

Global Pedagogy

Close Reading, Teaching the Conflicts:
Reading Reflectively in Korea

Kelly S. Walsh

Abstract: My most striking realization while teaching in a liberal arts college in Seoul has been the need to teach students close reading. The difficulty they find in performing detail-oriented textual analysis is, in part, a product of their prior literature training which is significantly inflected by colonial history. Their resistance to the method, moreover, can be traced to issues of neoliberalism and globalization, most concretely in the mismatch they perceive between “liberal learning” and the job market awaiting them. For students to determine for themselves the value of close reading, I argue, they need to be trained to reflect on their modes of reading. My most sustained effort in this regard has been a seminar called “Literature and Pedagogy,” inspired by Gerald Graff’s call for “teaching the conflicts.” In focusing on the critical debates that have shaped the discipline of English, most students gain significant appreciation for the virtues of active and reflective learning while adopting a more critical stance vis-à-vis their prior literature learning and the university itself. Such a metacritical approach to English does not resolve the tensions impacting their educational lives, but it does give them the capacity to more critically and reflectively negotiate them.

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My experiences in the English literature classroom of a liberal arts college in Seoul have continued to reveal the need to teach students the skill of close reading. As far as I can tell, this has little to do with the fact

that English, for most, is a second or third language. Instead, the lack of facility in performing close textual analysis seems to be a function of their educational backgrounds, both in terms of a system “dominated by the pedagogy of information transfer” (Grubb et al. 67) and the rigid historical approaches to twentieth-century Korean literature most have learned in secondary school. At the same time, the resistance many students demonstrate when asked to pay close attention to form and detail, to proceed inductively in generating claims about the literary work, is reflective, as Susan Bruce suggests, of much wider “constructions of ‘value’ outside the discipline of English” (134). For one, the time and attentiveness close reading demands runs against the grain of their high-tech, information-rich environment, but, more fundamentally, the open-ended nature of the method does not align with the larger narratives of national and economic development that surround them. In Korea, politicians, education officials, and some business leaders have been promoting American-style liberal learning in higher education as a means to produce more innovative and entrepreneurial graduates to bolster the country’s “creative economy” (Fischer). But even as these educational reforms have gained momentum in recent years, few efforts have been made to explicitly articulate to students how courses in Enlightenment philosophy, Chinese history, or postcolonial literature will make them more marketable job candidates. (And it appears that even less energy has been expended elucidating the non-instrumental values of such an education.) Most students are familiar with the rhetoric of acquiring transferable skills like creative and critical thinking;¹ in my experience, though, when it comes to trying to develop these skills in the English classroom, many, at least initially, do not see the point of directing their attention to “the words on the page.”

While my concerns with close reading are pragmatic—how it enables students to generate more critical and persuasive interpretations—the issue of reading literary works is enmeshed in a much larger matrix of postcolonialism, nationalism, globalization, and neoliberalism. South Korea has been subjected in the past century to Japanese colonization (1910–1945), American military occupation (1945–1948), civil war (1950–1953), and a series of dictatorships (1961–1987) before becom-

ing the democratic republic it is today. Since the end of the Korean War, the nation has experienced remarkable, if turbulent and uneven, economic growth and transformed its economy into one of the twelve largest on earth. Below, I suggest that the colonial period, and the national narratives that have emerged from it, continues to play a significant role in shaping students' reading habits. But even as the historical wounds of colonialism remain visible and open,² it would be more accurate to situate the present landscape of South Korean higher education within the "post-postcolonial" (Jay 91).³ In this prosperous, technologically advanced nation, the forces of "economic globalisation, neo-liberal economics and national competitiveness" (Edwards and Usher 98) play a much more direct role than colonial history in shaping both institutional and individual aspirations. This is evident, for instance, in the university's emphasis on collaborations with industry and entrepreneurial programs for students. However, another outcome is the growing prominence of humanities courses in Korean undergraduate curricula.

The promotion of Western-style liberal arts education in Korea, then, emerged in reaction to the widely expressed view that Korean students, despite their excellent performance on standardized exams, lack the creativity and critical thinking skills needed for the country to produce its first Nobel laureate or the next Steve Jobs (Fischer). In response, my university (Yonsei), which is known in Korea as one of three elite institutions of higher learning,⁴ has created its own, largely autonomous, English-language liberal arts college on the main campus. The Common Curriculum (CC), of which I am a faculty member, is composed entirely of international professors, predominantly from humanities fields, and the distribution between Eastern and Western specialists, for want of a finer distinction, is roughly equal. As part of their graduation requirements, all students must take a certain number of CC courses in literature, history, and philosophy, along with critical reasoning, science literacy, research design, and a foreign language (Japanese, Chinese, or, for international students, Korean).⁵ Nearly three-quarters of the students are classified as Korean, meaning at least one parent holds a Korean passport; nevertheless, our college is easily the most cosmopolitan undergraduate unit in the country. The interna-

