Structure and Serendipity

Patricia Demers
University of Alberta

As readers we are a profession of heterodox wranglers. Our diverse, often overlapping creeds of post-structuralism, French theory, cultural materialism, New Criticism, New Historicism, and psychoanalysis, among others, mean that our at times interchangeable ranks can range from blogging, face-booking, wiki-ing, early-adopting emissaries of IT to historians of print culture, paleographers, epigraphists, and iconologists. Readers have been envisioned as itinerant poachers ("nomades bracconant à travers les champs qu'ils n'ont pas écrits," as Michel de Certeau described these travelers), as rapt listeners for whom George Eliot used the "drop of ink at the end of [her] pen" to offer "a faithful account of men and things,… as if narrating [her] experience on oath" (Eliot 3, 181), and, according to bibliographer D.F. McKenzie, as the makers of "new texts" (McKenzie 20). Readers can be oblivious hypocrites, refusing to recognize the frail monster of boredom smoking his hookah as he dreams of scaffolds, in Baudelaire's address to "Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère," or courteous, knowledgeable understanders, of the sort Rachel Speght welcomed, as distinct from

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> Readers too common and plentifull
> . . . that can read a.b.c
> And utter their verdict on what they doe view,
> Though none of the Muses they yet ever knew (Speght 47)

Patricia Demers, University Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, researches and teaches currently in the areas of early modern literature and Canadian women's writing. Recent publications include an edition of Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (Broadview 2007) and the third edition of *From Instruction to Delight: Children's Literature to 1850* (Oxford 2008).

I propose that we celebrate this very multeity as our curious, multiform strength, its amplitude reinforcing and invigorating our work. The only proviso I would add concerns the crucial element of engaging, active zeal. Not in the rabid obsession of Zeal of the Land Busy, but in the desire to communicate a passion about reading's encounter with other subjectivities and a rigorously social approach to this cultural activity that can promote "humane forms of collective life" (Schweickart 8). I'm endorsing Roger Chartier's image of the book—a repertoire of poetical, philosophical, fictional, scientific discourses, elite or plebeian, hand-held codex or digitized online scroll—as one of the most powerful metaphors "pour penser le cosmos, la nature, ou le corps humain" (Chartier 96). Attentive to writing's social and cultural constitution of historical subjects, reading is not a single "ontologically defined process of reception" but, rather, comprises what Janice Radway sketches as "the wayward and diffuse yet redundant and cumulative effects of engagements with books, texts, stories, images, films, music, video games and much more" (Radway 331).

In the interest of such responsible eclecticism, perhaps even latitudinarianism, and as a demonstration of the recursive activities reading prompts, I want to offer a little sample of the discoveries of my own reading and re-reading. Daniel Mendelsohn's essay on Herodotus, already the delight of several postmodern writers, took me back to the "dazzlingly associative style" of this fifth-century BCE study of the imperial hubris of and catastrophic retribution for Darius and Xerxes, whose vastly superior Persian numbers were defeated by the Greeks. As well as pioneering a new form of writing—in prose, *pedzos logos*, walking language—to convey his idiosyncratic and now topical view of the differences between East and West, Herodotus's riffs and vagaries "replicate ... the ambling, appetitive nature of the work as a whole." Robert Alter's new translation of the Psalms, that storehouse of phrase and allusion for writers, which is itself borrowed from earlier polytheistic poems of the Ancient Near East, strives to retain the "rhythmic compactness" and "forward thrust" (Alter xxiv) of the Hebrew originals without resorting to the elegance of the King James Bible. Whether in the "grip of despair" or riding the "crest of elation," his fresh version sounds "something like the Hebrew" but with "a slightly

antique coloration" (Alter xxiv, xxx, xxxi). The concession he makes to English readers is retaining the address "Lord," as he explains his position on the prohibition of pronouncing the tetragrammaton (YHWH):

> English readers of the Bible have been sufficiently conditioned over the past four centuries that the "Lord" is fluent and natural as an element of the poetry, whereas "Yahweh" might run the risk of sounding as though it belonged in the *Journal of Biblical Literature,* not in a poem. (Alter xxxv)

