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Language and Literature 2012 21: 211
DOI: 10.1177/0963947011435864

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What is This?
Private experience, textual analysis, and institutional authority: The discursive practice of critical interpretation and its enactment in literary training

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Abstract
Academic literary criticism emphasises both the private experience of reading and the analysis of formal textual features. Since the early 20th century, this double emphasis has been sustained through the production of ‘readings’ or ‘interpretations’ in which claimed responses to literature are accounted for through textual analysis, a practice here theorised in terms drawn from discursive psychology. Conceptualising interpretation as practice renders it investigable through qualitative social research methods. This article thus studies the enactment of critical interpretation within a specific form of literary training, carrying out a turn-by-turn analysis of an undergraduate tutorial on Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). Within this classroom context, students use claimed private experiences to challenge a lecturer’s reading of the work, treat those claimed responses (some of which appear homophobic) as unnecessary to account for, and account for responses they reject in non-textual terms. For contrast, a short extract is provided from an established department member’s tutorial on William Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ (1798). It is argued that the two instructors’ very different levels of institutional authority are reflected in their teaching styles and in the resistance or compliance that their students exhibit towards the discursive practices of literary criticism.

Keywords
Authority, discourse analysis, experience, homophobia, interpretation, literary training, reading, reception, resistance, response

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I Introduction: Experience, knowledge, and critical interpretation

The private experience of reading enjoys a troubled place in the theory and pedagogy of literature. De Certeau, for example, sees it as the site of secret resistance to cultural and educational authority:

Today, it is the socio-political mechanisms of the schools, the press, or television that isolate the text controlled by the teacher or the producer from its readers. But behind the theatrical decor of this new orthodoxy is hidden (as in earlier ages) the silent, transgressive, ironic, or poetic activity of readers (or television viewers) who maintain their reserve in private and without the knowledge of the ‘masters’. (de Certeau, 1984 [1980]: 172)

Does private experience support or subvert the project of literary training? Against de Certeau, we might note that teachers of literature often elicit personal responses from their students before trying to draw them into a more scholarly mode of engagement with texts. This strategy was identified in Jones et al.’s analysis of an undergraduate tutorial on Jane Eyre:

DA [the instructor] asks for a personal response about a particular aspect of the text; students talk about their own pre-occupations in their own words; DA quietly reframes, steering them back to (or reminding them of) the themes, ideas, language that he would like them to take on. (Jones et al., 2005: 256)

What this suggests is that teachers elicit their students’ personal responses to text in order to integrate those responses into a scholarly mode of engagement with literature (here through what Jones et al. call ‘reframing’, a tactic I shall analyse in more detail later). Such integration can also be seen in Short’s definition of stylistics as a process of ‘examining carefully the linguistic structure of a text and showing the role which that linguistic structure plays in helping a reader to arrive at an interpretation of that text’ (Short, 1993: 8; note that in this context, ‘interpretation’ implies a pre-analytic response). Given a sufficiently broad definition of ‘linguistic structure’, such a definition can comfortably accommodate most forms of Anglophone literary criticism since the early 20th century, as one may see from Richards’ insistence that a ‘full critical statement’ must involve not only the revelation of a reading experience but also an explanation of how that experience was ‘caused by certain features in a contemplated object’ (Richards, 1966 [1924]: 23).

There are historical reasons for this state of affairs. As Atherton (2005) shows, an opposition between personal experience and the scholarly production of knowledge has troubled British writing on literature since the 19th century. At that time, professors ‘drew on certain aspects of literary scholarship in order to claim ... [professional] authority’ when writing for an audience outside of the academy, yet sought at the same time ‘to distance themselves from the methods [scholarship] employed and the types of knowledge it prioritised, foregrounding a personal sympathy that offered itself as the only route to a “true” understanding’ (Atherton, 2005: 87). Discussing the context of 19th-century France, Bourdieu contrasts the aristocratic ‘mondain’, who ‘invoke[s] experience against knowledge’, with the scholastic ‘pedant’, who ‘is inclined to accept the ideology of
innate tastes, since it is the only absolute guarantee of his [sic] election; but against the mondain ... is forced to assert ... the value of ... the “slow effort to improve the mind” (Bourdieu, 1986 [1979]: 74; the quotation is from Kant). Like Atherton’s English-speaking professors, Bourdieu’s ‘pedant’ lays claim both to personal response and to scholarship. Response alone could not be enough, because, as Knights observes, ‘if you are to lay claim to specialism, you have to find ways of marking off your activity from what readers do anyway’ (Knights, 2005: 35).