tional students, among them a sizable portion of Korean Canadians and Korean Americans, hail from all over the world, but the majority come from neighboring countries in the region, particularly China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Russia. While I consider the views of international students to be just as valuable, my arguments pertain specifically to the Korean students, due to the institutional location and the educational background common to many, though not all, of these students.⁶ Of the Korean students, about sixty percent are female, and most come from affluent homes in the Seoul metropolitan area. And, with few exceptions, the Korean government and the university have deemed them to be among the very best in the country, with each having successfully navigated an extremely competitive admissions process. While Korean students—or their parents for them—choose to enroll for different reasons, they most commonly cite the college’s promise to provide an elite, Western-style education close to home (UIC 18–19).

In recent years, a number of commentators, with varying degrees of reservation, have noted the unidirectional bearing of internationalization in higher education. Gayatri Spivak, for one, writes with apparent cynicism: “U.S. ‘core curricula’—minimally ‘politically correct’ by including ‘multicultural’ classics—again in English translation—are traveling internationally” (26). Rey Chow argues that the rise of “the global university,” specifically “the aggressively futuristic, revenue-oriented placement of U.S. campuses in distant locales,” speaks to a Western desire “to close read” new places on the globe. Frequently, as Peter Ninnes and Meeri Hellsten note in a review of the critical literature, one reads of the “colonial characterization of internationalization” in higher education (4). Others such as Michael Singh have stressed the forces of globalization and neoliberalism in the process: “Universities around the world are being de-structured in response to and as a means of engaging with neo-liberal globalism” (34). As an instructor of one of these transplanted American “core curricula”—one, though, designed and implemented by a Korean institution—I find that such comments touch upon many of the key tensions that must be negotiated by faculty members; it must be said, however, that they fail to do justice to the complexity of the learning space and students’ experiences.

On the one hand, my college was undeniably established as a result of the pressures of “neo-liberal globalism,” with the university highlighting the importance of “tak[ing] the lead in the globalization of Korean higher education” (Hahm and Mo 11). At the same time, in teaching English literature (and some “multicultural classics” in translation) in this educational setting, the specter of cultural imperialism is rarely absent, as both what and how students are asked to read have real stakes for their evolving “educational and other identities” (Knights 48). From an institutional perspective, my obligation is to teach materials and develop thinking skills associated with the West, even as these skills and the graduates who acquire them may not neatly match the end product sought by the university, corporation, or government. While leaders in these areas seem to agree that there is economic value in creative and critical thinking, “liberal” values, such as independent thinking, the freedom to criticize authority and institutions, and interrogating tradition, can potentially conflict with local norms, which tend to assert the importance of hierarchy and social harmony. And, in writing this piece, I am, as Chow suggests, “close reading” the students and classroom and institutional dynamics in an effort to make sense of an array of competing forces and demands. In this regard, I am inevitably constructing the location and students I am studying (Jay 73), while harboring “tacit assumptions about meaning and significance” (Felski, “From Literary Theory” 111). These are not tensions that can be resolved any time soon; I can, however, be reflective about them and use them productively in my pedagogy and scholarship. Along these lines, it is important to bear in mind Arjun Appadurai’s insistence that “globalization is not the story of cultural homogenization” (11). The adoption of a Western-style curriculum by my university was a calculated decision, and the educational model continues to be heterogenized and reinvented as Korean administrators and faculty strive to better support the nation’s evolving social, economic, and cultural aspirations.

As I make a case for the value of teaching both close reading and disciplinary conflicts in an East Asian liberal arts college, one reality, which I learned early in my tenure, merits mentioning: students coming from a postcolonial nation like Korea do not necessarily arrive in the class-

room equipped to critically engage with the singularities of imperialism, especially in their literary representations. Moreover, even as forces of globalization reshape the country, most students have been led to view globalization as a type of competition between nations for economic and cultural superiority.⁷ While my claims about teaching students to close read modernist and postcolonial works and exposing them to the institutional history of literary reading are relatively modest, this two-pronged approach does develop critical skills and reflectiveness that lend themselves to more incisive close readings of the larger social, economic, and cultural forces that surround students. On one hand, close reading teaches students to attend to the text's details rather than "conjuring textual meanings out of preexisting assumptions or explanations" (Felski, "Latour" 740). On the other hand, providing students a metacritical point of access to the discipline of English places them in a more auspicious position to make sense of their (literary) education and its location at the crossroads of postcolonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism.

