

## *Constructing the Innocence of the First Textual Encounter*

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**Abstract:** Three faculty members from UMass Boston's English Department—a team responsible for the department's M.A. course on the Teaching of Literature and for the training of novice teachers of literature—examine the complex process of reading texts that they teach as if they are encountering them as their students do, for the first time. Accepting the proposition that reading texts in the classroom places the student at the center of an experience that originates in the instructor, they suggest that teachers must be prepared to relinquish their “expert” attachment to the text by defamiliarizing it to themselves. Instructors must work to “construct” the innocence of a first encounter, recognizing the artifice of the constructed innocence even as they seek it. The authors share three approaches to this process of estrangement, what they call “the innocence of the material text,” “the pedagogy of restraint,” and “the suspension of mastery.” By having their students read first printings of novels, interpret poetry without the aid of scholarly commentary, and defer their desire to fully comprehend literary texts, teachers can use these “innocent” encounters to balance confident and uncertain readings and enrich the literary experience in the classroom.

### **“Anarchism and the Parking Meter”**

*As I was about  
to put a quarter  
in the parking meter,  
a man walking by  
stopped, whirled,  
fired three karate kicks*

*decapitating the meter,  
and stretched out  
his hand  
for the quarter*

—Martin Espada

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Espada's poem never fails to evoke a smile, if not an outright laugh, from readers when they encounter it for the first time. Whether first encountered in a poetry text, in an essay such as this one, in a classroom, or at a college open house "mini-lecture" showcasing the "value" of literature for prospective students and their parents, the poem's parking meter is a familiar object and the rage it elicits is a shared sentiment.

The language of the poem is simple, despite the word "anarchism," and therefore accessible to both hesitant and sophisticated readers. Seldom does anyone feel that the poem presents an insurmountable barrier to comprehension. It is precisely because of its semantic transparency that Espada's poem provides the ideal ground on which to examine the relationship between innocent and experienced reading, and the different responses we have to the familiar and unfamiliar. Most readers voice their familiarity with the parking meter and almost immediately say what a hated object it is. They follow up this response with a sense of surprise: anarchism?? How strange that something as concrete as a parking meter would be yoked to an abstract and a complex idea like anarchism.

They're fascinated as well by the word "decapitating." Imagine the anger, imagine the turn to violence that would lead an individual to such an act, they observe. At the same time, they sense the humor in the visually rich language—"whirled/ fired three karate kicks"—leading up to the parking meter's decapitation. Then, someone will say that the parking meter is a symbol of state power, a reminder of the constant intrusion of the government into and its regulation of our lives. Others might be most interested in the outstretched hand and the request for the quarter; the violent kicker is transformed into a needy scrounger. Such an observation might (and has) led to the view that "It's a commentary about society. We would rather 'feed' an

inanimate object than a human being." Someone else resists this suggestion, aggressively, "How are you getting *that*? You're reading too much into the poem!"

Of course, it's no surprise to those of us who teach literature, that a text that elicits such varied and rich responses is precisely the kind of text we should be teaching. But Espada's poem is useful not simply because it reminds us of the pleasure of the textual encounter, but also because it very efficiently both allows every reader to reconceive the familiar parking meter *and* gain insight into her/his own "tolerance" for certain kinds of analysis. The textually-oriented reader feels her/himself reluctant to move away from a focus on the play of language and the intellectual energy of the words in the poem and their relationship with one another. The world-oriented reader moves in and out of the space of the poem to connect to experiential urgencies. There are, of course, the hybrid readers who are both textual and worldly in varying degrees. For many individuals, the recognition of the type of reader they are can come as a shock—I didn't realize I was *that* kind of reader.

For teachers, too, the terrain of the classroom can shift unpredictably as a result of many forces, none of which we can account for fully. As a result of that shifting terrain, teachers can find themselves changing their own interpretations of the poem and their understanding of how they themselves read. Teaching the Espada poem can feel at one extreme like an innocent and spontaneously embraced adventure—when you have no way of knowing what the poem will do to the students in your classroom or the audience at the open house mini-lecture; or, at the other end, it can feel like a carefully rehearsed performance where you orchestrate when you will say what and how you will invite the voices of people in the room to make their contributions.

Both reading and teaching, we argue, can profit enormously from an embrace of innocence. The constructed innocence of the teacher and the innocence we might strive to create and harness in the classroom can take many forms; it can be characterized by an immediacy of response, an emotional or even visceral reaction, a sense of insight or epiphany, a moral or ethical judgment, or sense of confusion, bafflement, and uncertainty. We like to emphasize the sense of curiosity and questioning that can both help students to enjoy the experience of the text and lead them to sophisticated conceptual and critical understandings of it. Instructors, who deliberately defamiliarize the textual encounter both for themselves and for their students and in doing so return to a state of innocent wonder about the text at hand, perform an invaluable service that leads ultimately to enriched pedagogy.

