



Invisible Poetry: Secret-sharing Classrooms

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Abstract

The reflections that follow are about the silent and invisible intertextualities of classrooms. The customary illusions we harbour of the seen and felt, the heard and overheard, pertain mostly to the poems we read with students. The *one* poem which is read aloud or silently by students is really a reading *among* innumerable texts by a multiplicity of readers that ineluctably deploy varied kinds of reading and random acts of attention. The secret of this phenomenon, seldom if ever known to its sharers, is explored here by reading two poems by Jules Supervielle and Denise Levertov. It is our inordinately vast and complex mnemonic resources to which the hypermediated world of the academy should remain both mindful and indebted. Although the theatrical textual events in a classroom often go unremarked, such spectral emanations constitute live evidence of where we live and what we live for.

Keywords

Poetry and Secrecy – Denise Levertov – reading relations – classroom spectrality– haunting

In classrooms, all of us are wayward seekers of wisdom, each according to needs that need no regular plan or conscious recognition. There, our collective mnemonic sensoria rather than individual reading skills are at work. When teachers read poems with students, their minds are being raided by a host of inarticulate texts they do not read ostensibly. As a matter of fact, what they read are not quite those to which they have direct audio-visual access but many more others that echo in their minds. A subliminal concourse seems to present three kinds of texts for their access. Of these, some texts are remembered; some, forgotten. Others are remembered (but forgiven) as irrelevant or inappropriate to the subject at hand. Passages we read in class begin to converse nevertheless with other texts, voices, and visions, all assembled for the nonce if only to reassure us that as readers we ought to respect *reading relations*, the invisible bonds social-aesthetics afford us. Even the least diligent among us carry anthologies of unseen texts about us. We seem drawn towards and partake of such invisibly collective riches. Assorted and disparate, haphazard and fragmentary, our mnemonic resources seem to swell within a world adumbrated by T. S. Eliot's (1963) "Burnt Norton" as "Words [that], after speech, reach/ Into the silence" (194). Of course Eliot's reflections are centred mostly around words and music, but they extend toward speech, and its

complete absence in silence. He alerts us to the *unspoken, unheard* music of poetry whose suggestion is sometimes far more haunting when it eludes the words we see, hear, speak, and are spoken. No wonder, Hugh Kenner (1959) called Eliot the *Invisible Poet*.

While the silence of literary decorum is still observed by most seasoned writers, texts of everyday life sometimes whisper to us words unheard by others, scenes thrown only on our mind-screens, epiphanies that inspired them, unbeknownst to anyone else. By this strange logic, the complete drama of Edgar Allan Poe's (1842) "Masque of the Red Death" plays out on my suburban streets. Sometimes I see a slow-moving crowd of corona masks, and overhear *The Waste Land* voice: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (Eliot 65). This strikes me as close as it can get to what Wolfgang Metzger (2006) calls "the invisibly present" in perception (136). <1>

Let us now sample a few invisibilities and silences of poetry classrooms, varieties of which are not unknown to readers. The persona of W. B. Yeats's (1974) "Among School Children" observes rather gnomically that "Plato thought nature but a spume that plays/ Upon a ghostly paradigm of things ..." and alludes

in rapid row to Aristotle, Alexander the Great, and Pythagoras, all of them life-long learners who, sadly, look rather pathetic in old age: “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird” (Yeats129). Even as they are imprecise and perhaps far too irrelevant to qualify as pointed references to anything that one reads at hand, the “ghostly paradigms” nonetheless seem most apposite (and answer) to the readers’ private sense or mood. The line that inevitably cheers me up on such quaint occasions is W. H. Auden’s (1965): “The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from, / Having nothing to hide” (242). Since students will hardly ‘see’ their teachers’ point if they haven’t seen a passage an older generation of readers cherishes, there is little chance of the young sharing this *secret* intertextuality with anyone at all. When you hear the Oriole sing, the tune is neither in the bird nor the tree but, the poet remarks, in the delighted ear of the recipient.

Philip Davis (2013) has caught this conundrum most charmingly. He tells us that readers often respond to an “inner speech” that they hear apart from a text’s voice, “an electric association of feeling or a pang of memory.” Such textual fragments gather within readers unbidden, and they suggest certain directions if only to suggest that the readers’ errancy has not altogether been pointless. Davis goes on to suggest that “These memorable fragments serve as metaphors for what readers [...] may or may not quite recall. [...] This idea that the text contains within it a niche for its secret personal meaning to the reader, thinking off the back

of the text, also is itself one of the secrets of reading” (129-30). Beneath every poem one reads to a class lie a large number of other poems, not always mimetically legible, nevertheless silently read, silently relayed.

