

Note

A Necessary Tension: Nussbaum and Simon Inform a Pedagogical Reading of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

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The development of higher order critical thinking skills in students is an endeavor that almost certainly guarantees an educator will end up navigating more questions than answers in her classes. What William Sumner (1940) called “the critical faculty,” or the ability to think critically, is

a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power . . . [that] is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances . . . [Those] educated in it cannot be stampeded . . . [since] education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can truly be said that it makes good citizens. (pp. 632, 633)

Sumner went on to describe a person with the ability to think critically as one who “can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain” (p. 633). Such a learner can sit with the possibility that a question can have many different answers and that some ideas, when paired, produce tension as they conflict with and perhaps even contradict one another.

I have taken Sumner’s (1940) stance in my teaching, recognizing that my own learning and that of my students remain limited if we engage with questions that beget only seemingly clear answers. I have worked for the last 18 years to embed what I call asymmetrical critical thinking in my high school English classroom. Working with literary texts, I attempt to model how at times the asymmetrical parts of a whole may not obviously correspond to each other—and that learning comes from holding together those things that do not seem to align as “possible or probable in all degrees.” To mobilize asymmetrical critical thinking in the classroom means that the students and I must grapple with questions regarding the text that are difficult to answer “without certainty and without pain.”

In my years as a teacher I have found that the honed skill of a learner to hold together multiple ideas as possible requires making room for moments of asymmetrical relation and its tension of thought. That skill can be called upon when searching for links to connect seemingly disparate philosophical notions. For example, Martha Nussbaum’s (1997) theory of the novel’s impact on a reader does not immediately or obviously connect with Roger Simon’s (2000) view of “zahkor,” a “public pedagogy of remembrance” (p. 219). While there is an agreement between what the novel *is* and what it *does* to the reader, according to Nussbaum, Simon’s interpretation of zahkor presents no conceptual balance or harmony, as learning is

gained through the complexities and the mess of memory work. I wonder if it is in fact *through* the dichotomous tensions of considering Nussbaum and Simon together that critical learning is made all the more possible.

In my English literature classroom, I have considered how the reading and working through of one specific novel has created a potential site of *zakhor*, a place of historical memory where the reader is offered “forms of learning central to life in human communities . . . telling again and again,” instead of it being a literary experience that is limited to a “passive undergoing of recollection or reminiscence” (Simon, 2000, p. 218). I have asked myself what might come from pairing Nussbaum’s (1997) novel-induced compassion for “the other” with Simon’s practice of *zakhor* as a way of offering learners the chance to move literature beyond its own scope—beyond entertainment or fleeting emotion to political “action” of the mind. My students and I explored how that action could literally be put to paper through the writing processes of active listening and guided note-taking when we had the opportunity to work through these tensions in our study of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. It was an experimental novel study experience for us all. I read to them while they took guided notes, which then informed our class discussions. It was a multifaceted process that connected elements of both theorists’ ideas: we tried to compassionately recognize “the other” while striving to avoid the trap of consuming another person’s story. The tension experienced in working to bring Nussbaum and Simon’s ideas together in the novel study left me uncomfortable enough to confirm that both my students and I were learning to think critically throughout the process.

Nussbaum’s (1997) “The Narrative Imagination” is a multifaceted work that considers literature, specifically the novel, a necessity to “serve the good of the whole” of humankind (p. 74). Nussbaum emphasized the need for a voice and the development of compassion through literature, for both qualities create in people a “sympathetic understanding with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility” (p. 75). Nussbaum saw the need to develop a sympathetic understanding for “the other” as a democratic imperative for “the good will not be served if human beings are seen simply as instruments of one another’s purposes” (p. 74). Nussbaum invoked Aristotle’s argument that literature is “more philosophical than history . . . because it acquaints us with ‘the kind of thing that might happen,’ general forms of possibility and their impact on human lives” (p. 77). Nussbaum went on to write, “A society that wants to foster the just treatment of all its members has strong reasons to foster an exercise of the compassionate imagination that crosses social boundaries, or tries to. And this means caring about literature” (p. 77). Nussbaum’s statements from “The Narrative Imagination” point to the novel’s power to affect change in the reader. Literary theorist Lionel Trilling called the imagination of the novel reader a “liberal imagination” (as cited in Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90) where

habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy. (p. 90)

It is worth noting that within Nussbaum's own theory tensions exist as both community and separateness are considered intrinsic to cultivated sympathy in a novel reader.