### INVESTIGATING THE INNOCENT TEXTUAL ENCOUNTER

Almost 100 years ago, in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky, of the Russian formalist school, described literature as the kind of writing that defamiliarizes the familiar, a type of language that draws attention to the strangeness or artfulness of its own construction, leading to new ways of perceiving and understanding. Paul Fry, in explaining the "literariness" of the formalists in his lecture at Yale on the Russian formalists, observes that it involves special techniques and devices that "slow us down" in arriving at meaning, that unsettle a quick comprehension.

We take the term "defamiliarization" and move it from its original location in poetics to the arena of pedagogy. Our goal is to present to instructors of literature several strategies for defamiliarizing literary texts, or making a "known" text seem strange or removed from one's field of

mastery; further, we aim to encourage instructors of literature to take up texts with which they are genuinely unfamiliar and use these as terrains of productive engagement with their students. Based on the belief that learning (of experienced instructors, of graduate apprentice teachers, and of undergraduate students) is a continuous process of dismantling, reconstructing, "unknowing," and reformulating ideas, opinions, and assumptions in the dynamic space of the classroom, we offer three of our own strategies for enabling this process, in which we emphasize what we call "the innocence of the material text," "the pedagogy of restraint," and "the suspension of mastery." We identify these approaches as practices—as approaches to knowledge-making—that enable the engagement among teacher, student, and text to result in "deep learning," for the student, of course, but also for the teacher (whose insights about the text and effective pedagogy are continually enriched and deepened as a result of the student's responses); this notion of "deep learning" is a variant on Clifford Geertz's "thick description," which he uses to characterize the close and complex attention that the anthropologist must pay to the many layers of cultural meaning embedded in rituals, customs, and daily activities. We maintain that "deep learning" can be rooted in innocent reading.

Our pedagogical project is infused with the spirit of Lyotard's call to "resist[ ] a discourse of mastery"; though he uses the phrase to talk about writing and the effort of writers to feel their way through an idea without necessarily grasping it in its entirety, his sense of a humbly questing mind as it wrestles with language could just as easily be applied to reading. In an interview with Gary Olson, Lyotard observes, "[W]riter[s] ... progress[ ] in a space, a field (but it's not a field) in which they don't know what they have to write. They are confronted with the unknown,

and that's to say they are really confronted with language itself. There is a sort of fight, a battle with and against words and sentences and phrases, and that's beautiful and terrible work in a sense, and I admire it." As a technique of teaching, defamiliarization or "unknowing" draws on the work of, among others, Gayatri Spivak (as articulated to Stuart Murray in a 2003 interview). She says, "reading literature in its literariness is to practice the other as other so that the reader is adrift—determined by the text—in unpredictable alterity" (191). We also find useful Calvin Thomas' phrase "fruitful ignorance" as the necessary stance for doing English studies (20).

We, instructors and students of literature, are typically uncomfortable in the face of unfamiliarity, in the confrontation with circumstances, objects, peoples, and landscapes that elude our understanding. When a text—whether it is cultural, textual, visual, social, or material—maintains its barriers to our comprehension of it, we become frustrated. The discomfort may come from our being reminded that not everything is within our grasp intellectually or emotionally. This essay takes as its starting point the idea that the teaching of literature should endeavor to cultivate within the instructor and the student openness to and acceptance of the unfamiliar.

The three of us, Alex Mueller, Cheryl Nixon, and Rajini Srikanth, are involved in our English department's systematic training and mentoring of graduate students who have a special interest in the pedagogy of literature. Some of our graduate students already teach at the high-school level and are eager to enrich their current teaching practices and acquire new ones; others are preparing to become teachers of literature in colleges and universities. In our work with these current or aspiring teachers, we attempt to accomplish two seemingly contradictory goals: (1) to provide the necessary skills and knowledge to increase their confidence to teach literary texts and

(2) to cultivate their willingness to suspend or relinquish "mastery" and approach a literary text with the innocent expectation of a first encounter. Elaine Showalter describes this latter objective as a process of re-animating the text so that it holds for the teacher the same excitement of a first encounter and returns the teacher to the moment of her/his own delight of discovery (45-6).

For an instructor of literature to adopt such innocence in the reading posture is, we admit, artificial and constructed; our own journey as teachers was necessarily a process of *shedding* innocence and conquering bafflement in the face of the literary text. Likewise, our novice teachers certainly don't want to feel unprepared as they encounter their undergraduate or high school students. Perhaps, therefore, a more accurate way to describe the kind of pedagogical posture we want our novice teachers to cultivate is to see it as strategic or performative.