I. Close Reading

Close reading, for me, means attending to the specific details of the literary work, particularly those which disrupt a straightforward reading; this includes paying careful attention to the formal texture and moments of textual ambiguity or indeterminacy. It involves slowing down the reading process and encouraging rereading, such that the text gains in complexity and the reader forges constellations between individual details. The close reading method I model in the classroom involves an inside-out movement, from individual details and passages toward a larger, arguable claim about some aspect of the work. More generally, the approach stresses that students "read what is actually on the page" (Gallop, "Close Encounters" 9), rather than what an online summary or generalized historical context tells them should be there. While not unique to this educational setting, a recurrent issue is that students have a tendency to spend more time reading *about* an assigned text than directly engaging with it. As such, close reading in the classroom often involves identifying textual details that undermine analyses students have found online or elsewhere. At the same time, most students have been

trained to see a work's context as the ultimate arbiter in terms of explaining what they have read. Of course, providing students with context is necessary to enable them to perform an effective reading; nevertheless, close reading, as we practice it, places the emphasis on the direct encounter with the text, prior to any substantial engagement with the contexts that surround it.

To cite a specific classroom example, when I teach *Wide Sargasso Sea*, many students interpret the colonial dynamics of Jean Rhys' Caribbean in terms of the racism and oppression they associate with Japanese colonialism. Although this can generate greater interest in the novel, such readings result in "generalizing the contingencies and contours of local circumstance" (Bhabha 214). A close reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is designed to make students more aware of the particularities of the "local circumstance" while helping them to appreciate "the complexities of cross-racial representation and dynamics in the novel" (Hai 494).⁸ One detail we have honed in on is the epithet "white cockroach," which the young Antoinette is called by her black playmate Tia and, later, by the servant Amélie during the honeymoon in Dominica (Rhys 20–21; 83–85). The dynamics of race, servitude, and representation grow increasingly complex when we carefully investigate this phrase in its contexts. For instance, students have pointed to Tia's reported speech, in which she mocks the declining fortunes of Antoinette and her family: "She hear all we poor like beggar. . . . Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money" (21). With a little prodding, students articulated the idea that "white cockroach" is used by black Jamaicans to speak of the former slave-owning class ("She hear"); it is an invective that refers to the Creoles' diminished economic status, specifically in relation to the more recently arrived English ("Real white people"), and it is motivated by racial animosity and historical grievance: "Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (21).

When we moved from this passage to Amélie's use of "white cockroach," students registered that the master-servant relation in the novel is not one of simple domination and submission. After being slapped by Antoinette for making an impertinent comment about "this sweet

honeymoon house,” Amélie returns the violence: “‘I hit you back white cockroach, I hit you back,’ said Amélie. And she did” (83). (This juncture has also spurred discussion on specific strategies of negotiation or resistance employed by different black servants in the novel.) Other details we lingered over include the racist, highly circumscribed nature of Rochester’s narration—“‘I don’t always understand what they say or sing.’ Or anything else” (85)—and how the figure of the “white cockroach” shapes Antoinette’s fraught sense of identity and Creole worldview: “That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. . . . So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong” (85). Some students connected the sense of cultural dislocation and isolation expressed here (“between you”) with Tia’s gibe that Antoinette is not a “real” white person, and almost all of them picked up on the self-serving nature of her reductive historical account. With these details in mind, I then provide cues, such as the limited narrative perspectives of Antoinette and Rochester, to assist students in making some larger claims. While this can lead in several directions, my goal is for students to engage with the varieties of incomprehension, projection, negotiation, and resistance in the novel. Above all, I encourage them to address how the form and content of Rhys’ novel reveal this colonial system to detrimentally shape both colonized and colonizer.

From a pedagogic perspective, the value of teaching close reading in the Korean English classroom is indisputable. When successful, students develop greater precision in discussing and writing about literature; they learn to productively engage and, for some, take pleasure in the “difficulty, complexity, paradox, ambiguity, and the multilayered meanings in literary texts” (Chick et al. 401); they create knowledge rather than receive it, learning through “the singular and unverifiable” (Spivak 324); and, in many cases, they practice a critical vigilance, which enables them to more thoughtfully interpret the cultural texts and national narratives that surround them. And, as the example above suggests, they can develop a finer attunement to the singularity of postcolonial narratives from other regions of the world. To varying degrees, as their survey

responses indicate, students come to realize these benefits in retrospect, but what they register immediately is that close reading creates conditions for active learning in the English classroom, as opposed to “more authoritarian model[s] of transmitting preprocessed knowledge” (Gallop, “Historicization” 184).