And it is while respecting separateness that ". . . the compassionate imagination . . . crosses social boundaries, or tries to" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 92). In this phrase, Nussbaum spoke to Ralph Ellison's description of the novel as "a raft of hope . . . that might help keep us afloat as we [try to] negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic idea" (as cited in Nussbaum, 1997, p. 88). Her addendum "tries to" is where I see Nussbaum's theory of literary compassion being lived out with my students. To "try" is the very opposite of a passive acceptance of information. The action of reading includes the selection of text for "the works of literature we choose will inevitably respond to, and further develop, our sense of who we are and might be" (p. 84). Therefore, the act of "trying" to gauge who one "might be" suggests that nothing is certain in terms of what Nussbaum described as the "quality of vision" that may be developed through novel reading, but the attempt must be made for the sake of the liberal imagination to cross boundaries as people negotiate each other's common humanity—for we are all "other" to someone (p. 85). That notion of otherness is something my students live every day in the city of Toronto. The city's beauties and struggles are enmeshed. Even while it is celebrated as "multicultural," inequities and challenges are lived out by marginalized "others" within the very schools where this novel is taught.

Before I couple the theories of Nussbaum (1997) and Simon (2000), I must first unpack the existing philosophical tension between the two. Nussbaum's linear thinking of how literature begets compassion and understanding runs counter to Simon's collective memory. As he said, "the practice of *zakhor* can never be entirely unproblematic, embodied in a unified pedagogical form" (p. 219). At the same time, the acts of compassion that may emerge from the novel reader's ever-expanding liberal imagination are plausibly connected to Simon's concept of *zakhor*, the Jewish practice in which he grounded his work, that he called a "public pedagogy of remembrance" (p. 219). Simon's presentation of *zakhor* connects with Nussbaum's idea that "[w]e all learn most from a curriculum that contains dissent and difference, an interaction of opposing views" (p. 84). To gain awareness of an ensuing compassion for the world and all peoples in it, the benefits of dissenting and opposing opinions are brought to the fore as Nussbaum spoke to the need for interdisciplinary dialogue (p. 85). Though she used this terminology as specific to academia, I wonder about the possibility for dialogue beyond academe. I imagine that the dialogue emerging from novel reading in the context of the public education classroom can be linked to and informed by the pedagogical nature of *zakhor*.

Simon (2000) said that *zakhor* is "inherently pedagogical [and that] Jewish existence has depended on [a] pedagogy of remembrance [that shatters] conventional linkages of time and memory" (p. 218). This practice is not entrenched in memories of a distant past but rather in time as "reconstituted through relationships":

zakhor must forever negotiate the tension between . . . providing a sense of continuity and confirmation while . . . renewing the

significance of memory through making evident a cited past's discontinuity with immediate existence . . . [Therefore,] zakhor is something one must do. (p. 218)

A tangible connection between the theorists appears in Simon's "do," which is similar to Nussbaum's (1997) "try": both doing and trying require action on the part of the community who is remembering and the community who is both reading and writing.

Simon (2000) said that the "fundamental importance of the doubled notion of zakhor" requires us to reconfigure what he calls the "point of connection" (p. 221). Technically, a "point of connection" refers to an emotionally charged identification as "one's attentiveness [to historical memory] is heightened" by a concrete and specific connection "that may be 'read' as shared elements between the other and oneself" (p. 219). Simon called it an "imaginative affinity" (p. 219). Yet, even with the best of intentions, as we are "wounded by the wounds" of others, finding a "point of connection" has the potential danger of absorbing "the elements of another's memories" in an attempt to find "empathetic identification" (p. 219). Simon called this "transferential obsession" (p. 222). He countered the danger of remembrance being co-opted by self-emphasis when he reconfigured a "point of connection" into "one that initiates an ongoing attentiveness to identification and difference" (p. 219). Such remembrance "shift[s] and disrupt[s] the present, opening one to new ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting" (p. 219). Therefore, zakhor is "this necessary relation between continuity and unsettlement," and the beauty of this tension is how, with action, "the intricate practice of remembrance is bound up with the possibility of hope" (p. 221).