By using the word "performative," we risk having our training viewed as an exercise in duplicity; therefore, we want to dispel this notion immediately. We recognize that when confronted with a roomful of hesitant undergraduate or high-school students, our novice teachers may find it difficult to maintain a posture of performative innocence. They may be tempted to fill in the silences that greet their questions about or invitations to respond to the literary text. What we discuss in this essay are the various ways in which an instructor can navigate between, on the one hand, a desire to display confidence in one's knowledge of the material to be taught and, on the other, strategic or performative innocence about what this material signifies. If the goal of the instructor's posture of performative innocence is to elicit from students their unrehearsed and fresh engagement with the text, then Sharon Todd offers a useful point of departure. She writes,

Plato serves up the irony of teaching in the very consummate figure of the teacher, Socrates: the good teacher is someone who does not teach, or more appropriately, who does not see oneself as teaching. Socrates is the teacher, who, like the perfect murderer, makes it appear that teaching has not taken place, who leaves the scene without a trace, and who, moreover, is convinced of his innocence. ... Performatively speaking, in a pedagogical scene where teaching is supposedly absent, where the teacher is an innocent facilitator, Socrates exhibits himself as a crafty questioner, as a skilled wordsmith who carefully scaffolds the possibilities of response. (24)

We want to push against the phrases “crafty questioner” and “skilled wordsmith.” If silence is what greets the instructor, then the instructor’s response should not be to take up the mode of the “crafty questioner” or “skilled wordsmith.” Instead, the instructor should regard the classroom as precisely the kind of experimental and fluid space in which certainty and predetermined understanding become destabilized. Students should ideally witness the instructor who, in the process of confronting the unknown, speaks hesitatingly, tests out various halting articulations, and searches for formulations. This kind of faltering utterance could also be feigned, we acknowledge, but we maintain that if through such feigning our teacher trainees “perform” the relinquishment of mastery, then the likelihood of student engagement dramatically increases.

The instructor’s unrehearsed and roughly articulated thoughts, shaped in the presence of the students, serve to “scaffold[] the possibilities of response” (see Todd above). Particularly with beginning or diffident readers of literature, such

scaffolding is crucial, provided that it is not too prescriptive. In fact, the instructor has to take particular care to avoid both the too elaborately constructed scaffold, which can overwhelm students and stifle the emergence of their own perspectives, and the too open interpretive space, which can generate anxiety and result in a refusal to engage the text. The questions the instructor poses, the comments s/he makes that are offered in a spirit of shared exploration, the “perhapses,” and “maybes” that constitute the interpretive footholds—all these can work to position the instructor as equally “baffled” by the text as the student but eager to embark on a textual journey.

With this eager textual journey as our goal, we now turn to three strategies we have employed to encourage our students to take that voyage.

## THE INNOCENCE OF THE MATERIAL TEXT

*Cheryl Nixon*

If we want to encourage innocent readings, perhaps we can use “innocent” versions of our texts in order to do so. In this section, we explore a strategy of defamiliarization that centers on the materiality of the text and emphasizes how the physical text can help the student—and teacher—to, quite literally, see the text anew. Thanks to the recent growth in electronic databases collecting scanned primary sources, our students can now sit at their laptop and engage with rare first editions, early print versions, and archival collections that could once be accessed only by visiting the most exclusive of rare books libraries. These rare books sources are typically positioned as the materials of advanced academic research, helping scholars formulate and engage in bibliographic study. However, we propose that these materials allow both teacher and

student to share the innocence of the first textual encounter—an encounter that connects the wonder and curiosity of a first reading to the most sophisticated of critical questionings.

An exploration of the material text can start with something as seemingly simple as a title page or a one-page excerpt from a literary work. I often circulate a short material text when I introduce a new work to a class, with the aim of stimulating opening questions about it; I will also circulate samples of material texts when a class is in the middle of reading a longer work, with the goal of unsettling some of the too-easy or too-repetitive interpretations we may have formulated of it.

Let's re-see the well-known novel *Robinson Crusoe* by examining an early title page from 1722 (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> First published in 1719, this incredibly popular novel appeared in a sixth edition by 1722; selecting the 1722 edition allows us to locate a scan of that text—and its title page—on *Google books*. Although the first edition, in addition to the sixth edition, is available in high-priced, university-subscription databases such as *Eighteenth-Century Collections On-line*, the proliferation of scanned early texts on *Google books* is making it a valuable research and teaching tool. Students can easily access *Google books* themselves, allowing for the creation of new forms of primary-source-centered assignments and exercises.

As they examine the title page, the students can't help but become conceptual questioners. Because the students know that the title page is alien to the entire class,

they ask questions that might seem basic in other contexts, but that work to productively interrogate the foundations of the literary text: Why would a book title try to contain an entire plot summary? Why is Defoe erasing himself as an author? Why is the title most interested in the details of time and space? Students notice the strangeness of some of the information contained in the title, and their questioning provides avenues for further historical and cultural investigation: How can it be that Crusoe was shipwrecked and lost near America—was the American coast that unknown? Were pirates really still sailing around in 1700? When I circulate this title page in the classroom, the results are immediate: students are transformed into hyper-observant close readers. As they investigate the page, they are instantly hooked by the strange font and layout of the page; they can't help but have a "What is this? What's going on? What does this say?" reaction. They notice that the most foundational elements of the novel look—and are—strange. The novel is not titled *Robinson Crusoe*; it is titled *The Life, and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who lived eight and twenty Years in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River Oroonoque; having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With an Account how he was at last strangely deliver'd by Pyrates*. The author is not listed as Daniel Defoe. Instead, authorship is indicated by the phrase "Written by Himself," claiming that Robinson Crusoe himself wrote the book. And, the 1722 title page features an elaborate image of a ship, advertising that the book is "Adorned with Cuts" or illustrated. Finally, the page includes detailed publishing information at the bottom; the book was sold at "the *Ship and Black-Swan* in *Pater-Noster-Row*," a London location that can be visited today—and easily found on *Google maps*.