In the early 20th-century movement that has come to be remembered as the New Criticism, academic critics attempted to overcome the divide between private experience and scholarly knowledge by integrating responses to literature into a credible form of investigative research. They did this through the production of ‘readings’ or ‘interpretations’ grounded in the formal features of literary texts, as in the pronouncement from Richards quoted earlier. Such an approach may have had other advantages: for example, McGann (1985: 111–114) suggests that it enabled literary study to make a radical break with the discipline of philology, which focused on texts not as phenomena experienced in the present, but as artefacts produced in the past. So it should be no surprise to find teachers of literature (from at least the time of Richards onwards) encouraging their students both to express ‘personal’ responses to literature and to produce analyses of formal features as explanations for those responses. Indeed, this was a vital part of the process by which literature and criticism were ‘establish[ed] as disciplinary subjects designed to be part of the curriculum of the university.’ (Green, 2003: 65)

Institutional insistence on interpretations having what Olsen calls a ‘foothold in the text’ (1982: 25) provides academic criticism with a means of combining a focus on inherently subjective personal experience with a degree of rigour and even objectivity. The point is not to provide an incontestable demonstration of a text’s ‘objective’ meaning, but to ground an interpretation in something existing independently of the interpreter – and (just as importantly) to limit the interpreter to the production of interpretations that can be grounded in this way. This institutional insistence arguably provides interpretations with a loose equivalent of falsifiability that one might call ‘challengeability’: constructing an interpretation on the evidential basis of a text’s formal features enables others with access to the same evidence to challenge that interpretation in ways that would be impossible were one’s interpretation presented as the expression of personal experience. The experience thus becomes to some extent depersonalised, which can create the impression that a critical interpretation is ‘anonymous to authorship, a property of the text, a discovery for any competent reader to see’ (Livingston, 1995: 99), resulting in the production of a discipline that is centrally focused on reading experiences but not upon readers as real people (see Allington and Swann, 2009: 219–223).

The integration of private experience into rigorous analytic study is problematic, however, since the former can be argued to compromise the latter, and vice versa. Thus, Frye (Frye, 1957: 11) attempted to separate the two, arguing that while literary criticism should aspire to become ‘an organised body of knowledge’ on the model of physics, literary reading ‘should, like prayer in the Gospels, step out of the talking world of criticism into the private and secret presence of literature’ (1957: 27). Evidently, this argument did not prevail: today, ‘[t]he act of interpretation’ is ‘a kind of sine qua non in the teaching of literature on the college level’ (Jackson, 2005: 520).
Such teaching entails norm-enforcement. Without the insistence that reading take a challengeable form, arguments from private experience can become very powerful. No one can seriously argue with you about the private experiences that you say you had or did not have whilst reading. And the interpretation that accords with private experience can be presented as a true exegesis, a bringing out of what is really there in the text. Conversely, the interpretation that does not accord with private experience can be presented as an eisegesis, or attribution to the text of ideas originating outside it, for example in a false consensus – as in Frye’s dismissal of critical interpretation as ‘a mere reflection of critical conventions, memories, and prejudices’ (1957: 27).

The management of reading demands empirical investigation. Arguments about reading experiences – whether made on the general level (as with Frye) or on the particular level, in discussions of specific texts – can usefully be approached from the standpoint of discursive psychology, i.e. the study of how ‘psychological’ topics are placed at stake in spoken and written discourse (see Edwards and Potter, 1992). This entails a focus on the ways in which speakers deploy ‘versions of external reality and of psychological states’ (Edwards and Potter, 2001: 15) in the production of what Sacks (1995) calls ‘accounts’: a focus that has inspired a re-conceptualisation of ‘decoding’ in the extra-academic reception of printed and audio-visual media (Allington, 2007). This is particularly pertinent to the study of literary teaching and criticism, as discursive psychologists take a special interest in ‘how psychological matters are introduced, defined, and made relevant to the business of [institutional] settings.’ (Edwards and Potter, 2001: 13) In this article, I theorise critical interpretation as a discursive practice in which it is normative that ascribed psychological states (i.e. reading experiences) be accounted for with versions of external reality (i.e. analyses of formal textual features of the works being read). This contrasts with an alternative rhetoric in which versions of external reality (i.e. claims as to the ‘real’ meaning of texts) are accounted for in terms of ascribed psychological states (including reading experiences) that need be accounted for only when they are presented as ‘wrong’.

