rejecting not merely less successful examples of a type, but “kinds of assignment”: they have determined that responses framed within particular genres – creative responses, pieces that might encourage students to draw on wider cultural resources, more imaginative or creative explorations – are inappropriate because they do not enable candidates to meet the assessment objectives. Some years ago, in investigating school students’ reading of Shakespeare, I expressed concern at the turn against empathetic writing. Eva Smith’s Diary has now officially been consigned to the dustbin of English studies, but I remain bothered by the binary opposition of creative and critical, the assumption of the automatic superiority of the essay form – and less than convinced by a simple hierarchy of values in which putatively objective analysis is privileged over forms of response that allow more scope for students to enter into a relationship with the text on their own terms.

And this takes me back to Darren and his problem with Alfieri. Nathan, using the contrasting front covers to explicate the title (and hence the mediating role of Alfieri), asks, “Which side are we on? Which side are the characters living on?” There is an assumption underlying these questions that we are on a different side from the characters, that we, in effect, share Alfieri’s detached perspective. And this is, I think, the assumption that Darren challenges. He knows whose side he is on, in the sense both of where his allegiances lie and also of whose lifeworld most closely resembles his own. For Miller, presenting working class characters to a middle-class, theatre-going audience, Alfieri’s choric role serves the purpose of mediating an unfamiliar social world and representing the story within the frame of a classical Western dramatic tradition (hence, for example, Miller’s original title for the play, *An Italian Tragedy*). For Darren, Alfieri is the intrusive other: no wonder that what he says “makes no sense.” This does not mean that questions of dramatic structure and technique are irrelevant to Darren’s reading of the play – any more than they were irrelevant to students who once grappled with writing Eva Smith’s diary.

Miller’s observations on the casting for the first English production of the play are worth remembering in this context:

The *View* auditions were held in a theatre whose back faced the vegetable stalls of Covent Garden. I would sit beside Peter Brook listening in some pain as one actor after another who seemed to have arrived fresh from Oxford recited the words of Brooklyn waterfront Italo-Americans. One day in desperation I asked Peter if we couldn’t interview some of the Cockney hawkers in the hive of working-class types behind the theatre, exactly the kind of men the play needed. “Doesn’t a grocer’s son ever think of becoming an actor?” I asked. “Those are all grocer’s sons,” Peter replied, indicating the group of young gentlemen awaiting their turns at one side of the orchestra, “but they have trained themselves into this class language. Almost all the plays are written in that language and are about those kinds of people” (Miller 1987/1990: 430).

Darren does not need to turn himself into a Brooklyn waterfront Italo-American to recognise his (class) affinity with Eddie and Marco, say – an affinity that is, of course, also gendered. Perhaps he needs the chance to explore, play with – and enjoy – this affinity before he can even begin to engage with questions of technique, of structure, of theatrical tradition. And when he does begin to engage with the play in this way, it still might be on his terms, from his reading position.

References

- AQA [Assessment and Qualifications Alliance] (2005a) *General Certificate of Secondary Education: English Literature 2007, Specification A*. Manchester: AQA
- AQA [Assessment and Qualifications Alliance] (2005b) *General Certificate of Secondary Education, English 3702/3712, Specification A: Examiners' Report, 2005 examination - June series*. Manchester: AQA
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Passeron, Jean-Claude (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice. London: SAGE
- Gee, James Paul (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. New York: Macmillan.
- Levin, Richard (1979) *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press
- Miller, Arthur. (1955/1995) *A View from the Bridge*. London: Heinemann.
- Miller, Arthur. (1987/1990). *Timebends: a life*. London: Mandarin.
- Miller, Suzanne (2003) "How Literature Discussion Shapes Thinking: ZPDs for Teaching/Learning Habits of the Heart and Mind." In Kozulin, A., et al. (eds.) *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nystrand, Martin, et al. (2003) "Questions in Time: Investigating the Structure and Dynamics of Unfolding Classroom Discourse." *Discourse Processes*, 35(2): 135-198.
- Said, Edward (1983) *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus
- Service, Robert (1989) *Collected Poems*. New York: Warner.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. (1994) "Imagination and Creativity of the Adolescent." In *The Vygotsky Reader*, ed. Van der Veer, René, and Valsiner, Jaan. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. (2004) "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood." *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 42 (1): 7-97.
- Williams, Raymond (1973) *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Yandell, John (1997). "'Sir Oracle': The Merchant of Venice in the classroom." *Changing English* 4(1): 105-122.

1 Participants' names have been replaced by culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

2 See for example, two recent reports in the *Guardian* newspaper: one (Jeevan Vasagar 19 June 2006) is headlined "Thousands march with family raided by police", the other (Will Woodward, 27 June 2006), "Police have no right to rush into action on dubious intelligence, say most Muslims in poll."