There are two main challenges involved in developing close reading as a habit and skill in undergraduate education that students can use as a means of continuing to learn and critique, wherever their lives and careers may take them. The first is teaching the method and giving students various opportunities to practice it in discussion and writing. The second, which is significantly more complex, entails trying to convince students of its value. Articulating my assumptions about close reading and explaining to students why I ask them to read in this prescribed manner certainly contributes to this aim. But even as many students become adept at performing close formal analyses, while gaining appreciation for the method’s attention to detail and its antiauthoritarian manner of creating knowledge, there remains the question: To what end? As one student wrote in a survey response: “I understand the fact that ‘mere reading’ can be transformative, but I want to know what transformation it will lead to and why this transformation is necessary.”⁹ More generally, another wondered: “Why does Korea have to force students to have liberal arts knowledge in order to get jobs?”

These are undoubtedly legitimate questions, ones that matter deeply to students. What they perceive is a basic contradiction between the rhetoric of creative and critical thinking invoked by the university administration and government officials and their sense that the rigid, paternalistic Korean corporate culture remains essentially unchanged. That is, even if students believe that close reading develops powerful thinking skills, they are skeptical of their relevance in terms of landing an attractive, well-paying job, at least in Korea. “I don’t know how useful this type of reading is in a practical sense,” said one student, noting the “disparity between the ‘critical thinking skills’ government policies seem to want from universities and the hiring standards of many (if not most) large companies that ask for largely group-oriented, not-outspoken graduates.”¹⁰ She, like other students, expressed a general sense of

frustration with the education system and the realities of the job market: “Essentially, high school prepares us for college by forcing us to memorize numerous facts, then suddenly in college they seem to ask for critical thinkers, and then they require us to fit back into unified standards when searching for jobs.”

This state of affairs can be distressing, as I have little idea how these structural tensions can be resolved or if they ever will be. Ultimately, students will have to decide at a later date, in relation to their personal and professional lives, what the value of their liberal arts and English literature education has been. But after reflecting on these issues for several years, I believe I can at least give them a critical framework with which to make better sense of their literature instruction—particularly the merits and limitations of close reading—and, perhaps, to more productively negotiate the ostensible mismatch between humanistic inquiry and the demands of the marketplace. My most sustained effort to achieve this has resulted in the creation of an upper-division seminar entitled “Literature and Pedagogy,” which I am now teaching for the second time. The course’s design was influenced, in no small part, by Gerald Graff’s call for “teaching the conflicts,” to exploit “the potential educational value of our unresolved conflicts” (“Coverage” 2064). Rather than teaching close reading, then, the course positions close reading and several schools of literary theory and criticism as the object of inquiry.¹¹ The discipline of English, therefore, is the focus, and we look at important developments that have shaped its history, from Cambridge English to New Criticism, from deconstruction to new historicism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. From studying these disciplinary debates, specifically with an eye toward their pedagogical impact, the students become more reflective readers, not only of literature but also of criticism and theory. In terms of the latter, they develop an attunement to the writers’ underlying assumptions, be they methodological, ideological, or pedagogical. At the same time, they almost universally adopt a critical stance vis-à-vis their prior literature learning and their institutional setting, in which the discipline of English becomes a type of synecdoche for the university as a whole. While this may constitute a “fallacy” (Perloff, *Poetry* 19), the act of putting English

under the microscope authorizes students to raise important questions about their liberal arts education, whether in terms of the curriculum, institutional goals, or intimate ties between nationalism, globalization, and higher education in Korea.

In order to adequately contextualize the outcomes of this seminar and clarify the specific stakes of this conflictual or metacritical pedagogy in the Korean university, I will first situate the method of close reading in relation to students' prior literature learning and Korean literary criticism. Because the majority of students have been negotiating intricate hierarchies for much of their lives, both in and out of school, they see novelty and significance in being asked, as one student wrote, "to analyze materials for themselves rather than being fed by others (such as their teachers or education materials)." "The value I see in close reading," said another, "is that the higher authority (if there is one) is much more obscure." Some students cite the transferability of the technique to other contexts. "Close reading," according to one, "helps me appreciate the texts more, and it trains me to 'close read' other non-literary phenomena outside the classroom," while another stated that it "is also good for political science students (like myself), since it develops attentiveness, an ability to see even small details that other people might not see." And one student, "at the risk of sounding cliché or superficial," believed that "close reading literature—really engaging it—enables the reader to become more empathetic. We learn to understand other people and their perspectives in a wholly different way that we cannot personally experience." The novelty of the method, while allowing students to produce knowledge that is new for them, also brings with it a significant amount of difficulty, precisely because, as one student put it, "you're not allowed to use external factors as a crutch." "We've never been taught to closely read texts and try to make sense of them for ourselves," wrote another student, emphasizing, as several did, the amount of time and "detailed feedback to discussions or papers" needed to learn to perform productive close readings. Even as students appreciate the relative freedom provided by close reading, they recognize the need for "the professor's guidance," as "close reading tends to engender all sorts of haphazard interpretations."