As this article will show, undergraduate students are in some cases able to use this alternative rhetoric to resist academic authority by managing the discursive business of reading in ways other than those established by Richards and others as central to literary criticism. As we shall see, such resistance is not necessarily progressive.

2 Background to the data

This article builds on the discourse analytic tradition in ‘booktalk’ research (Eriksson, 2002), and arises from a project of observing critical interpretation as enacted within (and not merely instilled by) literary training. Such a focus on enactment is important because it recognises that critical interpretation is not an abstract ‘competence’ (as in the early work of Culler, 1975) but a discursive practice shaped by institutional context; it thus reflects the current ethnographic and anthropological understanding of reading in terms of socially embedded ‘literacy practices’ (Barton and Papen, 2010; Street, 1984) that will inevitably vary from one context to another, even in a single individual. Whiteley (2011), for example, finds more and less highly trained readers to respond to texts in broadly comparable ways when taking part in informal reading group discussion, but this does not mean that they will respond similarly in every context: leisure reading is a cultural behaviour
overwhelmingly determined by educational attainment and occupational class (see Allington, 2011: 131 for a review), and literary training has been found to have a significant effect upon performance in quasi-academic interpretative tasks (e.g. Bortolussi and Dixon 1996; Dorfman 1996). Taking a broadly discourse analytic approach does not mean assuming that reading and context can be related to one another as dependent and independent variables; rather, it means exploring the ways in which reading becomes manifest within contextually oriented cultural practices, as in Peplow’s (2011) study of the turn-by-turn negotiation of textual interpretation in naturally occurring reading group discussion.

The data collection on which this article draws took place in the spring of 2006, when 40 separate classes were audio recorded in the English Studies department where the author of this article was studying for a PhD, and in which he also carried out a small amount of teaching and lecturing. These recordings were made in as naturalistic a manner as possible (i.e. with no individuals in the room who would not ordinarily have been present for class), with anonymised verbatim transcripts being produced in the course of analysis (see Appendix for conventions). As in conversation analysis, the focus was on the sequential organisation of talk rather than on the mere presence or absence of particular themes or topics. However, conversation analysts’ exclusive focus on local context as manifest in talk (see Schegloff, 1997) was relaxed in favour of a commitment to exploring connections between the turn-by-turn development of classroom interaction and the historical development of the institutional macro-context within which the interaction took place. Though some participant perspectives are included in this article for comparison, this analytic commitment enables claims to be grounded independently of appeals to insider knowledge and anthropological ‘going native’ (see Tresch, 2002). It aligns this research with the tradition of ‘linguistic ethnography’ (see Rampton, 2007).

The audio recordings revealed a tendency on the part of instructors to direct students towards discussion of the meaning and formal features of literary texts. Reader responses, literary theory, and the historical context of the texts’ authoring (including authorial biography) were other topics that instructors frequently raised. In this article, all these topics are termed ‘critical matters’ by analogy with the ‘therapeutic matters’ whose discussion has been argued to be central to the discursive practice of counselling (Hutchby, 2002: 148). However, it was observed that not all instructors promoted discussion of critical matters in the same way. Classes led by members of what Bousquet analyses as the academic proletariat, that is, ‘graduate employees and former graduate employees working part-time and non-tenurably in subprofessorial conditions’ (2008: 46), tended to be organised in a student-centred fashion. The pedagogical style of these part-time, fixed-term contract teaching staff, known as ‘teaching assistants’, was thus characterised by the organisation of pre-planned activities involving both instructor–student and student–student interaction. This reflected the principles of the cross-departmental induction course required for all teaching assistants and experienced first hand by the author of this article. This course emphasised that the instructor’s task was to facilitate student engagement in a variety of structured activities providing opportunities for groupwork, pairwork, class discussion and so on. Whether this emphasis was pedagogically well advised is unclear: Benwell and Stokoe, for example, find undergraduate resistance to participation instudent-centred activities to be so great that the ‘shift in participant roles ... does not appear to advance the pedagogic project’ (2002: 441). On the other hand, such an approach to the work of teaching can also be interpreted as a contextually
appropriate enactment of the teaching assistants’ low institutional status – a theme I shall return to below. Classes led by permanent, full-time members of the department tended by contrast to be organised in a more instructor-centred fashion, and typically consisted of three activity types: the reading aloud of extracts or whole texts by the instructor, monologic exposition from the instructor to the students, and apparently ad hoc instructor–student interaction in which the instructor played the dominant role. (It should be emphasised that other activities did occur, especially where students were expected to exhibit behaviour modelled by instructors: reading aloud by students and pre-prepared, instructor-assessed monologic exposition from individual students to class were also observed, although less frequently.)

