

Dr Anna Janus-Sitarz

ajanus-sitarz@wp.pl

Dialogue and the teaching of literature in search of the lost reader

Academic biography

Anna Janus-Sitarz has a Ph.D in Humanities, and is tutor, researcher and teacher educator at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (the oldest university in Poland offering 48 disciplines for over 46 000 students). She is the author of books on the reception of literature, intercultural diversity, the professional competences of teachers and workbooks for grammar and secondary schools. This article touches on the problems developed in her last book *Pleasure and Responsibility of Reading* (Kraków, 2009).

Abstract

This article presents a significant problem in contemporary teaching of literature: the crisis in reading among young people. It examines the causes of non-reading against a background of transformations in civilization. Then, it reflects upon the chances of challenging, checking and even stopping unfavourable tendencies, and this is considered through the presentation of selected aspects of the philosophy of responsibility and of literary theory that can be applied in scholastic encounters with reading. These reflections accentuate the necessity of teaching joy in reading and respect for the voice of the Other in every cultural text. This is where the key issue of dialogue between the reader and the text as the voice of the Other becomes so significant in the teaching and learning of reading. Attention is drawn to those aspects of educational philosophy which demand changes in approach both to the student and to the literary work.

Keywords: reception of literature, teaching of literature, crisis in reading, ethical turn

The State of Non-reading

University teachers of literature have for a long time been reflecting on how to help teachers who feel discouraged, resigned to and dismayed at students' resistance to reading. How – in a state of permanent

changes and transformations – do we teach reading? How do we restore to reading two moribund, but essential elements: pleasure and responsibility?

Studies by the National Library's Book and Reading Institute give alarming results concerning the reading gap in Poland. This is evidenced in a study by Gołębiewski (with Frołow & Waszczyk, 2007), in a report on the book market in Poland, as well as in reports previously published on an annual basis. In 2006, half of the Polish people did not read even one book (a result 8% worse than in studies from 2004, and 19% worse than in 1992); and ⅓ did not even purchase one. Over the course of two years, over two million people completely stopped reading – even cookbooks or do-it-yourself handbooks. Reading takes place chiefly out of obligation – for school or work. What is more, statistics reveal that the greatest percentage drop in reading compared to past years is in evidence among young people – in the age group in which (if only on account of school reading requirements) the readers' index has always been the highest.

In research conducted under my direction in 2008, out of 556 fifteen-year-olds surveyed (middle schools in 10 towns), a mere 26% (of whom 86% were girls) declared that they read in their spare time. Reading took last place, losing ground in apparent competition with socializing, listening to music, engaging in sports, computer games, cinema, television and the Internet. The question of whether they liked to read was answered positively by 59% of students (though as many as 30% could not give the title of their favourite book); and negatively, by 41% – but there were schools where the number of reading-averse students reached as high as 66%. They do not read because books are long and monotonous – and, after all: 'there are better forms of entertainment.'

Equally disturbing manifestations of the 'state of non-reading' which has been establishing itself for years are shown by studies carried out in other countries. Already

in 1967, Roland Barthes wrote in *Le plaisir du texte* about the reading gap – that every second French person does not read, and that the ability to derive pleasure from an encounter with literature is mysteriously disappearing.

A quarter of a century later, in times even less favourable for books, the subject of lost pleasure in reading and rejection of reading by young French persons was taken up anew by Daniel Pennac (2007), a writer and secondary-school teacher of French. In reflecting on the reasons for the ‘loss of pleasure’, he sees the main culprit in enforced reading, in mistakes made by parents and teachers in the period when a child begins to read independently. The moment the word ‘have to’ appears – and together with it, control and expectations – moments with a book which were once a magical time for a child sometimes become pure torment.

Pennac confirms that it is not easy to teach literature; for reading requires intimacy, quiet, thoughtfulness. Awareness of this difficulty does not, however, justify the school which too easily ‘absolves itself’ of the obligation to sustain love for books and, in large measure, kills that love by limiting itself to laborious exegesis.

