

Burning at the Edges: Judith P. Robertson and the Provocations of Reading

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When thinkers inhabit the matrix
of life worlds of complex thought,
it's not always easy to be clear or coherent
about the structures and patterns
that fly like bats in the night through mental
space.

-Judith P. Robertson, personal communication, October 23, 2008

I will begin my discussion in this paper by framing what follows as a story of latching; as a movement of learning and desire, and an impossible grasping that is “both an event and its limit” (Britzman, 2009, p. 21). To latch onto something—be it the words of literature, the knowledge of another, a teacher’s tone, a professor’s pose, or a mother’s breast—usually means to get hold of it, to have it in your grasp, to take it with you for a while and then, maybe, to let it go. The triumph of latching may thus be said to lie in claiming for one’s own purposes something out there in the social world, transforming—in the entrails of this indefinite excursion—the psychic worlds of both the latcher and the latched, the teacher and the student, the reader and that which is read.

Transitory spaces of reading—as potential locations where textual latching is enacted and embodied—are forged in the juncture and contact zone between the subject and the object of interpretation, between “two desiring systems: the text of the mind and the text of the story” (Robertson, 2000, p. 188). For reading, literary, and curriculum theorist Judith P. Robertson (2003), following Julian Wolfreys’ (2000) etymological tracings of reading and its relations to the belly of the beast, “Entering the beast's belly with a view to ‘reading’ it is a fraught business.”¹

The gathering of latching is a risky, divided and non-committal affair, yet, at the same time, it is also an unquestionable staking of value. Think of what we do when we co-author, where we go when we converse. Where we pause and what we touch stays with us in traces—bodily reminders and sketches of subtle affect, certain words that resonate deep within our psychic selves, tearing at our very fabric, “where thinking may hold and be held momentarily by the thoughts/relics/traces of another” (Robertson & Radford, 2009, p. 204). As it is a promiscuous relationship that does not always ask permission, latching can also be a violent experience, and is thus an interloping and hidden elocution, sometimes a pleasing and sometimes a terror. Reading is always a question of latching, though latching is always a question unanswered.

For Bruce Fink (1997), speaking of the conditions of transference in Lacanian psychoanalysis, “Anytime the analysand latches onto one of the analyst’s demands ... reconstituting him or herself in relation to that demand, satisfying it or deliberately frustrating it, the analyst must shift ground to ensure that her desire remains an unknown” (p. 64). In the relational folds of reading we also have a similar dance, where the intimations of an unnamed desire seem to forever whisper from somewhere beyond where the text and reader meet, and as soon as we think we may have grasped its meaning—or that we have effectively latched onto its shades of insight and truth—it slips away, and is once

more elusive, out of reach and seemingly out of control. As Robertson (2003) puts it, “reading is something fleeting,” and so is here considered not by its quantifiable trajectories and measures of success or failure, but in how it responds to the demands of an unvoiced question, not by *what it is*, but instead, by *where* and *how it moves*, and then also by *what it does*.

As Robertson (1994) expresses it, there is an “error inherent in reading” (p. 169), and it is through taking up the intangible implications of this error as a given—recognizing the inescapable and contradictory silences that persist in language and speech, as a slippage and a passionate imprecision—that I will latch myself onto Robertson’s words, as an avowed reader of reading, and stage a performance of theorizing at the brinks of what in reading is unplumbable and unfigured. With reference to Freud, Robertson (2004) writes, “There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown” (p. 89). And so, figuring that the unknown will likely and mostly remain so, I will here venture into Robertson’s various—and sometimes co-authored—considerations of reading’s phantasmal provocations, or what she and McConaghy call “the psychosocial dynamics that give shape to shadows in reading” (Robertson & McConaghy, 2006, p. 13). In recovering the unpredictable nature of our encounters with the textual world we are also encouraged to recuperate education’s (sometimes lost) potential for invention and spontaneity, and to claim the erratic pulsations of curriculum and language as something always lived and embodied.