The strange layout, font sizes, and

<sup>1</sup> This image is reproduced from *Google books'* scan of the 1722 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, found by doing a simple search of "Robinson Crusoe" and the publication date of 1722: [http://books.google.com/books?id=QWTQAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=robinson+crusoe&lr=&as\\_drrb\\_is=b&as\\_minm\\_is=0&as\\_miny\\_is=1722&as\\_maxm\\_is=0&as\\_maxy\\_is=&as\\_brr=0&cd=10#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=QWTQAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=robinson+crusoe&lr=&as_drrb_is=b&as_minm_is=0&as_miny_is=1722&as_maxm_is=0&as_maxy_is=&as_brr=0&cd=10#v=onepage&q&f=false)

typography triggers questions (why do “s”s look like “f”s?) that help students understand how the physical shape of the text helps to construct its meaning. Students “read deeply,” looking at shapes of individual words and letters, and “question widely,” wanting more information on topics such as the printing of early books of the exploration of the Americas. In other words, students quickly become both “textual readers” and “worldly readers.” Students might be innocent first-time readers of *Robinson Crusoe*, but the experience of looking at an early title page makes them into a “more innocent” reader and, crucially, an “equally innocent” reader who can share that process of investigating and questioning with the rest of the class. Freed from asking the typical or expected questions about *Robinson Crusoe*, they formulate questions that might start with a more enthusiastic reading, and could lead them to a more investigative reading, informed reading, or multivalent—textual and worldly—reading. The freedom and flexibility of the interpretive process encouraged by the material text often result in unexpectedly insightful observations, questions, and conjectures: the students see more by seeing anew.

Until now, early editions have been the materials of the expert literary scholar. Students, in contrast, typically read texts that take a very different form. Heavily edited, corrected, regularized, modernized, annotated, footnoted, and introduced, modern editions work to make the text familiar and knowable, but always mediated by a figure more expert than the student. The modern edition, no matter how necessary, removes the reader from a productive sense of “unknowing,” and a productive sense that this “unknowing” can be transformed into knowledge through careful reading and questioning. The modern edition necessarily removes some of the innocence of the original text, and thus some of the possibility of the inno-

cent first encounter with the text. Somewhat paradoxically, the material text allows the student to enter into expert scholarly investigation precisely because he or she can engage with the texts as a novice, fully embracing reading in a state of unknowing.

Reading the “innocent” material text can be a defamiliarizing experience, but typically proves that such defamiliarizing can be fun and enjoyable. The possibilities for integrating defamiliarizing uses of the material text into the classroom are numerous, and can be employed with students working at all levels and with almost any type of text. Simply circulating copies of select pages can quickly get questions and ideas circulating amongst students. Exercises can encourage students to compare a scene in a modern edition to that in an early edition, to compare a scene across multiple early editions, or to compare illustrated and non-illustrated editions. One of my most successful classroom exercises asks students to be textual observers, marking up photocopies of a page of material text, circling strange elements, and creating lists of questions based on those marks. A favorite follow-up assignment asks students to step into the role of textual scholar, requiring that they select a page from an early edition and transcribe it, adding footnotes or an introductory explanation.

In addition to investigating early editions of the assigned literary text, the text can be positioned in dialogue with lesser-known texts of its time period. With the help of databases of scanned materials, students can experience literature not just as individual material texts, but as participants in a larger textual material culture. To return to the example of *Robinson Crusoe*, even a cursory investigation of early eighteenth-century texts invoking the novel turns up a multitude of “cheap print” sources. One of the best, *A Dialogue Betwixt D--- F---e, Robinson Crusoe, and his Man Friday*, highlights the idea of engaging in a creative dialogue with the literary text.

Also available on *Google books*, the 1719 pamphlet by Charles Gildon criticizes the characters and plot of *Robinson Crusoe*, but does not take the form of a scholarly piece of literary criticism. Instead, the essay mocks any attempt at expert interpretation by showing how the questioning of a literary text can take original, creative forms.

As its title indicates, the pamphlet allows Defoe's fictional characters of Crusoe and Friday to "come to life" and confront Defoe directly, asking their author why he made them inconsistent and illogical. Crusoe and Friday are so angry at their portrayal in the novel that they contemplate shooting Defoe, but decide to question him instead. Friday explains that Defoe has injured him, to which "D---I" or Daniel, replies and continues the conversation:

*D---I.* Injure you too, how the Devil have I injur'd you?