These contrasting teaching styles had interesting consequences for the discursive place of personal experience. Permanent members of the department frequently elicited personal responses to text from their students, but generally did so in a closely controlled way, ensuring that those responses would serve to advance the discussion of other critical matters. That is, personal responses were elicited with regard to parts of the text that the instructor had already identified as significant, with the instructor subsequently using these responses as an opportunity to elicit and/or produce commentary on specific formal features, theoretical concepts, or aspects of historical context. This approach is clearly illustrated by the following exchange, in which ET is a male senior lecturer and ES5 is a male student (six other students were present, all but one of them female):

ET (reading) ‘these orchard tufts. which at this season. with their unripe fruits. are clad in one. green. hue. and lose themselves. mid. groves. and copses’ (stops reading). speak to me about tho-. that that. that small portion. what are. what are the impressions. that the verse. is. throwing up?. what are some of the salient images that are being thrown around?\

ES5 confusion\

ET yes. there’s certainly a sense of confusion. where do you pick that up?\

ES5 well. everything in nature is just. ehm. (tuts). where is it? (6 sec pause) it’s ‘clad in one green hue’. [so it’s nothing. nothing=\

ET ye:s\

ES5 =specific. it’s all. one. green. hue=\

ET =precisely there doesn’t seem to be a kind of. clear set of boundaries or definitions in [place\

ES [(clears throat)\

ET there. there’s. look. look to the lines. (reads) ‘and connect. the landscape. with the quiet of the sky’ (stops reading). things are kind of. indeterminate there doesn’t seem to be a rigid sense of difference remember. he’s looking above at the scene. and things. appear to be relatively. boundaryless. and that’s a very good point

Here, ET draws attention to a passage from William Wordsworth’s 1798 poem, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’, eliciting a response from ES5 (‘confusion’). ET then prompts ES5 to identify something in the passage to account for his response (producing a rudimentary form of what Richards, 1966 [1924] calls a ‘full critical statement’), expands on ES5’s brief explanation to produce a more in-depth analysis of
formal features, and finally compliments ES5 on having made ‘a very good point’. In this way, personal response to text is structured as something not only to be expressed but also to be accounted for – and to be accounted for through textual analysis. In conversation with the researcher, ET expressed concern that he spoke too much in class, but his domination of discussion appeared to be in no way unusual for an established member of the department, and served to reproduce what I argued earlier to have been a key principle of literary training and research since the New Criticism.

There appears to be substantial similarity between the foregoing exchange and the pattern mentioned earlier identified by Jones et al. (2005). Like other permanent members of the department, ET controls the expression of personal response through what have been called initiation-response-feedback exchanges (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). This gives little or no opportunity for resistance to arise because any student who responds to the initiation must take what Sacks calls ‘first position’ (1995, vol. 2: 344–347). As Sacks observes, argumentative first position is inherently vulnerable: ‘if you can put off going first [in an argument], it’s not just a matter of your going second, it’s that you don’t have to state your position or argument; instead, you can criticise the prior party’s.’ (1995, vol. 2: 345) Hutchby (1996), for example, shows that talk radio programmes place callers in first position, making it easier for the host to criticise their arguments than for them to criticise the host’s. In this illustrative extract, ET uses second position not in order to criticise the student’s response but in order to make it accountable for in terms of formal textual features.