In the pages that follow, then, I will initiate an inquiry into a reading that travels in meditative flight through the shaky and uncertain inventions of an/other, and I will use Judith Robertson’s words as a compass, as my interpretive north star, as that which I circle around. For Robertson, the object of reading is always already lost, and despite persistent claims to the contrary, reading’s subject revels in a groping and a latching whose meaning remains perennially misplaced. What can

education take from such uncertainty? Can moments of teaching and learning, and the space of an elusive and living curriculum, likewise revel in doubt and indeterminacy? Where knowledge is never so much that which concludes, but instead, that which begins, and begins, and begins again?

Reading as a Social Activity

In describing the landscapes threaded throughout her writing, Robertson (2008) describes her work as engaged with acts of reading throughout the human life cycle, the professionalization of reading in teacher education, the relations of reading to questions of psychic interiority, risk and trauma, the cultural uses and effects of literary experience, and pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning through literature.

In these categories, there is a sustained interest in the dynamics of “reading readings” (Robertson, 1994), a methodology of interpretation, which through an integrated theoretical lens of cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism, “demands a strategy of rhetorical analysis” (p. 12), an attention to the elusive movements of desire in language as a type of “reading effect.” To attend to such effects is itself to allow for reading and education as interminable acts—as fluctuations of knowledge and self with no regard to finality or closure—since “If education [and reading] is to acknowledge its own imperfections and the tensions of its own projections, education must *first see itself*, experience itself as something *incomplete*” (Robertson, 2001, p. 41, italics in original).

The physical traces of “reading effects,” which point to Freud’s understanding that “speech performs as a vehicle through which unconscious effects are established” (Robertson, 1997, p. 81), are found in the “material affects” of language, such as repetition, metonymy, metaphor, condensation, displacement, ambivalence, hesitation, etc., all of which mark “language as a carrier of excess” (Robertson, 1994, p. 22),

and as a permeable container for unresolved tensions, silences, struggles, and obstacles, with which the reader—in their psychic work—is always unconsciously engaged. By attending to these often neglected and ambiguous moments and movements of reading experience, Robertson challenges us not to resolve or “fix” the problem of reading, or to make it “stick,” but instead, to think of “the idea of obstacles as reliable learning objects” (2001, p. 27), and to reconsider reading’s inadequacies as creative methods of containment and emotional transference, as places we put ourselves and as words that touch us and hold us like breath. To paraphrase Shoshana Felman (1987), who asks, “What can the impossibility of teaching teach us?” (p. 70), Robertson invites us to pose a similar question: What can the impossibility of reading read to us, in us, with us, and through us? Or, as she succinctly expresses it, “*how to make out from what is given something meaningful*” (Robertson, 2001, p. 29, italics in original).

In this search for evidence of a sometimes-slumbering significance in textual engagement, Robertson (1994) looks to the collective arrangements of reading experience, and to the social space of the “reading formation,” which she defines as “a knowable community ... a transitional, transferential space through which the conditions of textuality and dialogue force symbolic exchanges to occur” (p. 299). “Reading formations,” therefore, are most obviously found in the encounters of classroom life, though they are also located in spaces of out-of-school literary exchange as well. For Robertson, the largely “unexamined representational spaces” of book clubs (Robertson, Lewkowich & Rottman, 2010, p. 143)—where intersubjective meaning is often “constituted, disrupted, exceeded, and ever-remade” (Robertson, 2003)—occupies a privileged place in contemporary expressions of literary and cultural formation. In book clubs, encounters of reading are experienced “as a living cultural phenomenon implicated in transforming landscapes of power/knowledge, through indigenous

processes that are common and ordinary, and yet largely invisible and unofficial" (Robertson, 2003). The social life of reading is here at its most palpable, persistent, and impulsive. Even as readers in a social circumstance may vigorously defend their own interpretive claims, to be embroiled in the energies of such an endeavour of literary exchange is always to "allow the knowledge of an/other to touch the mind" (Robertson, 2001, p. 42). In this manner, "recovering [reading] as provocation invites us to view it as something dynamic and unfrozen" (Robertson, 2006, p. 175), as something that is only ever partial, incomplete, and perpetually unfinished.