*Fri.* Have injure me, to make me such Blockhead, so much contradiction, as to be able to speak English *tolerably* well in a Month or two, and not to speak it better in twelve Years after; to make me go out to be a Spokesman to them, tho' I did not know, whether they understood one Word of my Language; for you must know, Father *D...n*, that almost ev'ry Nation of us *Indians* speak a different Language. Now Master shall me shoot? (ix)

In this short passage, questioning the text is a vigorous and stimulating activity that hopefully captures the student reader's imagination and ignites pleasure in reading. Friday himself questions the text, complaining that he has been made a "Blockhead" in the novel that invents him. The activity of questioning can be "seen" in the typographical representation of back-

and-forth dialogue on the page. That activity is comic, creative, and full of energy. That activity is also conceptually sophisticated: Defoe's fictional characters become "real" in order to offer insightful commentary on how their development is not realistic. Friday emphasizes the details of his own story—that he was not able to develop his language abilities over the course of the novel, yet he was able to speak with unfamiliar savages—as means of providing a striking critique of Defoe's inability to structure character development. This critique can lead to a deep reading of the novel; the textual reader might emphasize the novel's inadequate use of time in character development, while the worldly reader might emphasize the categorization of Friday as a "savage," which then allows him to be equated with all "savages." The seeming "innocent," Friday, proves more knowing than his own creator.

*A Dialogue Betwixt D--- F---e, Robinson Crusoe, and his Man Friday* illustrates just how much fun the activity of defamiliarizing literature can be: a minor, forgotten pamphlet from the early eighteenth century allows canonical characters to come alive and break out of a typical reading of a well-known novel. By experiencing *A Dialogue*, the student is invited into a space where the activity of question-filled dialogue is valued—and the new, innocent reader is empowered by that activity. Authors can be critiqued, literary texts and contexts can be brought together, and the division between canonical and non-canonical texts can be erased. The primary source, captured in its original "innocent" state, gives the student access to a new way of seeing the text. Crucially, this new way of seeing preserves the student's innocent reading while also giving the student new expertise in the close reading and conceptual questioning of the text. Perhaps even more crucially, it emphasizes that engaging in dialogue with the literary text is fun.



## THE PEDAGOGY OF RESTRAINT

Alex Mueller

One of the quickest—and all too prevalent—ways we kill such textual fun is by expounding upon the way a piece of literature has been interpreted by literary critics over time. It has become a pedagogical habit, almost beyond question, to consult study guides, glosses, and commentaries on the texts we teach. We endure the weight of this task for fear that our expertise could be undermined by our lack of familiarity with the interpretive tradition. Unfortunately, I often find that immersion in the critical debates paradoxically leads to the authorization of standard readings and the exclusion of more provocative interpretations in my classroom. Even though I seek to open up the field of interpretation for my students, my rehearsal of the critical tradition limits the terms of analysis and stunts the development of surprising or new investigations of literary texts. This pedagogy of critical saturation privileges the replication of ossified readings over the production of fresh analyses, transforming literature discussions into parodic exercises in which students parrot the interpretations of their teachers and the critical “authorities.”

Because we become intimately familiar with the texts we teach and research, it is difficult for us to recall the “innocence” of reading these texts for the first time. For example, Shakespearean scholar Ann Thompson claims that her expertise often belies her efforts to teach *Hamlet*. She confesses, “I find that I know it almost too well for the purpose; it is virtually impossible for me to imagine what it must be like to read the play for the first time, and I am capable of becoming impatient with students’ perfectly reasonable desires to discuss topics which for me have become tedious through over familiarity” (7). While Thompson suggests that teaching

outside of one’s area of expertise will resolve this tension between research and teaching, I want to argue that it is indeed possible to “construct the innocence of the first textual encounter” even with texts we know so well that we can recite them from memory. To accomplish this feat, however, teachers will often have to withhold their own historical, literary, and linguistic commentaries and allow their students to work through their confusion and readings collaboratively.

Such a pedagogy of restraint is especially urgent for texts that are “overtaught,” that is, those that can be found in most “Introduction to Literature” anthologies. For example, a Shakespearean text that is familiar to many literature teachers is *Sonnet 130* (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun . . .”), a poem frequently taught because of its accessible language, concise form, and unflattering description of a lover:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head;  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.  
(Duncan-Jones 375)<sup>2</sup>

Readers who seek scholarly commentary on this poem will soon discover that this sonnet is a response to the Petrarchan tradition of hyperbolic praise of the object of affection (Booth 452-5; Duncan-Jones 47-9, 374; Fineman 23, 179-80, 182; Hadfield 173-4; Kerrigan 359-60; Schoenfeldt 129; Steele 132-7). Most commentators will insist that this unconventional blazon be read as a response to honey sweet sonnets such as the following one by Edmund Spenser:

Coming to kisse her lyps (such grace I  
found)  
Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet  
flowres:  
that dainty odours from them threw  
around  
for damsels fir to decke their lovers  
bowres.  
Her lips did smell lyke unto Gillyflow-  
ers,  
her ruddy cheeks lyke unto Roses red:  
her snowy browes lyke budded Bel-  
lamoures,  
her lovely eyes lyke Pincks but newly  
spred,  
Her goodly bosome lyke to a bounch of  
Cullambynes:  
her brest lyke lilyes, ere they leaves be  
shed,  
her nipples lyke yong blossomd Iesse-  
mynes:  
Such fragrant flowres doe give most  
odorous smell,  
but her sweet odour did them all excel.  
(Larsen 64; Hadfield 172-3)

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Johnson describes the sonnet as eminently teachable because it "is as down-to-earth sonnet as they are likely to encounter, so the meaning becomes immediately clear" (18). Likewise, Deborah Beezley teaches the sonnet to her high school students because it grabs their attention and "contrast[s] sharply with the idealized standards of beauty touted by Shakespeare's contemporary sonneteers" (20).

