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**Needing to Read like Needing to Eat:
Making the Power of Literary Reading Available
to Students of Literature**

- Christina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching*. New York: Continuum 2011. xvi, 159 S. [Price: EUR 20,99]. ISBN: 978-1-4411-2465-4.

1. Introduction

Why Literature? is aimed at teachers and researchers in tertiary education. Even though the question why literature matters has frequently been addressed in this context,¹ Vischer Bruns offers an unusual approach. Two aspects set her publication apart from most others: Firstly, she seeks to establish a conception of the value of literary reading that explicitly resonates with what she calls »pleasure reading« (2). The personal significance of encounters with literary texts has received little academic acknowledgement so far and Vischer Bruns endeavours to make personal reactions fruitful for academic enquiry. Secondly, she treats the question about the value of literature as a pedagogical one. She strives to remedy a climate of reclining interest in literary reading and classrooms full of reluctant readers. How can literature produce a compulsion to read in learners that feels like »the need to eat« (8)?

2. Aims and Framework of *Why Literature?*

Vischer Bruns identifies a calamitous gap in the teaching of literature: So far, didactic approaches to teaching literature are not based on a clear conception and articulation of why literature matters in life at all. Literature courses are not explicit about what they aim at doing and why. Therefore literary education is not as effective as it could be, possibly even contributing to the tenuous role literature holds in society at present.

Vischer Bruns aims at developing a conception of the value of literary reading that on the one hand can function as a solid foundation for literature courses, and on the other enables powerful transformative experiences through reading. She seeks to examine and reveal what makes literary reading personally meaningful and attempts to close the gap between academic and personal reading. Subsequently she investigates how such a conception should influence literary teaching, and what pedagogical principles can be derived from that foundation.

Although she takes other theoretical approaches into account, the theoretical core of her conception of literature's value are object relations theory, especially the work of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, and reader-response criticism, especially L. Rosenblatt's approach.

3. Chapter Summary

3.1. Reading as a Formative Experience

In chapter 1, Vischer Bruns examines some recent contributions to the question of the value of literature and points out that they either see the value in aspects that overlook pleasurable reading experiences, or articulate literary pleasures without explaining the benefit of such experiences. In the course of the chapter she develops a perspective on the matter that accounts for both, the satisfaction and the human benefit of literary reading.

She argues that through reading experiences of shock, recognition and enchantment literature has the potential to change readers. Literature can shake us out of our idiosyncratic perspectives, give form to experiences we could not grasp otherwise, and take us out of ourselves to dwell in imaginary worlds. Thus gaining distance from the empirical world, we gain the ability to critique and potentially change it.

Since other cultural or non-cultural experiences, like watching a movie, listening to a piece of music or practicing meditation, hold the same potential, Vischer Bruns further seeks to define what sets literature apart. She argues that it is living into the characters, adopting their voices, inhabiting their identities, submitting to a text's language, and trying on a new way of being in the world that makes literary reading more potent than other experiences. Literature is primarily experienced within oneself. Without sounds or pictures given, it engages and mobilises all senses simultaneously.

Furthermore, Vischer Bruns uses F. Farrell's conception of literary reading as a »ritualized practice« (24) to find additional ground for literature's specific value.² In Farrell's work, literature offers readers a safe context to establish contact with psychic or cultural patterns that might otherwise be threatening to the self. The full extent of human possibility can be witnessed from the protected space of a story or a poem. We simultaneously enter a psychic state comparable to those of early self-formation in young childhood, when the boundaries between fiction and reality, between self and other, between inner and outer experience are temporarily blurred. Just like in childhood, these states allow us to rework ourselves, our relationships to others, and our way of being in the world. She concludes that it is the safe and ritualised return to early self-formation that we seek when our need to read feels as urgent as a need to eat.

Farrell's work on the formative role of reading paves the way for Winnicott's object relations theory to become the theoretical core of Vischer Bruns' conception of literature's value. In Winnicott's terms, formative experiences happen in a »transitional« or »third« space – a middle state between self and world, inner and outer experience.³ Vischer Bruns argues that literary texts are prime candidates to become transitional objects in Winnicott's sense. In her argumentation Vischer Bruns echoes L. Rosenblatt's conception of a work of literature being what arises in the transaction between the text and the reader,⁴ thus establishing reader-response criticism as the second theoretical column of her work.

Concluding from a teacher's perspective, Vischer Bruns points out that experiences in transitional space are crucial for training the flexibility needed in on-going relationships between individuals, between individuals and an ever changing environment, as well as between cultures. Since not all readers automatically have access to such experiences, teaching of literature has to focus on facilitating formative experiences. The benefits originate at an individual level, but the effects impact society as a whole.