Simon (2000) argued, "The difficult stories of the suffering matter because the very possibility of hope depends on their memorial insistence" (p. 221). To attain said hope, the practice of zakhor "requires the recognition of boundaries," as in

I begin to enact my memorial kinship to the memory of another with the recognition of my distance from these memories . . . I attempt to hear or see within this boundary space and re-say that which I have heard or seen, but in a way that takes cognizance of its strangeness, its foreignness, so that my rearticulation begins to interrupt my . . . present. (p. 223)

It is at this juncture—of continuity, unsettlement and boundary—where I see an opening for Nussbaum's compassionate and liberal imagination to become yoked to the practice of zakhor.

I teach my students that literature is not simply a part of the past in which it was written. Simon (2000) wrote that a "practice of historical memory . . . is not merely a recall, but always a renewal of the possibility of the past, which may innovate and interrupt the performance of the present" (p. 224). Thus, when I speak of characters or plot lines in class, I emphasize the living nature of the text that is made up of a renewed past and a potentially interrupted present. The urban Toronto high school where I taught this novel has a very culturally diverse student body where the majority of the student population is made up of newcomers or first-

generation Canadians. For many, including those students born in Toronto, there exists a tension that both ties them to and separates them from what is considered “home.” I strive to make my English classroom an environment where that tension might be considered with the hope that literature has the potential to help name the unnamable for students, specifically for those who can feel voiceless in an education system that can inadvertently or purposely work to silence them. The schoolboard sets cross-cultural and character education as key goals to be fulfilled in every class, but with over 80 cultures represented in the school, how can it include everyone’s experience within the building? Thus, we have the ubiquitous “multicultural assembly,” where a few students with family histories from here or there dance or sing to “traditional” music. At the end, we applaud and head back to our classrooms where thoughtful teachers attempt to discuss what we have all just seen and heard. Many of us are uncomfortable with what Simon would call the “object lesson” of the assembly, and we, like the students, can be left voiceless after this limited experience.

Learning to read and write critically is a way to challenge the object lesson quandary. In class discussions around essays like Jamaica Kincaid’s “Upon Seeing England for the First Time,” voices are raised, whether there are students from Barbados in the room or not. Many students from India or Jamaica have absorbed within their homes their own love/hate relationship with the United Kingdom, and therefore Kincaid’s words resonate at some level with their own experiences. Simon’s wariness around “transfential obsession” is warranted, as students may too easily absorb Kincaid’s experience as their own, risking forgetting her memories in their personal remembrance. I see my responsibility as a teacher as working to interrupt that potential erasure. Nussbaum (1997) suggested that compassion for “the other” arises from the novel, for there is time for the reader to create relationships with its characters or, at the very least, analyze why certain relationships do not develop. She pointed to the novel as moving beyond cerebral contemplation as a reader invests a personal stake in the story because of her extended time spent with the text, and more specifically with its characters. To help facilitate entry points for students into a novel study, to try and interrupt the potential for erasure, I look to the process of guided note-taking. The doing and trying of note-taking that comes about from active listening seems to help my students to build bridges, connecting them with complex stories and characters.

The process for guided note-taking took center stage when I introduced Marquez’s novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* to my grade 12 students. As a teacher I must always consider my audience and how they might be able to connect with the work. In light of Nussbaum (1997) and Simon (2000), I hoped that engagement with Marquez’s short text would enable students to walk away from the novel study as more compassionate and critical thinkers—thinkers who could hold two ideas at the same time without certainty and without pain, remembering and with hope re-saying someone’s story other than their own. When I introduced the text to my grade 12 students those years ago, I used biographical information about Marquez to situate his personal and political worldview. I then followed with historical information about the South American struggle for voice. I wanted to give the students as much information as I could about the United Fruit Company’s stranglehold on Columbia and the ensuing Banana Massacre and other disastrous events that made their way