Spenser's sugary similes graft human beauty into a botanical world that Shakespeare critiques as overblown and unfaithful to the mundane, and sometimes unsightly, appearance of a lover.

An understanding of this poetic tradition may be necessary in many cases for a responsible reading of Shakespeare's sonnet series, but I want to suggest that the premature introduction of this context potentially limits the range and depth of student readings of the poem's evocative imagery. For example, the lines "And in some perfumes is there more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks" (7-8) provoke virulent reactions from students that scholarly commentaries often nullify. In a note on "reeks," commentator Katherine-Duncan Jones claims that the word simply meant "exhales" and did not have "quite such unpleasant associations for the Elizabethans as it would later acquire" (374.8).<sup>3</sup> Yet, readers such as Sarah Gouthro, a student in my introductory "Art of Literature" course, are immediately drawn to the word precisely for its "modern" connotation. In her own written commentary, she admits, "Imagining her reeking breath is borderline repulsive," but she goes on to suggest that "His mistress' breath probably doesn't reek, per se, but my understanding is that Shakespeare is using such a harsh comparison to basically say that flowers don't bloom and angels don't sing when this woman happens to open her mouth."<sup>4</sup> Without the awareness of the supposed Elizabethan banality of "reeks," Gouthro's repulsion becomes a

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<sup>3</sup> Booth agrees that "reeks" was not quite the "insult" it now would be, but he adds, "commentators often over-caution modern readers: both the verb and noun were already well on their way toward their modern meanings in Shakespeare's time" (454.8).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah has kindly given me permission to use her name and this passage from her commentary in this essay. She was a student in my Fall 2009 course at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

gateway to an insightful interpretation, one that scholars of the sonnet justify by contrasting it with poems of other sonneteers and the opinions of other commentators. Yet, if students are given the impression, via scholarly commentary or gloss, that “reeks” did not possess the shock value for Shakespeare’s audience that it does for them, such emotional engagement and critical exploration are unlikely to occur.

In fact, Gouthro may be surprised to discover that her reading is shared by sonnet critic Joel Fineman, who suggests that this backhanded praise turns “all such heliotropic verses back upon themselves, re-versing these familiar tropes, so that, quite literally, “my mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” because the lady’s eyes *are nothing*—like the sun” (179). Nothingness is emphasized over ostentation, the “glib and oily art” of Cordelia’s sisters in *King Lear* (1.1.226), not in an attempt to insult the object of affection but to represent a raw and unadulterated love. Gouthro and Fineman’s point is one likely to be displaced within the context of sonnet conventions, in which hyperbolic and fantastical similes are not just tolerated—they are expected. The “literal” reading of the sonnet is exemplified in an illustration from Charles Sorel’s *The Extravagant Shepherd* (1654) that depicts a monstrous woman who *actually* has suns for eyes, roses in her cheeks, and even globes for breasts (See Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> If teachers preemptively correct students’ “misreadings” or interrupt responses to words such as “reeks” by referring to commentary or sonnet tradition, such unsavory images will not likely emerge in the minds of students reading this poem for the first time—instead, the sonnet may read simply as a sexist joke or anti-sonnet that students will not feel compelled to take seriously. Many

will be inclined to agree with commentator Duncan-Jones, who dismisses the sonnet as “offensive both to her [the object of affection] and to women in general” (48). While I believe this is a fair reading, how many of our students would be audacious enough to contest it?

When we read *as* teachers, we have to be careful not to read *for* our students. Even when we try to pursue multiple readings of a text in the classroom, our own expertise and the scholarly material we introduce can obstruct students’ interpretive processes. In literature classes, we work to develop students’ academic voices through which they can contest and defend interpretations of texts. Yet, if we share the scholarly commentary on a text before students have the opportunity to form their own analyses, how many of our students possess the interpretivechutzpah to challenge the opinions of experts? To combat this problem, I use Sheridan Blau’s practice of having students write their own commentaries before consulting the critical tradition, citing the interpretations of their classmates as if they were scholars themselves (173-9). I’ve found that they are much more likely to contest the opinions of their classmates than the scholarly material they find through JSTOR or Google Scholar. To my continual delight, I often discover that their “scholarly” collaboration leads to interpretations that they would have never risked after reading scholarly commentary.

Ultimately, my goal is that students learn to achieve textual understandings by reading collaboratively, juxtaposing their readings with those of others, scrutinizing accepted interpretations, and assuming interpretive authority over texts. In other words, I want our students to begin to read as we do—as teachers. For this to happen, we must restrain our impulse to survey the field of interpretation for our students. Our students then become the surveyors, revealing “innocent” avenues of inquiry that challenge “authoritative” readings.