James Simpson's study of the reading of the Bible in Reformation England, *Burning to Read*, explores the controversy between Tyndale and More and their respective contemporary champions, David Daniell and Eamon Duffy, to illustrate what a "tightrope of terror across the abyss of damnation" (Simpson 29) the Bible actually was. The big deal was *not* the circulation of a vernacular Bible but the emphases in the translation itself; attentive to the "institutional and theological implications of [a] philological fight" (Simpson 75) between these adversaries, both Henrician martyrs for word and principle, *Burning to Read* shoes how the translation of a single word—*penitentia* signifying "repentance" for Tyndale but underscoring with full sacramental significance "penance" for More—could tip the balance on the Reform or Roman side.

Liberation from strict, exclusive loyalty to one reading school or scheme allows us to experience reading as an aggregative, winding, spiraling, recursive activity. With Jeffrey Hamburger's assistance we can see in the drawings of the medieval nuns of St Wallburg "the meanings and memories of texts, together with associations codified by ritual" (Hamburger 214) and thus grasp how the viewing of images complements the reading of texts. In exploring the fallible, capricious working of the mind, Montaigne, flaunting a wonderful scorn for consistency and so-called intrinsic and extrinsic matters, declares that apropos and not apropos don't matter: "A propos ou hors de propos, il n'importe" (Montaigne, Tome II 482). Instead, with remarkable bravura and lots of contradictions he concentrates on himself—"C'est moy que je peins.… [J]e suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre" (Montaigne, Tome I 1) and on the instability of the mind, comparable to the perennial motion of the earth … "Le monde n'est qu'un branloire perenne" (Montaigne, Tome II 222). His own spirit, or mind, or soul is apprenticing—"mon ame … elle est tousjours en apprentissage et en espreuve" (Montaigne, Tome II 222). This remarkable, sustained, serio-comic probing of a life and mind, ostensibly "without miracle and without extravagance" reflects "the tensions of his age" (Rosen 53); for

readers today the *Essays* continues to reveal the vertiginous movements of an engaged spirit in a corrupt society.

The seminar or classroom is, of course, our primary arena for investigating together the other subjectivities and humane forms of collective life reading affords.

I want to return to the sense of engagement as a collective, analytical, enlarging endeavour. It's absent, I think, in the formulation of the title for this event—in its interrogative, the coerciveness of the verb, and the demonstrative pronoun, possibly exuding contempt, disdain, bafflement, or resistance. The seminar or classroom is, of course, our primary arena for investigating together the other subjectivities and humane forms of collective life reading affords. While I'm not seriously suggesting that we promote hypocrisy, or insist on the regurgitation of buzz words, I think the classroom exchange should involve more than literary chit-chat and require more than anything-goes bloviating opinion. After all, we are educating critical thinkers, not mere talking heads. I find exchanges best —and the experience of last term's classes confirms this—when readers disagree. In these classes students debated and clashed over why, in *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry*, Elizabeth Cary lets Salome, who vowed to "be the custom-breaker and begin / To show [her] sex the way to freedom's door" (1.3.309–10; Cary 80), get away with murder? Does the scorn of the maligned Mariam for her sister-in-law Salome, whom she calls "base and hungry Edomite" (3.2.94), justify Mariam's execution? In Patricia Blondal's *A Candle to Light the Sun* how long are we allowed to entertain the fantasy that David Newman might be the illegitimate son of the town doctor in Mouse Bluffs, Manitoba? How does Alice Munro's recent short story, "Free Radicals," challenge the reader to think she or he has misread, wondering if the central character is actually the first wife, Bett, not the second wife, Nita? Only in the last segment of the narrative, when the recently widowed Nita writes "*Dear Bett. Rich is dead and I have saved my life by becoming you*" (Munro 143) does the intricate structure of the story restore the balance so that the reader is relieved to learn that the central character is really Nita, who had assumed an identity to protect herself from a pathological intruder.

Analogous to the sobering that comes from drinking largely, capacious, deep, but not indiscriminate reading helps us recognize narrative clues and cues, invites us to probe the plurality of language, and continues to extend the opportunity of encountering difference and otherness.

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