3.2. Exploring Transitional Space

In chapter 2 Vischer Bruns investigates what kind of reading is required in order to make a text available as a transitional object. Informed by the insights of some exemplary teachers of literature as well as heavily influenced by P. Ricœur,⁵ she determines the necessary reading process as consisting of two moves: the immersive and the reflective move. Before a text can become a transitional object, readers must allow themselves to become immersed in the text, to let go of their sense of self. At the same time, readers need to be able to step back and reflect on how the text managed to draw them in. Further following Ricœur, Vischer Bruns examines the interaction between immersive and reflective reading and concludes that they keep each other from working. Same as Ricœur, she then suggests to move from an oppositional relationship to a creative interdependence of both moves in a three-stage process of reading: An initial stage of fast immersive reading should be followed by a reflective phase. Critical reading can solve questions that arose from the first reading, allowing a deeper immersion into the world of the text in a third reading. Although the stages might in reality turn out to be more fluid, especially the last two possibly occurring at the same time, she speculates that the dialectic between immersion and reflection may become the key of literary pedagogy.

Applied to the teaching of literature, Vischer Bruns draws a number of conclusions from her suggested reading process. Firstly, students' ability to initially immerse themselves cannot be assumed. If students' experience of a text does not surpass seeing black letters on a page, further work with the text makes no sense at all. Critical tasks at this stage would only close them off from formative reading experiences. Instead, facilitating immersion by means of drama, art or visual support becomes crucial – much more crucial than working with the text on a language level. Secondly, the direction of the following reflective phase has to be based on students' initial readings, with their experience providing the subject of their analytical scrutiny. Apart from that, the reflective stance may be needed if the text remains ultimately puzzling and not accessible for students' immersion. Vischer Bruns suggests a supportive role of reflective reading: It develops immersive reading, while immersive reading envelopes critical reading.

In conclusion, she points out the main limitation of her approach. Students may be unwilling to immerse themselves, caused by a fear of »derealising« (76) themselves through reading. She acknowledges that the transformative capacity of literary reading can cause harm instead of good for particular readers of particular texts in particular contexts. Teachers have to take care when encouraging students to take risks with texts in such vulnerable territory.

3.3. Immersive Reading *tête-à-tête* with Classroom Reality

In chapter 3 Vischer Bruns examines how recent approaches to literary instruction as well as the schooling environment help or challenge the development of her particular pedagogy. She surveys publications on the teaching of literature in the post-secondary sector as well as a few written for the high school context.

Vischer Bruns sorts the said publications into two categories. One group mainly perceives the teaching of literature as the instructor's activity that students observe, the other teaches literature through engaging students themselves. In the first group, she lists publications that focus on literary works and on ways of reading them. The main stance of reading here is the analytical, critical, distancing mode. The main mode of teaching consists of lectures that model the teachers' reading practices for students. The focus lies on the teachers' learning and there is little reference to students at all. According to Vischer Bruns, these approaches intrinsically

prevent transformative experiences. In the second group, teachers focus on the skills students need for literary reading and aim at handing students the tools to produce their own readings. The examples of student involvement Vischer Bruns lists include posing students questions with answers that depend upon their personal reading, preparing their own performances when reading plays, or students acting as experts during flash presentations. In these ways students ›make the texts their own‹ and according to Vischer Bruns they arrive at a familiarity and engagement with the text that can potentially foster the immersive experience of transitional space. Even though involvement is a prerequisite for transformative reading, not all tasks found in these publications were conducive to it, especially if they prioritised ideological critique. Only one approach, Sheridan Blau's *Literature Workshop*,⁶ satisfies Vischer Bruns' conditions of allowing reading to happen in transitional space. Blau's work, however, lacks the justification that Vischer Bruns offers.

Her assessment of the school context equally arrives at a sobering conclusion. A great number of aspects limit students' opportunity to use works of literature as transitional objects, amongst them students' and teachers' previous reading habits, a testing and grading environment that influences students' behaviour in class and promotes conformity, the tendency to study and talk about literature the way that other subjects are studied, the scheduling and decorum required in school, the need for a manageable curriculum, and a speech genre in the classrooms that is hard to change. Altogether these factors turn schools and colleges into environments that are highly challenging, if not hostile, to transformative reading.

3.4. Suggestions for Teaching Literature

In chapter 4 Vischer Bruns outlines the pedagogical implications of her approach and proposes some principles and ideas to intentionally welcome immersive reading into post-secondary literary education.

The principles of teaching within her framework were partly outlined in the previous chapters. A new consideration is her suggestion to use the reflective stance as a means for students to reclaim some textual power. They need to find out how literature works on readers and be explicitly taught about the formative power of literature. In that way they can realise what lies behind their own preferences for transitional objects. In another principle she notes that culturally distant texts can cause an initial refusal in students to immerse themselves and thereby bring the negotiation of otherness into the foreground. Instructors can reveal the students' reading habits as culturally biased and promote a reading on the text's own terms. Furthermore, she deals with the complication of establishing students as full participants in making meaning. Even if the students' reading is blatantly wrong, it has to be the starting point for didactic decisions. Students shape the course, teachers only create conditions and provide broad questions, activities and assignments for exploring them.