Reading as a Function of Travelling and Landscape

The place of reading is then difficult to determine, since reading happens not *in space and time*, as a moment that can be captured and explained in full, but *through space and time*, as an often fleeting feeling that is more of a hunch and a guess than a fact—an untidy, non-linear affair that involves the leaking of body, memory, and mind. Perhaps it is this distinction that can best explain the silences that persist in reading theory about what Robertson and Radford (2009) call "the pedagogical significance of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, in reading experience" (p. 203). If reading is to be measured by "processes that are often felt to reside precariously outside of meaning itself" (Robertson, 2003), it is then no surprise that the stirrings of travel—journeys both physical and psychological—can evoke the presence of powerful literary encounters, and contribute to the range of ways in which reading is experienced in relation to the world around us. Of course, to pursue the bloody entrails of any plot—whether of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or the history of an iceberg floating off Newfoundland's Southern shore—is always to stage a conceptual travel (that the mind wanders is an unavoidable consequence of reading); to touch someone else's words is

at all times to move through the space of multiple mental archives. We trace a writerly trail in a “*reading going places*” (Robertson, 2008, italics in original) that hints at an indecipherable method—a path that trembles through—insinuating at once the desiring intentions of the writer, as played out in the text, alongside those of the reader, whose strident sounding of words inspires unanticipated and intersubjective performances of memory and emotion.

For Robertson and Radford (2009), “There is no literary—or literacy—archive without a literary pilgrim” (p. 206), a figure described as “a truly fevered reader who seeks in the place of lost things the full promise of a once-felt reading” (p. 206). This is a reader who returns to the locations of past literary encounters, who recollects an author’s uncertain geographies and places of residence, who recalls the biographies of writing lives and writing spaces, who reinvigorates graveyards and mounds of dirt with new meaning and significance, and who vociferously rereads the landscapes of loving and learning, of self and other, of subject and object. There is also in this figure a consciousness of the cultural uses of “containment,” where inarticulable anxieties and disquietings—those energies of psychic work most unapproachable—“may be held and returned in tolerable (humanizing) form” (Robertson, 2008). In this awareness that “who we are and how we live our lives relate to practices of reading” (Robertson, 2008), the literary pilgrim is ultimately a compulsive, obsessive, always-emergent, passionate, fevered, virile, interloping, and loving figure, caught up “in the pitch of a desire so urgent in its psychic and physical compulsions that it won’t let go” (Robertson & Radford, 2009, p. 204).

Unavoidable, however, is that this search for the union of a loving convergence of words and human emotion is, like the search for desire itself, never satisfied. It also never ends, since, as readers, we are all “immigrants in essential states of exile. In acts of reading,” Robertson (2003) reminds us, “no reading can be definitive.” The travelling reader,

though, knows this fact, and being well versed in the economy of a desire that cannot be exhausted, of a mountain whose pinnacle cannot be reached, takes his or her reward in the stiff sentence of pleasure lying hidden in the depths and surfaces of every reading, secretly gathering and revelling in the froth and the foam of the days as “the restless heir of reading’s afterlife” (Robertson & Radford, 2009, p. 206).

As much of her writing is infused with an invitation that “incites us to ask curious questions about place consciousness in reading” (Robertson & Radford, p. 207), Robertson also finds herself to be an inheritor of textual bliss. The impact of spatiality—how and by what means our environment affects us—is here understood as it relates to “the reader’s sense of temporal and historical situatedness in a place, and his or her elaboration of meaning-making within a geography” (Robertson, 2008). In a recent poetic piece, included in a short series entitled *Poems in Newfoundland Time* (2010), Robertson evokes a passionate reader who traces her own life in an archive of cherished place and unearthed objects, along with a desire to question and create:

HIGH TIDE IN THE GARDEN

Coming here from away
She found the elsewhere that had kept her hungry
(Like a sorrow that can strangle you
Like something you can’t live without
Like something you crawl into: a second skin.)