This has developed into a global problem. For example, in both the UK and the USA the issue of reading has been a sufficient cause for concern for official bodies to report on it and set up official ways to address it.ⁱ The causes of non-reading in the United States have been written about for a long time by academic literary studies specialist and methodologist for the teaching of English language and literature Eric Donald Hirsch (1996, 2006, 2008). In the later work (2006, 2008) the University of Virginia professor accuses the American school system of not realizing the declared *No Child Left Behind* programme (US Public Law 107 - 110, 2002), as is shown by studies of student reading skills proving a lack of development in these skills between the fourth and

eighth grades. He sees the causes of this unsatisfactory state of affairs in, above all, intensive preparation of youth to answer test questions, instead of transmission of knowledge and formation of skills. Exam preparation handbooks are constructed according to the erroneous assumption that reading comprehension is the same type of skill as, for example, typewriting, and can be perfected via mechanical exercises, while omitting knowledge. For the most part, lessons presently consist of executing commands: ‘find the main idea’, ‘list...’, ‘cite the author’s arguments’, and not of becoming acquainted with the world and its problemsⁱⁱ. Similarly, in Poland there is an ongoing discussion concerning the present form of examinations, which makes answering test questions the most popular ‘method’ of conducting lessons. The unfortunate result of the test-based form of checking students’ knowledge and skills is not only abandonment of education in skills that are not testable (creativity, ground rules and indeed appropriate manners for discussion (see Alexander 2008), teamwork, spoken interpretation of a text, etc.), but also a lack of motivation to reading anything at all outside of the text from an exam paper. In fact the university teaching community is demanding that the Central Examination Board (Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna) led by the Ministry of Education should change the way literary exercises in exam papers are edited, proposing that they require the young person to undertake an authentic dialogue with the subject, create an occasion to express their own views and reading preferences; that they check both knowledge *and* skill in individual evaluation of a work.

Why don’t they read?

Although there has been an attempt to address the problem through multi-modal texts (picture books and ‘books of the film’), this is not the place to discuss this related but also different and in some ways separate issue. In an era of image-based culture it is not easy to

commend traditional books; and it is not only the examination system here which is not supportive of teachers – who more and more often display helplessness in the face of the universal phenomenon of increasing numbers of students not reading anything besides text messages and e-mail. However, we cannot content ourselves with complaining at the laziness or irresponsibility of young people. We have to accept that in the past ten or twenty years, the student population has decisively changed; the reality in which that recipient is growing up has changed; thus, changes must ensue in teaching methods, in ways of motivating students. We have to observe carefully on an ongoing basis what changes in the reality surrounding us are contributing to the drop in popularity of books, for this is the only way to try to resist this disturbing phenomenon.

Among the various causes of non-reading, it is possible to distinguish main centres that are responsible. The first is school, with its enforced reading, instrumental treatment of literature, tests, and teachers' helplessness in the face of condensed versions, Internet cheat sheets and general aversion of youth to literature. Another culprit is the family home, from which students do not take a habit of reading, in which more and more often the tradition of reading stories to children is replaced by television cartoons – a home in which busy caregivers limit their parental care to purchasing abridged versions, borrowing adaptations of school readings, and demanding that teachers prepare their children as well as possible for final exams. The third culprit is multimedia, which effectively competes with books, diverting potential readers from them, tempting with ease of access and attractiveness of transmission, not requiring effort for attaining grades, and leaving the user with a feeling of psychological comfort (no one here is demanding anything of anyone: the recipient is a customer who is always right, for whose attentions one competes, whose good mood one does not spoil with the sight of his/her favourite idol reading).

Also responsible for the crisis in reading are transformations in civilization and culture – above all, market mechanisms which subject all spheres of life to their control and evaluate every human activity in terms of 'usefulness'. It would seem that this state of affairs is confirmed by the attitude of young readers, for whom books are more and more often of purely pragmatic, functionalized significance. Interest in *literature as an art form* is decidedly dropping; people are turning to books to look for specific information needed for school or professional work. Evidence for this change can be found in a range of research, e.g. Bortnowski (2004), Gołębiowski (2008), Janus-Sitarz (2009) and Zasacka (2008).