<sup>5</sup> This image is reproduced from “How to Make a Young Face Exceedingly Beautiful Or an Old Face Tolerable” on the Folger Library website: <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=1734>.

## THE SUSPENSION OF MASTERY

*Rajini Srikanth*

Yet, we caution our novice teachers, the goal is not to arrive at certain knowledge of the text but rather to see it as always available to being defamiliarized. We take to heart Edward Said's caveat that to become enthralled by the mastery of the text is to miss something critical about the world outside the text:

Our interpretive worldly-wisdom has been applied, in a sense, to everything except ourselves; we are brilliant at deconstructing the mystifications of a text, at elucidating the blindness of a critical method, but we have seemed unable to apply these techniques to the very life of texts in the world, their materiality, their capacity for the production of misery or liberation, their monumentality .... As a result, we are mesmerized by the text, and convinced that a text is only a text, without realizing how saying that, such a narrow view is not only naïve, it is blind." (qtd. in Ghosh 58)

To put into practice these ideas of productive unknowing and constructive defamiliarization in the service of "deep learning," Paula Gunn Allen's poem "Zen Americana" offers a fertile space. Texts can be unfamiliar or defamiliarized in several ways. Their language can be "estranging" (borrowing another term from the Russian formalists), in that they transform what was previously recognizable into something somewhat strange and unlikely; the cultural references they contain or cultural assumptions they make can be unfamiliar; the historical framework within which they unfold can be remote; and the social codes embedded in them can be alienating.

Allen's poem takes familiar language and uses the prefix "un" to defamiliarize semantically the words we all thought we understood. "How do you open/ the door to Un? What does the un place look like./ look alike?" (3-4). Allen's poem is an invitation to "un." "Un is okay./ Un pretentious. Un decided. Un known" (1-2). It seems we are being asked to un do meaning, un do sense, un do knowing.

This poem enacts, in its linguistic morphology, with its spaces and parentheses, the delay of sense. It is not necessary to make meaning, it appears to say. It is not necessary to find coherence. To know something is to control it, to desire to contain it. One might deduce from Allen's Native American heritage that this poem is a critique of the need to contain complexity within knowable categories, or that it is a resistance to what Gramsci calls the "discourse of hegemony" (in this regard, see also Srikanth's essay "Collecting and Translating the Non-Western Other"). But there are other possibilities: The title of the poem, with its New Age pairing of Zen and Americana is tantalizing in that one could see it as mocking the American tendency to commodify religious belief; or it could be, as one Japanese student saw it, an exhortation, in the spirit of Buddhism, to detach oneself from all material things—quite the opposite of the spirit of Americana. Allen's poem endorses bafflement; the last line of the poem is "(Un believed.)" (14).

Quite a different type of unfamiliarity presents itself in the translated (by Taylor Stoehr) poem "To Secretary Su, Who Did Not Find Me at Home" by the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese poet Wang Wei. How does one read this unfamiliar (to most teachers and students) text "responsibly"? What does it mean to read responsibly and how do we teach students to read in this way? How would we read this unfamiliar text if we did not have to teach it? How do we read knowing that we have to teach it?

At the very least, students might recog-

nize that the text is a poem, because of the visual layout of the words, which reflect the line breaks we have come to associate with the genre of poetry. When should the instructor introduce biographical information about the poet and how much of it? Introduce relevant debates in translation studies? What aspects of Chinese culture or history are even necessary to studying the poem? What about the Chinese literary tradition and Wei's place in it? Is the poem an act of political resistance (suggested by the honorific "Secretary" who came to a house from which the host was absent and who therefore was not greeted with the respect deserving of his station), or is it a simple and innocent apology? How should we read the speaker's tone in "No one here to open the gate to you, / just a stony road back for your trouble" (3-4)? As regretful, defiant, or gleeful?

One strategy I frequently employ is to assign a text that I myself have not read prior to my teaching it; I read the text at the same time as my students—in class, or in preparation for a class meeting. This strategy is an attempt to simulate for myself the first or innocent textual encounter that our students often experience; I realize, of course, that in my case the innocence is not entirely pure, because I know something about the text, though not its substantive particularities, and have selected it because it fits within the thematic framework of the course. My aim is to model for my students the reading attitude that is likely to lead to the richest results when we are faced with a text that presents us with unfamiliarities. Together we negotiate the text: What questions does it evoke? What articulations can one reasonably make from reading the text—where do the "events" in it take place? Who speaks in it? Can we infer what kind of persons the speakers are? What happens in the text? How does language work in the text? Is our understanding of the linguistic play reasonable? What do we not know but wish we knew? How would

we go about gaining this absent information? And how would we assess the reliability of what we find? When would we know that we have lessened our unfamiliarity with the text, and with what degree of certainty can we make such a claim?

Through this collectively engaged inquiry into/probing of the text and ourselves, we gradually come to an understanding of what it means to lessen responsibly our unfamiliarity with a text. If we have undertaken the process of unfamiliarization with appropriate interpretive humility, then both teacher and students will realize that the initial innocence will always be preserved. The text presents itself to us anew each time we look at it.