Coming here from away
She made her garden of green fury
Conceived in impetuous desire
And pitched against flint of sea and sky.
Then for thirteen moons

Coming here from away
She threw rocks and found horseshoes
Fallen long ago from nails large enough to bear weight
Turning up like magic things in the soil,
And slowly she limbered free.

Coming here from away
From a life of high romanticism
And rigid performances, it was here
In the bellow blow and varied beat
Of a different lectern

That she learned to take new measure:
Of how metal is made malleable
And less likely to fracture
When you can slacken up to anvil and take the heat
Of a whole new world in counterpoint.

In this poem, we read an announcement of the value in changeability and fracture. There is a strident ringing that persists from these words, that sounds off geographies of reading and living as through a stage of feeding and devour, that snakes around the crannies of history and memory, that knows growth and decay as different fingers of the same hand. There is a concern for learning elsewhere, a love for chance objects, an acceptance of magic and mystery, and a knowledge of the work required in the perpetual process of self-formation.

In discussions of reading, poetry can often serve as a means of refusing to explain away meaning. In poetic deliberation, whether immersed in the stanzas of a short text, an ocean's edge, or those of an urban sprawl, we encounter the arrival of an unexpected desire, unnameable and ethereal, yet (almost) touchable in words. As Britzman (2009) remarks, "The unconscious steps in precisely when we are not

aware of it" (p. 82), and so the assumptions of meaning in reading are locatable only in that which we cannot locate—that unthinkable nonsense that we, nevertheless, must read to figure its form. For Robertson, to engage with the libidinal and dizzying side of reading—as a dialogic energy where the self and other meet, as an inside turned outside and back again—is that which enables encounters of risk, play, and affect approaching the erotic.

Reading as an Erotic and Embodied Activity

In her efforts to “[make] thinkable an ecology of reading praxis that takes seriously space, time and containment” (Robertson & Radford, 2009, p. 206), Robertson writes of a conceptual distinction between, on the one hand, reading as an embodied activity with erotic potential and force, and on the other, reading as something ultimately reducible to “instrumental simplification” (Robertson, 2008). In the latter view, the erratic and elusive possibilities of textual engagement are abandoned, given over to the orderly, staid, and obedient character of commodified and standardized learning. Through endeavouring to re-envision the fundamental provocations of “literacies’ corporealities,” Robertson and Radford (2009, p. 3) emphasize the preverbal nature of reading, as the affects encountered in connection with language can often—and perhaps paradoxically—be seen as “a curious (and ardently unschooled) symptom” (Robertson, 2008). This is admittedly a strange disjuncture, and, as Robertson (2006) notes of “the fascinating dilemmas of classroom erotics” where “the objects of teaching lives are other than our own teaching selves” (p. 13), the objects of our reading lives can also be imagined at times as ardently split from the conscious nature of our reading selves. “The pleasure of the text,” as Roland Barthes (1975) acknowledges, “is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (p. 17).

Caught up in the preverbal vicissitudes of language, readers will often move through the text “as a form of digestion” (Robertson, 2004, p. 77), ravaged by the devouring force of “an omnipotent desire for the good feed” (Robertson, 2002, p. 200). For researchers into the qualitative nature of reading practices, such moments—in their “times of obscurity” and “times of distortion” (Robertson, 2004, p. 84)—deliver us from grasping reading as something ultimately transparent and secure. In this lack of correspondence between what is seen and what is felt—and in the knowledge that “good stories satisfy a craving” (2002, p. 209)—Robertson examines this conundrum psychoanalytically, looking at “how it is that narrative can function as an analogue to the structure of human desire” (2002, p. 81), and “how readers use texts as transference objects” (1994, p. 18). In these relations, the dynamics at play in experiences of reading are similar to those that surface in the social interactions and “strange intimacies” (Pitt, 2003) of everyday life: unresolved emotional conflicts—exhibited through compulsions of transference often unconscious and repressed—are projected outwards from the inner space of the reader’s psychic self “onto the public screen of the text” (Robertson, 2004, p. 81). “As readers read,” Robertson (2000) writes, “‘new impressions of old imprints’ force themselves upon the meaning-making process” (p. 181). The compulsion to satisfy the cravings of the literary feast is thus enacted through the influence and unpredictability of unconscious desire, “always in excess of the capacity of objects of knowledge to satisfy it” (Robertson, 2002, p. 199), forceful and searching, sometimes banal, sometimes ravenous and erotic.