We read as we have been raised to communicate

Presently, literature is a part of social communication, and reception styles, as Przemysław Czapliński (in Matuszek, 2005:63) argues, 'are formed not by reviewers, but by the school, the home, the Church, and everyday public communication. We read books not as we have been taught to read, but as we have been raised to communicate'.

This is a very valuable reflection worth remembering in the teaching of literature. On the one hand, the attitude students have towards books, towards the difficulty associated with reading them from cover-to-cover, with expressing their own feelings and thoughts after reading, with entering into dialogue with them, could be a result of the model of life to which they have been accustomed. Have they have been raised in a spirit of avoiding difficulty – or of facing it; expressing aversion to everyone and everything new, or openness to the unknown; hiding their own emotions, or sharing them; valuing only comfort and a feeling of safety, or accepting the challenges of reality; passivity, or problem-solving?

On the other hand, literature as an element of communication (encounters, reception styles) can also create certain attitudes and social behaviours. As Czapliński writes:

Literature, by becoming involved in social communication, should make more difficult that which we consider easy and obvious, that is: to consider that only our views are correct [...]; but it should also make easier that which is difficult, namely: to show that between aggression and indifference, there exists a limitless abundance of states of understanding. (in Matuszek, 2005:64)

Meanwhile, the blame for the turning away from reading is shifted onto literature itself; it is accused of being either too anachronistic to enter into young people's dialogue about their 'here and now'; or too difficult, because it has recourse to play with form and with the reader, experiments with genre and style, which convey the moods of a degraded world. My many years of teaching practice, as well as observation of hundreds of lessons conducted by teachers and student teachers, show that there are three types of works which trigger the resistance of young readers – and that it is to these types of books that the most attention should be devoted.

The first type of work rejected is that which young people associate with expected difficulties in reception. What we are speaking of here are those associated both with the thickness of the book, and with a language barrier (archaisms, neologisms, stylizations, foreign terms), as well as with formal experiments (mixture of genres, time planes, types of narrative). For all of these problems, there is one core solution: reading, though reading *to* students and dialogic discussion of that reading both offer ways ahead parallel with the student's own reading.

The student to whom we propose simple, thinner and thinner texts – and most often, only fragments thereof – will never know the taste of immersing him/herself in another world than that which surrounds him/her, of lasting contact with characters who have a chance of retaining his/her attention for the long term – of moving him/her, of triggering emotions and reflections. Not

accustomed to longer readings, more and more drawn in by media transmissions of brief, fragmentary character, oriented towards instant effect – the young person will not reach for a book of his/her own free will.

Both poetry and prose of a highly metaphorical character lie in the second category of works most often rejected by young people. The reader used to realistic literature will interpret literally the grotesque, the metaphorical and anything of parabolic character. Meanwhile, literature is not enclosed within the bounds of one realistic aesthetic language. Thus, if we want to give pupils a chance at experiencing satisfaction from reading, we must open them up to the multiplicity of literary aesthetic languages; familiarize them with diverse conventions, genres and expressive styles; teach them to recognize irony, playing with tradition, deliberate provocation. Only by making attempts to read works that are not easy, sometimes controversial, will we give young people a chance to deal with difficulties, to know the taste of understanding and communication with a work which, using the poetic language of the absurd or media platitudes, overflowing with distrust towards language and traditional narrative, engages in existential arguments with the world, with hypocrisy of speech, with degradation of humanity.

In the third group are to be found literature and art which take up serious subject matter: death, suffering, national martyrdom. This reference to martyrdom includes not only the 20th century experiences within Poland. From 1795 to 1918 Poland suffered occupation and almost disappeared from European map. This is echoed very strongly in literature (mostly from the 19th century which is obligatory in schools) and in the way of thinking about independence and the threat of losing freedom. The experience of both world wars was regarded as repetition of that suffering. Even the threat of communism was regarded in the same way. Communism for the average Polish person was not connected with ideology but with Russian occupation. It was obvious for many generations but not for the