I have no other means here to illustrate this haunting, one’s listening to some ghostly double as it were, except by reading two poems, both *secrets* that poets sometimes feel rather privileged to share silently with their readers. Not only are they secrets of the trade but a deeper *sense* of secrecy that attends all creation. The first, “The Child on the Stairs,” is a poem by Jules Supervielle (2008), a Franco-Uruguayan poet (1884- 1960) who captures memory infolded in an experience of his “childhood/ haunting a favourite place.” The visitant here is not a child, but *Childhood* that balks at commitment or confrontation. “You hide from me, embarrassed,” rues the poet:

but I was a kind of lodger in your house,
so now I can’t help recognizing you,
even though you make yourself invisible.
You prowl around me when no one’s looking,
and hurry away, as from an illicit meeting.

This short poem ends on a deal the poet offers Childhood. He wouldn’t tell anyone of this visitation but Childhood “must also keep our secret —“this constant

patter of my early footsteps on the present-day stairs” (Supervielle/ Alvi 296).

Another explicit line following this would certainly diminish the charm of this half-way deal between barter and offering, a gift promised in winks.

My second example is a far more intricate and invisible exercise of a poem sharing a secret that challenges its knowing mind to share it without being compromised in public. Denise Levertov’s (1964) poem called “The Secret” is very much within the haunted precincts of a classroom, the more we reflect on the exquisite mysteries of reading poetry and poets. The narrative voice here cannot but be Levertov’s because it evidently bespeaks a puzzle involving “Two girls” who discover “the secret of life” in a poem of hers. The poet is intrigued. She does not know the secret. The news of the girls’ discovery of it is conveyed to her by “a third person.” The gist of it all is that the girls had found it but they are at a loss to say “what it was/ nor even// what line it was.” Was it not, as we recall, “a *sudden* line/ of poetry” (my emphasis)? More than a week gone by, the girls have forgotten *it*— “what it was;” “what line it was;” “the secret// the line/ the name of the poem.

Is not all this simple, quite natural, as one would expect in reading poems in circumstances like this? How many of us remember exactly such “secret[s] of life” we might have intuited in the poems we have read? What, in any case, makes this

narrative a *poem*? Exactly half way through her lyric narrative, Levertov seems rather troubled by this “secret,” not quite the secret the girls have since forgotten, but the *poet*’s secret fascination with “the secret of life” someone else claims to have found in her poem:

I love them
for finding what
I can’t find,

and for loving me
for the line I wrote,
and for forgetting it
so that

a thousand times, till death
finds them, they may
discover it again, in other
lines,

in other
happenings. (Levertov 33-34)

Note how the poet’s fascination with the “secret” has suddenly begun to haunt her, now a “secret” of another kind, somewhat of a magnificent obsession, how it has slowly, silently, transformed itself from the girls’ “secret” into a rather cute puzzlement over *their* “finding what I can’t find,” to *their* “loving me”/ for the line I wrote, and again for *their* “forgetting it...”. Lessons in the phenomenology of reading now begin to haunt the readers as well when the poet recognizes, first, that a poem’s ultimate fulfilment is in its *performance* elsewhere, among its

readers. It does not matter who ‘performs’ the poem as long as the poem fulfils its dharma. Now *this* secret, what a poem *for* a reader might be, is hardly ever known to the poet, not even when the best commentaries salute its maker’s prodigious, invisible art. What the poem has since meant for every other of its possibly thousand readers will of course remain a riddle, especially for the poet who has made the poem and would love to solve it. Again, at every reading, the ‘performance’ is not the same even granting that the same person were to read it over and over again. We wonder how invisible, if not invincible, each of these readings will be, as we change, as the classes and consciousness change from year to year.

Now, *what* is it precisely the two girls have forgotten— the details, so to speak, of their first ‘performance:’ who read it first, and who, after; loudly; silently; just listened as the other read it; even went over the lines together by turns ...? Since no one reads the same poem twice (*pace* Heraclitus’s river metaphor), how crucial would the loss of *that* “secret,” at first flush, be? All these are riddling, sheer fun to ponder when the poem prompts them, but finally, is the “secret” then, not so much the “secret” *in* the poem as that *of* its ‘performance’? The poem’s last lines swell the poet’s mysterious fascination for the most difficult of all secrets. “I love them,” she says:

... for
wanting to know it,
for

assuming there is
such a secret, yes,
for that
most of all.

(Levertov 34)

That *most of all* now binds readers and the poet ineluctably in a relationship. Why? It is this *assumption* that keeps all writers going, and puts their readers on a trail, as it were. An *invisible* trail, to boot. It is not as though one has *a* secret of which the other knows nothing. The poem now haunts for its *shared* secret, at least for the assumption that if a secret is worth keeping, it is because it can be, someday will be, shared. A related thought: who might call anything a *secret* and still not feel specially privileged that they (alone) hold it? The magic of poetry, the art's ardour, has seldom been caught so brilliantly as here. And so silently, ineluctably.