Although we do not have space to examine that class’s interactions in detail, it provides a point of contrast with the class that we shall be focusing on for the remainder of this article. This class was taught by a female doctoral candidate, DT. Like the other class, it was available to students in their first and second years of undergraduate study. Eight students were present, including one male mature student. As I shall show, this instructor also used initiation-response-feedback exchanges, but did not require the students to respond to text in first position, enabling them to avoid accounting for their responses in terms of formal textual features.

3 Analysis: ‘I don’t know why so many people think that and I can’t see it’

The class I shall now turn to was devoted to Oscar Wilde’s 1895 play, The Importance of Being Earnest. The first data excerpt begins a few minutes into the class, during follow-up to a homework activity. There had been a lecture on the play, delivered by a permanent member of the department, and Anthony Asquith’s 1952 film adaptation had been screened. DT had asked the students to prepare for the class not only by reading and watching versions of The Importance of Being Earnest but also by reading critical writings on the play. The class began with the instructor asking the students to volunteer statements from these writings that they disagreed with. Disagreement with previous opinions is a characteristic mode by which literary critics engage with literary texts (Mailloux, 1989), and functions to structure their interpretations by establishing particular textual features as relevant to the critical enterprise (Allington, 2006: 135). DT thus arguably positioned her students as literary critics in their own right. Interestingly, the only disagreement that provoked extended discussion was with the lecture that an
established member of the department had given on *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Lecturing is an instance of the practice that Jones et al. characterise as ‘modelling’ work (2005: 260), wherein the instructor’s discourse provides an ideal that students are expected to emulate. In this particular department, lectures often ended with an invitation for questions, but students almost never used this as an opportunity to express disagreement with what had been said. DT’s pedagogical strategy provided students with an opportunity to do precisely that, treating the lecturer as having taken first position in an argument. Discussion developed as follows:

DT: okay? anyone else got a thing they disagreed with that they’d like to talk about? (5 sec pause) Monica?

DS7: ehm... well it’s kind of going back to what you were saying it kind of touches on that but the whole (coughs) homosexuality thing I couldn’t (sniffs) I actually couldn’t find much evidence in the play. to. suggest that. like when I read it I didn’t

DS: (very quiet) mm mm

DS7: so I kind of disagree with that. but then I don’t know why. so many people. think that and. I can’t. see it= 

DS6: =I think when you hear like a general view about something you think. ‘oh. I’m meant to agree with that’. but. I don’t really find anything either.

DS: (very quiet) mm

DS2: no that’s what I mean. cuz that’s what I was. thinking when I first saw it and read it I didn’t. really. read anything into the homosexuality element but. after the. lecture. I was like. (affects surprise) ‘oh. okay’ (laughs)

Here, DT’s question meets with a silence whose painful length is oriented to in her eventual nomination of a student to answer. Benwell and Stokoe (2002) analyse such silences as a form of resistance to the ‘academic identity’ that an eager, self-nominated answer might imply. Here, DS7’s response initially appears to resemble a literary-critical position on *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in that her statement that she had been unable to ‘find much evidence in the play’ for ‘the whole homosexuality thing’ might be taken to imply that she has examined the evidence and found it wanting. However, she qualifies this statement with the clarification ‘like when I read it I didn’t’, which carries no such implication: she is not claiming to have examined the evidence, but only to have read the play and not picked up on any. This mitigates her interpretive counter-claim – a mitigation carried further by hedging (‘I *kind of* disagree’). The invocation of the private reading experience may serve at this point to leave room for a possible change of opinion (see Swann and Allington, 2009: 254–255 for analysis of this discursive move within informal reading group discussion), but it also provides a way to account for the student’s disagreement without having to challenge the lecturer’s position on the level of textual analysis.

Rather than take second position in relation to DS7’s counter-claim and demand that she account for her disagreement in terms of textual features, DT remains silent, allowing DS7’s fellow students to build on the foregoing account. This leads to an escalation of scepticism and resistance in which DS7’s hedging is not replicated and the lecture is more explicitly identified as the object of disagreement. Intriguingly, the instructor remains neutral with regard to the lecturer’s interpretation of the play throughout the remainder of the class, and presents no interpretation of her own.
In informal conversation with the researcher (who was also employed on a fixed term contract), fixed term contract teaching staff frequently emphasised their alienation from, marginality to, and precariousness within the department; on one occasion, this particular teaching assistant compared their position to that of the governess within a bourgeois Victorian household. Her interpretative fence-sitting can potentially be interpreted as an enactment of this low status: by avoiding ‘first position’, she avoids placing herself at the mercy of her students’ ‘second position’ resources, perhaps in recognition of the fact that she has no institutional mandate to pose as a source of knowledge in her own right.