teenagers of today. They see themselves as free from such considerations which they cannot understand partly because it is boring for them. It does not provoke any emotions. So that becomes a legitimate reason for their refusal to read about it. There is an associated but defective conviction in operation which says that one must speak of lofty matters in a language of pathos which, for teenaged persons obliged to make statements out loud about literature in front of their peers, is unacceptable. In turn, death, illness, suffering – no one talks about these things either at home or at school. In a culture which promotes the success of celebrities who are young, healthy and beautiful, ageing and dying are taboo subjects. Secondary teachers of literature in Polish schools have been complaining about pupils' indifference or cynical behaviour in face of suffering shown in literature or films. I described the reasons of these reactions and necessity of developing ethical sensitivity (Janus-Sitarz, 2008); see also (Mikoś 2008). There exists a clear need to familiarize youth with such difficult problems and teach them to talk about them. Literature can play an extraordinarily valuable role here.

Shall we repeat once more: we read as we have been raised to communicate. Unfortunately, as the Polish researches have shown, we can observe significant turn in estimating products of what Pierre Bourdieu (1983/1986) named "cultural capital" influencing the educational success of young people. According to Bourdieu cultural deprivation mainly occurs in working class families when parents may have no interest in the child's education or cannot afford educational resources like books and computers. However nowadays the problem affects also well-educated and wealthy families. So-called "embodied capital", a set of character traits and ways of thinking, efforts for self-improvement, and interest in education, where traditionally demands were made for a family to invest time and attention, has been replaced by an expectation that diplomas and qualifications will be acquired quickly and at the lowest cost possible. This alarming attitude of many even well-

educated Polish families to the objectives of the process of education is the result of both the political and economical changes in Poland after 1989 and of the school reform that implemented in 2002 the system of external exams after each level of education. It is well documented in the social and educational researches, e.g. Świda-Ziemia (2005), Jakubowski (2006), Myrdzik (2006), Janus-Sitarz (2007).

Regaining Pleasure in Reading

The greater and greater resistance of young people to reading for school faces teachers with the necessity of searching for such methods of reading and interpreting meaning as will awaken in the student the Barthesian spontaneous reader; to point out the way for him/her to derive pleasure or intellectual satisfaction from the adventure of reading. The condition for the reclamation of a reader for literature is respect for the individual reading experience. Unfortunately, traditional teaching of literature directs the process of school reading towards the formation of an ideal, model reader who proceeds according to a carefully-specified pattern, disregarding individual tastes, needs and reactions.

Barthes (1973/1997) decisively defends all types of delight in reading, as well as the reader's rights to experience them in his/her own way, without any criteria imposed from above which would decide what is 'better' or 'worse' reading – even if these would be excitations of a more sensual than intellectual nature. Barthes as a reader savours a broad spectrum of experiences: the feeling of hope as the story gradually unfolds, satisfaction from reading (when s/he finds out how the story ends), Oedipal pleasure (from disentangling, knowing, finding out the beginning and the ending), the desire to know, the curiosity of the voyeur, immersion in reflections, the perverse pleasure of commenting on the story being read, reading it inside out, creating one's own story.

The Barthesian concept of pleasure in reading arising out of freedom in reading is close to deconstruction. An important advocate of opening the act of reading to creation rather than re-creation was Jacques Derrida. He understood the fears of those who maintained that such reading can be susceptible to anarchy – to the risk of saying ‘just anything’ – but he argued that we must take this risk in order to free reading from the threat of enforcement. For Derrida, reading was a ‘reading event’ – that is, an activity, a process, a creativity with the right to wander about the text. The condition for creative reading is the rejection of enforced effectiveness, the rejection of programmes preceding the reading process and of artificial models of the reader, for, as American researcher de Man wrote, developing Derrida’s concept for the purposes of literary studies: to read is to understand, ask, come to know, forget, blur, distort, repeat (de Man 1984:122, in Nycz 2000:74).