into Marquez's novels. Then, instead of asking the students to read the novel at home, I read the text aloud in class, and before doing so I gave them instructions on how to actively listen, using their ears, their hands and their voices. The novel, at only 130 pages, is filled with unfamiliar vocabulary, culturally specific metaphors and sophisticated imagery. As they wrote their notes, they were encouraged to listen for key terms and phrases that stood out to them. They were guided to code their notes using highlighters, underlining or coloring those words that were repeated and used symbolically. Because they were given the freedom to stop the reading process to ask questions and then continue to write, as we went along we found that on each page there was something to discuss or explain. Their critical notes became points of connection that I observed to be written with "an ongoing attentiveness to identification and difference" as they were read to (Simon, 2000, p. 219). Key concepts that they wrote down determined our class discussions. Tension-laden concepts that were laid bare in their note-taking meant that they saw in their own handwriting the words "white man," repeated again and again, as associated with social and economic class. They read their own written references to sex workers described as angels of mercy. As they wrote about magical realism, they were asked to question the term's potential to limit or enlighten their understanding of the text. They wrote "honor" over and over again in their notes, and then we discussed how that layered word has enough power to bring a whole town to its knees. They wrote of how the narrator describes grace in "the other," an outsider who offers hope and relief to a hurting antagonist in prison.

The reading and note-taking process obligated great patience for us all. It would have taken perhaps two days for students to read this novella on their own. Instead, it took two weeks to read it aloud in class. But as a community we maneuvered through it together, and I believe that our critical faculties grew because of the experience. I saw their active listening and note-taking as attempts to both *try* and *do*, as the words I read and those they wrote down became words that were spoken aloud in community. Upon the novel's conclusion, the ensuing group discussions highlighted for me where compassion, continuity, unsettlement and boundary had converged for us as a class. The students' process of active listening, note-taking and class discussions showed me how we had worked together to make the novella into a potential site of *zakhor*. Did our engagement with the text facilitate compassion for others outside of ourselves? As words upon words were highlighted and underlined, did our class really start to reckon with a collective responsibility to continue learning about a community that was not ours? I felt hopeful when a few students shared with me their continued research beyond our class discussions into the real world that had shaped Marquez's fictional town. Their actions pointed to the oral reading of the novel and their writing of guided notes as having been pedagogically valuable, as they used critical thinking skills to remember and re-say what they had heard and written of the "other."

I acknowledge that Nussbaum (1997) and Simon (2000) may balk at being placed together. Inevitably, nuances from their pieces are missing from what I have posited here in this short reflection. But I do know for certain that I was shaped as a teacher by both theorists' works, as the potential for a site of *zakhor* was opened up through our novel-incited compassion for "the other." The potential emerged in the

process of reading and writing beyond ourselves. The educational value of working with a variety of texts in the literature classroom is embedded in learning outcomes central to the Grade 12, University curriculum in Ontario, which states, “As students increase their knowledge of accomplished writers and literary works and vicariously experience times, events, cultures, and values different from their own, they deepen their understanding of the many dimensions of human thought and experience” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 16).

To help give my students the tools to increase their knowledge and “experience times, events, cultures, and values different from their own,” laying for them the foundation for a critical faculty that can hold two ideas in tension without pain, I cannot stop at simply presenting them with texts like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Experience has shown me that when engaging with such a text, a tangible tool that can be used to enhance their critical thinking skills is the writing of guided notes. The explicit in-class process of active listening put to paper exemplifies one way to demystify a practice of developing critical thought in students. Similar learning outcomes could just as easily appear in senior level social studies and history courses where teachers are given the leeway to use literature “[a]s a creative representation of life and experience [that] . . . raises important questions about the human condition, now and in the past” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 16). If the development of a quality of vision in the classroom is possible when theoretical tensions are embraced as opportunities for critical thought, as a teacher I will keep looking for those ideas that do not seem to obviously line up—to learn with my students as they attempt to hold disparate ideas together without certainty or pain and grow in the process.

References

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