The terms of the discussion which follows appear to be set by DS7’s closing words: ‘I don’t know why so many people think that and I can’t see it’. Verbs such as ‘think’ and ‘see’ have a subtle yet powerful rhetoric. For example, in mass media arguments on genetically modified organisms, scientists are frequently said to ‘think’ while the public is only said to ‘feel’, producing a ‘contrast between scientists’ rationality ... and the public’s emotion’, and enabling ‘[p]ublic opposition to GM [to be] attributed to ignorance’ (Cook, 2004: 38). In the case of this student’s discourse, however, ‘think’ would appear to be the less powerful term, since it is contrasted with a verb of perception. Saying ‘I don’t know why so many people think that and I can’t see it’ thus arguably represents the disagreement as one between that which is supposed and that which is actually visible, raising the possibility that what is thought but not seen is not seen because it is not real: contrast the Lord of the Rings fan who asks ‘how come most people don’t see’ the sexual attraction between two male characters (quoted in Allington, 2007, emphasis added).

This interpretation is supported by DS6 and DS2’s orientations to DS7’s statement. The clause ‘I don’t know why’ could be taken as an invitation to explain either or both of the clauses that follow it (i.e. ‘so many people think that’ and ‘I can’t see it’). But it is only the first of the two that DS6 and DS2 treat as problematic and as requiring to be accounted for. DS6 suggests that conformity (‘I’m meant to’) to group consensus (‘a general view’) accounts for the view that there is a homosexual aspect to the play, while DS2 is emphatic that the idea of homosexuality came to her not while watching or reading the play (i.e. as part of her private experience of it), but during the lecture. Despite the equivocal nature of DS7’s utterance, then, the upshot of her exchange with these other students is an unequivocal rejection of the lecturer’s response to The Importance of Being Earnest.

DS6 and DS2’s utterances involve instances of reported speech. Baynham divides reported speech into two kinds, with direct speech being discourse that affects to report ‘both form and content’ of an ‘original utterance’, and indirect speech being discourse that affects to report ‘content’ alone (1996: 68). In DS2’s case, what is reported is a private thought supposed to have occurred to her after the lecture, and in DS6’s, no specific occasion is referred to: it is an example of what Myers calls ‘typified reported speech’: utterances presented ‘to be taken as emblematic of broader attitudes’ (Myers, 1999: 386). As Myers argues, direct speech usually ‘serves to provide evidence ... arising from the depiction, the conveying of how it was said as well as what was said’ (Myers, 1999: 386), such that ‘it is the enactment that has the effect and calls on other participants for response’ (Myers, 1999: 396): here, DS6’s ‘oh I’m meant to agree’ indicates the recognition of pressure to conform, and DS2’s performance of her past surprise (‘oh okay’) indicates that nothing in her reading and watching of the play had prepared her for the lecturer’s interpretation.

By refusing to accept a link between homosexual meanings and the play, yet not proposing an alternative meaning, the students resist any co-option of personal response into
the discussion of formal features: the only response that is being discussed is one that the class consistently disassociates from the text. These disassociations grow more forceful as the session progresses:

DS4: and also I don’t want to so much. homosexuality in it. I don’t want to think that these. two characters. do have. that kind of. life. don’t want them to be like that so I don’t see it like that and I don’t read it like that. but. y’know. I can do. if. somebody. persuades me to.