Ethical Aspects of Reading and Philosophy of Education

It is important to reflect on how to modify present educational philosophy to halt the reading crisis among young people. The reading crisis among young people is a symptom of this and it is worthwhile to enrich the debate within the context of the experiences of the ‘ethical turn’, including selected aspects of the philosophy of responsibility. By doing this an opportunity can be discerned for the replacement of the now ineffective watchwords used up until now (duty, enforcement of reading, scholastic or national obligation ...) with ones closer to contemporary reality (philosophy of dialogue, responsibility for one’s fellow human being, respect for the voice of the Other, etc.). What is more, in delving more deeply into an understanding of the philosophy of responsibility and its possible application to the philosophy of education, we can discern that it is not so much that this philosophy does not stand in contradiction to the aim of forming in students the ability to experience pleasure in encounter with reading

matter, but rather that it can provide significant support to these aims.

Responsibility finds its echo in the philosophy of the ‘ethical turn’ – in Lévinas’ philosophy of the neighbour (e.g. 1991); in the ethical reading principles of Wayne C. Booth (1988), Joseph Hillis Miller (in Nycz 2000) and other representatives of ethical criticism; in Derrida’s deconstruction and Gadamer’s hermeneutics; in the principles of respect for individuality promoted by Derek Attridge. All of the philosophers and literary studies specialists mentioned are linked by a conviction that in interpersonal relationships, what is most important is the ability to listen: to carefully, attentively and respectfully listen to the voice of the Other (text, student, friend, any other person, writer, literary protagonist), as well as to be ready to engage in conversation with that voice.

One decided supporter of placing both literary criticism and teaching of literature in the area of ethics is Derek Attridge (2007), who points out the dangers arising out of the attitude that has established itself in recent years in education, dominated by such concepts as: quality assurance, standardization, fiscal responsibility, assessment of results, indices of results, while ignoring that which is most valuable in the humanities. He argues that the encounter with the Other in reading requires assent to a particular relationship between the work and the reader. If we respond to the *singularity* of a text, this means that we are willing to subject ourselves to the author’s creativity and open ourselves to a foreignness that changes us.

In recent years, we can observe an interest in Lévinas’ ethics in American teacher education centres (Edgoose 1997; and Noddings, 1992; 1995). Academic teachers formulate the thesis that Derrida’s *responsibility* inspires *caring* (a central concept in Lévinas’ philosophy); and the consequences resulting from this inspiration have the chance to contribute to the formation of a certain awareness of the ethical process that takes place during

education. 'Language fails me by refusing to mean to Others what I want it to mean', says Lévinas (in Edgoose 1997). Thus, such an involvement in speech is necessary as will make one sensitive to the recipient, his/her perceptions, the possibility of a different understanding of the same words. Edgoose (1997) warns against a wrongful disregard of communication itself – thus, to whom we are speaking, why and how, what part of our message reaches him/her, what s/he understands from it, what s/he agrees with, what s/he rejects.

It is the same with reading. We have no control over the fact that a text means different things to different people, for what it says is initiated and formed not only by its language, but by historical time (one time of writing, another time and context of reading), as well as by the differing sensitivity and awareness of the reader. The difference in interpretation of different recipients is not, thus, a consequence of the supposed right to freedom of interpretation. Hillis Miller, in refuting attacks on deconstruction for its supposed nihilism, states that it is this manner of reading which absolutely is associated with ethicality, for it compels the reader to read carefully, in a manner respectful of the text (2000: 129 - 130).

This is an important aspect of ethical reading: since it is impossible to get to the 'truth', understood as a reconstruction of the author's intent identified with a 'universal truth'; then the task of the reader, in speaking of or writing about a work, is to accurately present and justify his/her own interpretation, 'to show what a given text means to me and how'. Książek- Szczepanikowa (1998), Burzyńska (2001), and Dehnel (2006) have written about the controversies over the relationship between 'universal truth' and multiple truths within postmodern philosophies. In interpretive practice at school, this means consenting to and even encouraging students' personal interpretation of literature (thus, being guided in interpretation of the meanings of a work by their own experience – mainly in reading, though also

in life), and not requiring duplication of the analyses of authorities in the area of literary studies.ⁱⁱⁱ

The diversity and even controversial nature of the interpretations presented can fulfill an extraordinarily fruitful role: to trigger the emotions necessary to make personal contact with a work, to inspire a deeper look at some of its aspects, to provoke other voices about the text – which, thanks to them, comes alive, is not a closed book about which all has already been said so that there is no point in repeating it. Since, as Newton (in Waugh, 2006:482) writes, 'As long as there is the desire to interpret, interpretation will continue indefinitely'; then in encouraging new interpretations, we at the same time sustain the vitality of literature, its ability to conduct dialogue with successive audiences. It is difficult to deny the ethical nature of such activities.