## UN-CONCLUSION

The posture of un-knowing or imperfect knowing that we ultimately seek to encourage in our teacher trainees leads, we hope, to a necessary skepticism to the "textual attitude" that Said cautions against. By this he means, the "fallacy [of] assum[ing] that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books—texts—say" (93). When the text is not envisioned to be the repository of full meaning or, corollarily, when one does not seek to master its contents, then both the instructor and the student are reminded of the urgency of heeding the tumultuous world in which the text is merely metonymic. We are reminded that the world of the text and the world we live in can be open to such un-predictable acts as a passer-by kicking down a parking meter, a character threatening to shoot his author, a student being disgusted by reeking breath, and a student making "un"connections across cultures and religions. In short, we are reminded that innocence is an opening to question our texts, our world, and ourselves as students and teachers.

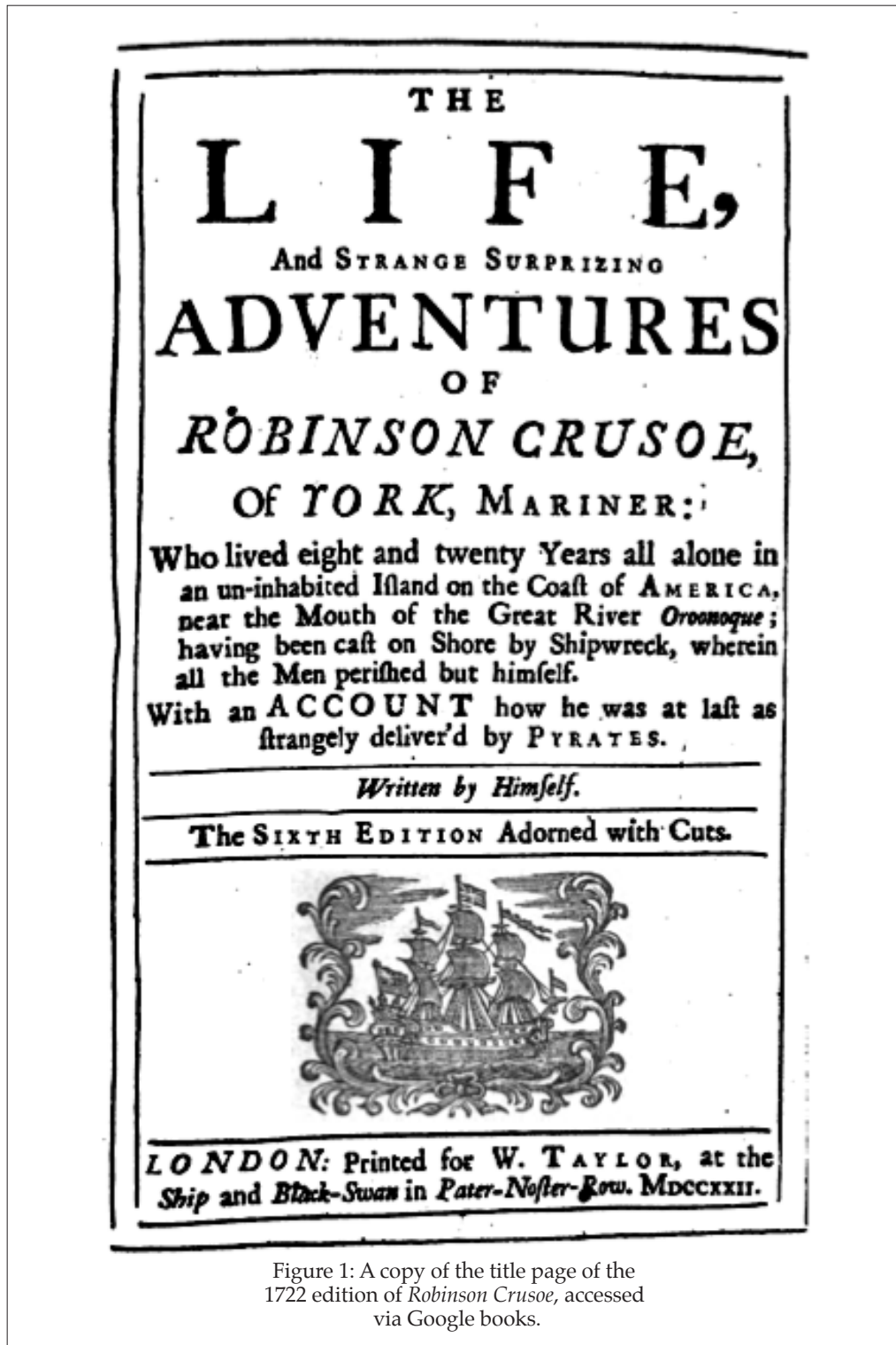


Figure 1: A copy of the title page of the 1722 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, accessed via Google books.



Figure 2. An illustration of "sonnet" beauty in Charles Sorel's *The Extravagant Shepherd* (London, 1654).

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