DT: okay. so the kind of [personal reactions you= 
DS: [(nervous laugh) 
DT: =might have to the play might sort of influence the kind of. reading into it you’re going to do= 
DS: =yeah

DS4’s initial utterance here does not even resemble an interpretation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The repeated uses of the word ‘want’, with sentence stress falling upon each one, are particularly notable. In context of a conversation about racial prejudice, Edwards has analysed statements of what people ‘want’ or ‘don’t want’ as ascriptions of ‘psychological dispositions ... [that] are provided for, as rationally tied to the way the world is’ (2003: 42), in other words, as not requiring any further accounting. In this case, the student accounts for her response to the text (‘so I don’t see... and I don’t read’) in terms of a psychological disposition that does not need to be accounted for in its own right, thus resisting the structuring of personal response as accountable for in terms of a (challengeable) analysis of textual features. The student states that she is capable of reading the play otherwise *if* someone can persuade her to do so, but she offers no suggestion of any basis on which such persuasion might occur, in that her reason for reading as she does is simply her own expressed distaste for (and implied moral judgement of) ‘that kind of life’. (The suggestion of homophobia within this moral judgement later became explicit in another student’s contributions, briefly discussed below.)

Although DS4’s utterance holds out the possibility of her being persuaded to the lecturer’s way of reading the play, the instructor – who throughout the class avoids taking first position by not endorsing any interpretation directly – instead responds through a ‘reframing’ tactic. On a linguistic level, she achieves this through a different use of reported speech than that discussed above. Baynham (1996) finds that, in adult education classes, teachers use reported speech to reformulate student utterances but not vice versa, and Myers finds that, in focus groups, reformulation of group member utterances is practised ‘largely, but not exclusively ... by the moderators’ (Myers, 1999: 394). In all these cases, indirect speech is used by more powerful interlocutors to establish what less powerful interlocutors’ contributions will be taken to have meant. DT’s strategy can thus be seen as an exercise of power, although one which avoids asserting an obviously contrary position: she begins by positioning herself as in agreement with the student (‘okay’), and then produces a formulation that she identifies with what the student meant.

This appears to be a widespread pedagogical strategy. Baynham gives the example of a numeracy teacher reformulating student utterances and ‘in so doing ... shifting them in the direction of a more mathematical discourse’ (Baynham, 1996: 72), and similar purposes are implied by one literature instructor’s expressed intention to ‘draw out’ from students’ utterances ‘things that can link back to the major critical issues’ and thereby
DT well what are the arguments then . this . idea of homosexuality in the play where does it . come from . what sort of . things is it that people are picking up on? . any ideas? (4 sec pause) puzzled shaking of heads

DS (unvoiced laugh)

DT blank looks all around . (5 sec pause) [no?

DS2 [I guess it’s just . taking the . life of Oscar Wilde and putting it [into . uhm . the character of . is=

DS [(sniffs) DS2 =it Algernon? . uhm . yeah . (laugh) uh and just kind of thinking well . he . doesn’t . maybe . s-. it’s just dependent on the actors who portray them . if the actors who portray them . are acting . kind of . gay . then . you will . perhaps . be motivated to think that but . if they’re not . if they’re playing it straight . then you won’t think that

While the instructor does not endorse the ‘homosexual’ reading of the play in this extract, she emphasises that it is not simply an idiosyncratic personal response, firstly by depersonalising it with her attribution of it to ‘people’ (and not just the lecturer), and secondly by asking a question predicated on the assumption that these people are ‘picking up on’ something real (‘things’). The activity then becomes one of accounting for a response that is associated with no particular individual, as in those forms of criticism wherein accounts are provided for hypothetical responses postulated by the analyst (as in most forms of cognitive poetics, e.g. Stockwell, 2002; see Allington, 2005 and 2006 for discussion). The instructor’s use of humorous comments arguably serves to protect her from losing face (Goffman, 1955) when her question is initially ignored (a strategy noted by Benwell and Stokoe, 2002). What the students are expressing such reluctance to do (with their very long silences) is to engage with the idea of ‘homosexuality in the play’ in terms of ‘arguments’ based on textual evidence. Moreover, the response the instructor receives yet again avoids examining the text of The Importance of Being Earnest, rejecting the homosexual interpretation not by demonstrating homosexual meanings to lack a foothold in the text but by linking them to an alternative source: first, to ‘the life of Oscar Wilde’ (whence they are put into the character of Algernon), and second, to unspecified actors’ ‘acting kind of gay’ and thus ‘motivating the audience’ to think that the characters they portray are homosexual. In this way, DS2 is able to answer DT’s question without rejecting the assumption on which it is predicated, yet also without examining the work’s formal textual features: the (hypothetical) things she suggests that people might be picking up on are outside the text.
The instructor then brings up the familiar (but probably untrue) claim that ‘earnest’ and ‘Cecily’ were Victorian slang for ‘homosexual’ and ‘male prostitute’. Although she does this with clear scepticism, this scepticism is expressed in the form of the scholarly injunction always to ‘check the sources on things like that’. This is in marked contrast to the students’ ways of rejecting the lecturer’s reading, which appeal not to historical sources but to personal reactions. The instructor then asks the following question, which continues her association of the interpretation with generalised ‘people’, rather than any specific individual:

DT what else might there be in the play that might people might be able to relate to the position of homosexual men or women in society at that time?

(7 sec pause)

DS1 I think it’s back to you have to keep it hidden. you can’t openly be gay. it then you had to be very hidden about it. and there’s a lot of secrets and double entendre and meanings. you couldn’t openly be gay whereas today. it’s just not an issue any more or it’s much less of an issue

DT okay so this idea of a double life [that=]

DS1 [mm]

DT =people lead you have one life in the city you have another whole personality for somewhere else. you have a different name you have a different circle of friends. that could be something that we could connect to the idea of homosexuality in the society at the time=

DS1 =mm

Here (though after another long pause), DS1 provides an account for the response constructed by reference both to formal features of the text and to historical information about the context of the text’s authoring. The instructor’s reformulation of this text-meaning link adds more precise textual details but essentially repeats the same idea, and DS1’s back-channel affirmations (‘mm ... mm’) during the instructor’s speaking turn emphasise that this is a co-constructed account. This is reminiscent of the sort of exchanges observed in ET’s class, though DS1’s contribution is more extended than that which we saw ES5 make in the previous section. On the other hand, it has come at the cost of a level of student resistance that ET’s more autocratic style simply gave no chance to develop. Examination of the full transcript of the latter’s class reveals almost continuous discussion of critical matters: mostly by the instructor, but also by students in interaction with him, as in the example already quoted. Moreover, student resistance by no means comes to an end with DS1’s contribution just quoted: a student who had until that point contributed little soon dismisses the homosexual reading as ‘nonsense’ and embarks upon a homophobic rant that DT deftly interrupts, cutting him off as he states that ‘most people find their [i.e. homosexuals’] practices repulsive’. The class as a whole only shifts towards discussion of critical matters when DT divides the students into two groups, assigns each group an idea about The Importance of Being Earnest, and instructs the groups to find ‘evidence’ in favour of their assigned ideas (i.e. to account for these non-personal responses through textual analysis). Neither group follows this instruction with particular closeness, but one discusses the critical matter of Oscar Wilde’s life and the other produces an unrelated response that it accounts for in terms of textual features, thus enacting critical interpretation.
4 Conclusions

In the introduction to this article, I argued that modern literary criticism reconciles private experience with textual analysis through the practice of critical interpretation: the production of responses accounted for in terms of formal textual features. In the subsequent qualitative analyses, I explored ways in which the potential contradictions of this practice may be played out within the sequential structure of classroom interaction. Adopting a more autocratic teaching style, the institutionally powerful instructor faced no overt opposition in co-opting a student’s personal responses to a text into discussion of its formal features. Adopting a more democratic style and allowing students to take argumentative second position with regard to absent third parties, the institutionally marginalised instructor faced far more resistance. Interpretations were challenged by reference to private experiences rather than to formal features, politically regressive (and even offensive) statements were made, and nothing resembling a critical interpretation was produced by a student until the instructor began to dissociate responses from individuals. To misquote de Certeau, the resistant students contrived to maintain the privacy of their reserve in public, structuring their personal responses as matters for which it was unnecessary to account.

Appendix

- utterance verbal emphasis
u: utterance phoneme sounded for longer than usual
(comment) transcriber’s comment
utra[rance A utterance B begins during utterance A
[u: utterance B
utterance A= no perceptible pause between utterances A and B
= utterance B
[utterance A= utterance A continues without break
[utterance B = utterance A
utt- incomplete word
. pause under 3 seconds
* incomprehensible syllable
utterance? utterance hearable as question

Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to those who let themselves be recorded – and to Beata, whom this research cost the most.

Funding

This research was partially funded by an award provided via the AHRC Doctoral Competition.

References


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