Deeply characteristic of the contemporary reception of and response to art (but probably also characteristic of all other forms of human communication) is the lost ability to listen: to listen to what someone else wants to convey to us with the word, image, sound. An extraordinarily difficult, but necessary task which faces contemporary teachers of literature is to teach careful, thorough reading which permits one to listen authentically to the text and undertake dialogue with it.

What is the simplest way to convey the idea of the ethical act of reading to young people? It is necessary to remind them, as often as possible, of certain principles of which students should be aware in contact with reading:

1. When I open a book, then at the same time, I begin a dialogue. Someone is speaking to me and awaiting my response.
2. I try to understand the one who is speaking to me via the work. I think about what s/he wants to say. I am open to what s/he says, because since s/he decided to speak to me, that means it is important to both him/her and to me.

Being ethical demands that I listen carefully to him/her, attempt to understand, and respond responsibly to his/her speech (with my own reflections). 'Responsibly' means not saying 'just anything', without looking attentively into his/her question, problem, worry, discovery, accusation.

3. Listening and understanding does not have to mean agreement or acceptance. I have the right to a response which rejects that (world view, idea, conviction) that my partner in dialogue (author, narrator, fictional character, text) is conveying to me, but respect for him/her/it requires that I be prepared to explain (to myself, him/her, other readers) why I do not accept (don't agree with, don't like) his/her speech. Is the reason for the rejection the content of the message (meaning, argument, remote subject matter), or the manner of its transmission (banality, schematicism, superficiality, hermeticism, excessive complexity of text, incomprehensible vocabulary...)?
4. I am a person/reader of Dialogue. I listen to the statements of Others just as I myself would like to be listened to. I respond to them with the respect that I expect from Others with regard to myself.

In the formation of an ethical or axiological (values-related) dimension to reading, all elements of the philosophy of responsibility are concentrated: the trust of the teacher with respect to the student, and respect of his/her right to individual interpretations; the student's independent dialogue (carried out on his/her own responsibility) with the text (with the obligation to read attentively, but with the right to opposition to the thoughts contained in it); the involvement of the recipient (for s/he is no longer a re-creator of other people's interpretations) and his/her axiological

sensitivity. Formation of this sensitivity is possible only in authentic dialogue, in the confrontation of the values or axiologies of the student, the teacher and the text. Avoidance of tensions or differences of opinion, nipping in the bud statements of rebellious character or otherwise not in accordance with expectations – this does not provide a chance for the emotional involvement which is a condition of ethical reading. The wise teacher who listens carefully and respectfully to the voices of young people and has the strong belief in the need of the real dialogue will, precisely from these young people, derive inspiration to create situations motivating them to read, as well as to plan directions for the interpretation of the text.^{iv}

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education there are specialists. Therefore for the earlier years in Polish primary schools and across the age-ranges in UK primary schools this professional skill, indeed orientation, in handling the interpretations of students, depends not just on subject knowledge *per se*, but on bringing generalist teachers to the same position as specialists where they have the confidence and capacity to promote and value this type of dialogue, and this is a challenge which in turn has implications for teacher initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The editors and reviewers have noted that an example of this is the UK inspecting body Ofsted's *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure* (2004) and the British Government's *Every Child a Reader* (2005 and ongoing) programme (see annual reports for project, 2006 and 2007, an undated University of London report by Burroughs-Lange, and the work of the *Every Child a Chance* Trust).

ⁱⁱ The editors and reviewers in the UK have noted that this corresponds with studies which examine critical literacy and the place of knowledge outside the classroom, e.g. Hall in Storey (1998) and Smith (1999; 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ The editors and reviewers in the UK have noted that this links with issues affecting UK schools discussed in Fisher 2008.

^{iv} The editors and reviewers in the UK have noted that in Poland there are generalist teachers only for children aged 6-9 years. For the 3 years after that in primary