

Richman on Rannou (2013)

Rannou, Nathalie, ed. *L'Expérience du sujet lecteur: travaux en cours. Recherches et travaux* 83. Grenoble: ELLUG, 2013. Pp. 160. ISBN: 978-2-84310-267-7

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The collection *L'Expérience du sujet lecteur: travaux en cours*, edited by Nathalie Rannou, offers a variety of perspectives on the many ways students in French schools develop relationships to literary texts. An issue of the journal *Recherches et Travaux* put out by the research team Traverses 19-21 at the Université Stendhal–Grenoble, the volume presents ten articles organized in four sections: “Les Activités face aux textes littéraires”; “Pour définir le sujet lecteur: lieux de lecture et espace didactique”; “Des sujets lecteurs scolarisés”; and “L’expérience esthétique du sujet lecteur à l’école.” These essays engage the various definitions, relative merits, and practical applications of the concept of the “sujet lecteur,” or reading subject, in the context of the French national education system, particularly its recent reforms and directives concerning the teaching of literature. Despite this specific context and focus on school-age learners, the collection will be of great interest to all who grapple with the challenge of teaching students to engage with literature.

In her introduction, Nathalie Rannou lays out the volume’s purpose, to present “l’état de réflexions où convergent les conceptions d’une littérature ouverte, donnée à des lecteurs responsables et créatifs, quand bien même ils ne sont encore qu’apprentis.” Here, she points to the givens that run across all of the contributions: a central role for students in developing their own critical assessments of texts, and the challenges involved—for students as well as instructors—in reconfiguring the order of things in classrooms whose traditions have developed over centuries. One telling example is Sève’s finding that in the absence of an “authority” on a literary text—should the instructor for example withhold judgment—anxiety leads students to turn to the figure of the author to try to uncover his or her “intention.”

Part of the great value of this collection lies in making explicit the ways in which pleasure, power, and politics are embedded in the pedagogical choices for teaching reading. Pleasure figures prominently in encouraging the young reader to engage with texts. Raphaël Baroni argues that reading for the plot, an “effet autrefois négligé,” deserves to be reconsidered and rehabilitated since it invites “ces apprenants à s’interroger sur les moyens poétiques qui érotisent leur lecture.” He characterizes fictional representation as “un plaisir exaltant” and writes of “lecture délectable.” Roux examines how polemical texts produce pleasure (or not) in readers, while at the same time implicating them in the politics of the texts.

As an example of the dynamics of power and politics within the classroom, Agra de Brito Neves quotes Michèle Petit about the origins of formal analysis—and thus the importance of the expert—in teaching poetry: “[...plus] l’école s’ouvrait à des catégories sociales éloignées de la culture lettrée, plus s’y imposaient un jargon et des techniques d’une extrême sophistication, empruntées à la critique textuelle, aux théories de l’énonciation, à la rhétorique.” In contrast, Dufays and others argue persuasively for recognizing “la lecture subjective comme l’une des composantes clés de la lecture littéraire.” Legitimizing emotional or personal responses as starting points for students’ analysis of texts necessarily entails restructuring the traditional hierarchy in the classroom. If effective learning proceeds from students’ ideas rather than faculty expertise, according to Brunel, “la posture de l’enseignant doit évoluer: elle doit accompagner la parole plutôt que la diriger.” A balancing act ensues that involves a back-and-forth between subjective understanding and broader social—and scholarly—knowledge.

Other authors directly address issues of power and politics outside the classroom. The following assertion by Gabathuler can be read as a prescription for developing a fully engaged citizen, as well as an individual empowered with a sense of agency: “La lecture d’une oeuvre littéraire... permet [au sujet (lecteur)] subrepticement d’infléchir le cours de sa vie, de repenser son rapport à l’autre et au monde, de déployer ‘une palette de possibles,’ de construire un espace à soi.” Baroni ties the development of the reading subject, specifically one who has been allowed to read for the plot, to a social actor whose discernment enables him or her to navigate rhetoric in non-literary contexts. “Analyser aussi bien la force de l’intrigue que sa forme, c’est aussi l’occasion de nous mettre en garde contre le pouvoir du *storytelling*, qui... se manifeste... dans le discours des médias en mal d’audience, de publicitaires ou de politiciens sans scrupules qui veulent gagner notre adhésion.”

Many of the strategies described here to engage students in a meaningful and ongoing relationship with fiction, poetry, and other genres will prove valuable in a college setting, helping faculty re-evaluate their approach to teaching literature. Brunel offers an exercise, gathered from instructors’ professional dossiers, which involves writing a reading journal over a sustained period: “Il s’agit donc de s’appuyer sur l’écrit pour développer les qualités d’appropriation et d’interprétation” in the reader.

His example convinced even this hide-bound teacher of the deeper importance of journals and “response papers,” whose value had always taken second place to more “analytical” writing. Just as we, as faculty, are encouraged to incorporate new technologies into our pedagogical practice, we could benefit greatly from the low-tech approaches presented in this volume.

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