Reading as a Gathering of the Psychic and Physical Worlds of the Reader

In their introduction to *Provocations* (2006), an edited collection on the lasting influence of Sylvia Ashton Warner’s writing, Robertson and

McConaghy note that in reading the subject of literature and biography, we are addressed by “a voice we cannot fully know, but to which we must bear witness, commanding us to awaken to something that ‘burns’ at our edges” (p. 4). Elsewhere, Robertson (1999) writes how, “Narrative ... commands others (then, now, and always) to awaken to its imperative demand” (p. 164). For Robertson, therefore, there is a significant connection that can be drawn between the inarticulable desires of reading, which burn incessantly and cannot be extinguished, and experiences associated with sleep, whose psychic manifestations are expressed through the language of dreams, which themselves bear a close relation to narrative, since, as Freud understood it, “we even dream in story form” (Robertson & Karagiozis, 2004, p. 415). With regard to this burning that takes place at the edges, however—as an “obstacle of the overhang ... [which] *makes operative* the very possibility of ... psychic reality” (Robertson, 2001, p. 27, italics in original)—the relationship between reading and dreaming goes beyond mere form and structure, and involves the actual substance of the reader’s unconscious as well, which in its persistence inspires us both to “dream on” and to “read on.”

As psychoanalyst Hanna Segal (1991) sees it, dreams are “guardians of sleep” (p. 3), whose performances of “psychic dream-work [aim] at fulfilling the unacceptable and conflicting wishes by disguising them, and it evolves a particular mode of expression—the dream language” (p. 5). The language we use to dream—techniques of displacement, condensation, symbolization, metaphor, metonymy, and so forth—offers problems of meaning whose “indirect representation” (Segal, p. 6), just as with literature, requires interpretation, along with an awareness that one’s interpretation might always be mistaken or flawed. And as we have already seen, such psychic manifestations are present not only in dreams, but in the equivocations of language as well, operations often activated through reading and “the provocations of story” (Robertson, 2000, p. 181). “The dream thought,” Segal continues, “is an expression of

unconscious phantasy, and our dream world is always with us" (p. 9), as that desire which burns at the edges of reading—forever ablaze and smouldering. It is no mere candle flicker and can never be simply extinguished or snuffed out at will. As Britzman (2009) puts it, "we cannot let go of affected life" (p. 58).

Shoshana Felman (1985), in a discussion about Lacan's relation to philosophy, also reveals another sense of the connection between burning and dreaming. She cites Lacan, who writes, "But haven't we felt for some time now that, having followed the pathways of the letter in search of the Freudian truth, we are getting very warm indeed, that something's burning all about us?" (cited in Felman, p. 135). As opposed to the philosophical demand for exhaustiveness of meaning, and which might suppose that Lacan is here endangering the substance of his own thinking about Freud—that in burning, it may smoulder into no more than a pile of ashes—Felman reads in Lacan's words, "a discourse that *burns its way along*, skipping, in the process, its own logical (methodological) steps [*un discours qui brûle les étapes*]" (p. 135, italics in original).