We are not yet done with such paradoxes when the class always begins to communally relish the fruits of a hermeneutic bid founded on a suspicion that the texts it reads surely bury more secrets than others (especially our revered critics) have unearthed in their readings. Again, that Poe (1844) story comes to mind, unbidden— “The Premature Burial,” but my compulsive reflections on such matters as silently interred textual bits and pieces conduct me toward Frank

Kermode's (1979) *Genesis of Secrecy*. Kermode makes compelling reading when young readers first realize that texts of authority, especially the Biblical parables, invite what he calls *divination* that affords them insights into the secret worlds of text-building, a hoary tradition still celebrated or revered in all cultures:

What is the interpreter to make of secrecy considered as a property of all narrative, provided it is suitably attended to? Outsiders see but do not perceive. Insiders read and perceive, but always in a different sense. We glimpse the secrecy through the meshes of a text; this is divination, but what is divined is what is visible from our angle. It is a momentary radiance, delusive or not.... When we come to relate that part to the whole, the divined glimmer to the fire we suppose to be its source, we see why Hermes is the patron of so many other trades besides interpretation. There has to be trickery. And we interpret always as transients— of whom he is also patron— both in the book and in the world which resembles the book (Kermode 144-145).

No harm either when we entertain, as a *haunted* community, the basic paradox that a secret is hardly one unless you share-hold it with someone, besides the more ethico-aesthetic challenge it poses. Held purely as an aesthetic object (like Levertov's poem), the secret is tantalizingly seductive; but translated and verbalized, shared and explicated, where is the secret? When Jonathan Culler (2000), for example, wonders *who* speaks Robert Frost's "The Secret Sits" (278-79), the haunting begins in a classroom while, as Frost puts it, "the Secret sits in the middle and knows." Culler gets this much right: what the Secret knows, alas, is what we would always want to know. But that 'knowledge' is certainly not of the kind the retention of memorizeable data gives the avid page-turner or the ace-

annotator. Will anyone ever know, for example, what *Maisie* knew? What really happened in the Marabar Caves? What story *Bartleby* would have told us? The Secret sits in the middle and smiles.

All that said, one student once brought this up for discussion: Would Page Du Bois's (1991) observation add or subtract from such knowledge, she asked, that in Greek thought truth is supposedly hidden in the female body, and that its mysterious powers draw men to seek it often by violent means of intrusion and extortion. Absolutely appropriate and most pertinent, I thought, if the class was, as it seemed, still haunted by Margaret Atwood's (1998) brilliant memoirist essay called "The Female Body." (We had of course discussed the Atwood piece a couple of weeks ago, but what haunted *me* more personally was Atwood's epigraph to her essay which read: "entirely devoted to the subject of 'The Female Body.' Knowing how well you have written on this topic ... this capacious topic," (343) which indeed sounded like the ghostly voice of an editor at the *Michigan Quarterly Review* where her article first appeared.) The class seemed however to recall Du Bois's observation that Truth's "hiddenness, secrecy, female potentiality, the tempting enclosed interiority of the human body, [its] links with both treasure and death, with the mysteries of the other" align it with the most vulnerable of the

species, women and slaves (DuBois 91). No one could be sure when such insights lead us onward to another day when one reader or the other startles our peripheral vision for which we feel grateful.

Some Levertov poems are quite those haunted corners into which no one looks. I cannot recall a poem other than “The Secret” that haunts me still for the difficulty of getting its sonorous power into manageable discursive focus. This again ought not in fact to strike anyone as exceptional or unprecedented as Derrida (1994) reminds us that seeing ghosts is the most *theatrical* of textual events. And that gladdens teachers who have always seen the value of academic orality equal to that of some rich *dramatic* performance. Who would catch those delectable moments of a lecture where more than words spoken, their *music* perhaps of silences, auditory gaps, inflections, gestures and poses are more telling? And the logic of aligning *spectral* with the *specular* derives from Derrida’s remark in *Specters of Marx* that “A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony” (6). Class and clowns are old bedfellows. No one *sees* a ghost in printed matter. When haunted, the classroom is *ersatz theatre*.

Note

<1> For which, see Metzger's Figure 140, a b/w photograph of a milling crowd, apparently waving to greet a celebrity or cheer a public spectacle at a distance. In a subtending note, Metzger comments: "Of all the people you see none completely, of most of them only a fragment of a face or arm. Nevertheless in no way do you have the impression of standing in front of a collection of arms and more or less complete heads, etc." (136).

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