Subsequently, Vischer Bruns dedicates a section to considering the students. She suggests enquiring specifically who the students are, what they bring to the classroom, what their previous experiences with transitional objects are, and what previous schooling experience they have. Falling back into previous habits should be prevented by providing explicit explanations about the shift in roles about to take place. She also suggests setting classroom activities where students adopt new roles and creating contexts where traditional speech genres do not apply.

The final ideas for teaching literature Vischer Bruns suggests are practical by nature. She usually starts her own literature classes by asking questions such as »why was this work influential?«, »why should it be read?«, or »why does literature matter?« (128). For answering, she has students work with a multi-part reading journal that includes reactions, notes and reflections. After their first immersive reading, small groups share their reactions. The teacher identifies emerging confusion and questions and leads class discussions about it. In assignments Vischer Bruns highlights the importance of choice for the students. They work on »whatever struck them« (145) in reading the literary text and she lets them solve a puzzling feature without using outside sources. They then conduct research projects on topics related to the text, before they write a reflection on their learning process. The assessment that follows consists of a marked essay on the initial course question. In order to allow a final immersion, she challenges the students with an artistic expression. They can either internalise the text through memorising parts of it, or re-envision it through creative writing, ceramics, photography, or painting.

4. A Final Appraisal of *Why Literature?*

Christina Vischer Bruns' work is highly readable. She situates herself very clearly as a teacher and researcher and reveals her perspective as what it is, not assuming more claim to truth than an individual perspective allows. Following a very stringent argument, she guides the reader strongly and with a clear voice. Speaking in her own terms, her text facilitates immersive reading on all levels.

Taking a reflective stance, Vischer Bruns' work leaves a mixed impression. The first two chapters testify her determination not to stop at preconceived notions about the value of literary reading but to establish a conception that embeds pleasure reading in a sound theoretical framework. Digging ever deeper, she arrives at convincing results. In the school context her focus on pleasure reading seems adequate, especially since she manages to illustrate how her approach to reading can not only produce motivated, but also critical readers.

However, several aspects of Vischer Bruns' work pose problems. In her presentation of previous approaches to literary instruction in chapter 3 she seems to read her idea of transitional objects into the publications she quotes, bending them to either fit or challenge her approach. The result is therefore merely a confirmation of the perspective she started out from, not a development or alternation of her approach.

Nevertheless, the first three chapters build up a substantial amount of suspense. After pointing out how difficult it is to change academic habits and how the school environment challenges her suggested approach, the weight of her work seems to rest on the final chapter. What is a fitting pedagogical practice then? Chapter 4 opens with the anticlimactic admission that her principles and ideas are preliminary and provisional, and that further work is needed. The suggested pedagogical practice remains vague.

Even though chapter 4 is only intended as a signpost for possible developments, it seems that it could have benefitted from a stronger connection to a theoretical framework, her own at the very least. The carefully developed three-stage model from chapter 2 is broken into more complex steps in Vischer Bruns' suggestions and appears to pose problems in practical teaching. In light of available concepts of scaffolding or creative engagement with an unknown text, it also remains unclear why she seems to leave students to grapple with the text on their own in their first immersive reading stage. Later stages are equally anachronistic in their me-

thodical choices. The kind of work Vischer Bruns suggests is still largely based on individual writing, discussions, student presentations and occasional lectures, even if the lectures take on a different role in her teaching process. She means to work with students' initial frustration productively and generously accepts random or »blatantly wrong« (137) first readings into her teaching process, but the use of it remains dubious if she then has to use a lecture to put it right. Some of the works she quoted in chapter 3 showed a much greater methodical range to accompany students' reading processes, immersive and reflective reading alike, but she does not seem to use their potential for her own teaching. Rather than focussing on procedures that are part of any experienced teachers' professional expertise anyway (like assessing the students' background or creating a suitable atmosphere in class), Vischer Bruns could have greatly increased the impact of her practical suggestions through the inclusion of theoretical work on story, on action- and production oriented approaches to literary reading, on creative writing, or on drama methods for example.

At a second immersive read, the merit of Vischer Bruns to have established a theoretical foundation for pleasure reading and a solid possible base for teaching literature still rings true. It is helpful that she defines what lies at the very heart of the matter of literary reading as a contribution to the ongoing discussion. The use of literary texts as transitional objects may not become the one unanimous reason why to read literature, if such could ever exist, but her conception inspires the debate to include a new direction. Vischer Bruns' work is not likely to have a practical impact until her suggested change of direction has found its concrete expression in the classrooms. Her open request for readers to develop her practical work will hopefully be taken up.

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Notes

¹ Cf. e.g. Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?*, New York 2004; Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, New Haven, Conn. 2004; Dennis J. Sumara, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight*, Mahwah, NJ 2002.

² Cf. Frank B. Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?*, Ithaca, NY 2004.

³ Cf. Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London 1971.

⁴ Cf. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, New York ⁵1995; L.R., *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, Carbondale, IL 1994.

⁵ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Evanston, IL 1991.

⁶ Cf. Sheridan Blau, *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*, Portsmouth, NH 2003.

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