While one philosophical reading of Lacan's text, to which Felman is opposed, "rushes to the fire—to put it out" (p. 137), Felman wishes to resolve this enigmatic conflagration without denying its persistence, and so turns to Freud's interpretation of a dream that has to do precisely with the question of burning. The context of this dream, as Freud describes it, involves an old man solicited to keep vigil over the body of a child who had recently passed away after a long sickness. The father, who was completely exhausted, fell asleep in the next room and dreamed

that *his child* [who] *was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?"* He [the father] woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that

the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them (Freud, cited in Felman, p. 138, italics in original)

Now, in Freud's case, he uses this dream to elucidate the tenuous relationship between sleeping and waking. For Segal (1991), "sleep can be disturbed by external stimuli," such as a loud noise or a bright fire, and "to protect sleep, the sleeper can produce a dream in which the [external stimuli] is taken up by the dream and, as it were, explained away" (p. 3). Though such explaining away may suffice for your typical sleeping dreamer, the arrangements in this dream lead Felman to ask:

Is the reality of the desire that governs us and writes us of the order of the 'fire' of our sleep, or of the order of the fire to which we awaken? Where exactly *is* the fire in this dream adventure? Which is the *real fire*: the one burning the living person in the dream, or the one burning, by metonymic repetition, the corpse in the next room and thus continuing, fatally and fantasmatically, to consume the body of a dead love? (p. 138, italics in original)

This question, necessarily unanswerable, concerns the place of reality in dreaming, and the constitution of meaning-construction in dreaming (and reading) as a process that emerges neither solely inside nor outside of the dream (or the text), but instead, in both places at once and as relentlessly non-linear. "Thus the encounter," Lacan writes, "forever missed, has occurred between dream and awakening, between the person who is still asleep and whose dream we will never know and the person who has dreamt merely in order not to wake up" (cited in Felman, p. 139). As in the errant encounter that is reading—a shifting speculation that is at all times impossible to finally pin down—the encounter in this dream is one that exists only in the setting of the

dreamscape, involving the consciousness of the dreamer as something neither asleep nor awake.

The question that occupies both Lacan and Felman—“*Where is the fire that consumes, that burns us?*” (Felman, p. 139, italics in original)—is one that also captures Robertson in her thoughts on reading. “This question,” as Felman (1985) states it, “is precisely one of undecidability ... since the fire is of course burning in *both* rooms, in sleep and in waking life alike” (p. 139, italics in original). Since the place of the fire in dreaming cannot be clearly situated or pinned down, it can thus be said to consume *everything*, and in its metonymic burning, relates also to the power of the place of reading as a possible thoroughfare to dreaming and its curious imaginings of self. For Robertson (1999), since the silences that inhere in reading and language can be as determining of meaning as that which is spoken out loud, it is imperative that, as readers, “we listen to words that ‘cry out,’ and answer them with care” (p. 168). The residue that attaches to words is often unconscious, seemingly illogical or governed by its own logic, and from some temporality other than that of the moment of reading—though of course, it involves the moment of reading as well.

As a voracious reader of Robertson’s words, I am struck, and endlessly inspired, by a prose that refuses to be fully realized (or extinguished) and revels in this very fact—it cannot gather dust, it awakens me to thought and holds me to interpretive account. This is the way that latching works in reading. As I read a word or I sound a sentence, I feel a place, a history, a moment, and even as I am sad I am joyous, also angered, also fevered. I remember when, as a Master’s student, I used to visit Robertson in her office at the University of Ottawa; there was always, for me, an unsteady and exciting aura of simultaneous calm and anxiety, of intellectual risk, and when I read her writing I am again enveloped. Although latching, at the beginning of this discussion, was initially expressed in its nature as a conscious act, it is often not really so, and like brambles in the forest that latch onto

sweaters, as words get spoken and attached to meaning they latch onto histories unintended and unplumbable. The methodologies of latching inherent in reading are thus, as Robertson (2004) expresses it, “a world of radical play, a risky business whose outcome can never be preordained” (p. 79). For, a curriculum that takes instability as its locus is one that also recognizes the subjects of education as breathing and, thus, inscrutable—shifting, slippery, bodies and minds. There is always in reading something unknown and unspoken, like a story that exists off the page, written nowhere else but in the mind and the life of the reader, and expressed in “the interplay of two desiring systems: the text of mind and the text of story” (Robertson, 2000, p. 188).

Notes

¹ As the citations from Robertson’s work in 2003 and 2008 are taken from unpublished grant proposals, there are no page number references.

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