In this regard, my assessment coincides with the students'. There are few shortcuts, since students must continue to practice close reading in order to improve at it; there are, however, practical ways to make the process more efficacious. One is to make a habit of asking students to expressly articulate the steps between textual details and their claims or interpretations. More labor-intensive, but critical in my view, is working through multiple essay revisions with students. This can take the form of providing them written feedback that identifies where they seem to have lost contact with the text, conferencing individually with paper and text in hand, or creating peer review opportunities, which can develop close reading skills in their own right (Gallop, "Close Encounters" 9–10). But I have also found it useful to borrow, with some modifications, certain New Critical pedagogic techniques, such as establishing a basic metalanguage that is adequate for the demands of the particular poem or story. I also promote the idea of reading "as if" the individual literary work is "both objective and self-sufficient, while still somehow connected to the larger world and worldly experience" (Lockhart 200). This means convincing students that forging a compelling reading requires only the text and their attention, intelligence, and creativity.

In the North American academy, there has been no shortage of criticism of New Criticism and its formalist method of close reading, which, for several decades, constituted "the discipline's specialized *techné*" (Schryer 150). Charged with being ahistorical, unconcerned with ethics or morality (DuBois 928; Archambeau 29), and, as Terry Eagleton argues, handmaiden to a reactionary bourgeois politics (*Literary Theory* 38), New Criticism was also said to be uninterested in the reader's affective response, yielding, at least in the classroom, "dry, boring, and nitpicking analyses on given 'autonomous' texts" (Perloff, *Differentials* xiii). To add to this, the New Critics read only the "best writing," which meant, in practice, "a rather restricted canon of traditional literature, almost exclusively written by men of European descent" (Gallop, "Close Encounters" 13). While, in recent years, a number of critics (Jancovich; Gallop; DuBois; Hickman and McIntyre and their contributors) have revised these accounts, negative perspectives remain dominant in the

North American academy (DuBois 929). But as Gallop suggests, there is no need for close reading to be “tarred with the elitist brush applied in our rejection of the New Critics canon” and “thrown out with the dirty bathwater of timeless universals” (“Historicization” 182). For, in Brian Reed’s words, “there is no necessary conflict between an attentive, appreciative, and probing approach to literature and a radical political agenda” (xvii).¹² Any literary work, however canonical or historically underrepresented, can be read closely and attentively, and the contexts surrounding it can be interpreted with equal rigor. Close reading and New Criticism need not be considered synonymous. At the same time, despite its unquestionable blind spots and shortcomings, there is still much, especially in Korea, that can be critically appropriated from New Criticism and put to productive pedagogical use. This is the case both for teaching close reading and investigating the reasons it became the New Critics’ signature technique.

In the Korean academy, these longstanding debates over the legacy of New Criticism and close reading are rather peripheral, resonating faintly, if at all. Needless to say, the students have little notion of how contested the issue of what and how to read within the discipline of English has been. But when we perform close reading in the classroom, many of the New Critics’ disputed precepts, such as Cleanth Brooks’ “heresy of paraphrase” and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “intentional” and “affective” fallacies, quickly register with students in a practical, pre-theoretical manner. When I tell them, for instance, that the author’s intention or biography is irrelevant for our classroom purposes and that their interpretations need to be supported by concrete details and specific uses of language in the text, they experience feelings of frustration and disorientation. This intensifies when I repeatedly encourage them to avoid falling back on their initial impressions or trying to summarize a general idea or abstract an overarching theme. Most fundamentally, though, what they come to recognize through their interpretive difficulties is an important, if now problematic, relation between text and context, intrinsic and extrinsic. In reflecting on these difficulties, several students referred to their high school training. One remarked that “most students are used to limiting their literary analysis to contextualization,”

while another said that “most Korean students have to be given a certain type of background to understand the text.”

It is not responsible pedagogy to propagate “the illusion that any piece of language, ‘literary’ or not, can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 38). But most students in Korea come to class unsusceptible to such an illusion. It is important, then, to make an explicit distinction for students between reading literature to form skills and habits of mind—what close reading intends to achieve—and giving them comprehensive knowledge about individual texts or English literature in general. The two are not mutually exclusive, but because of the students’ prior literature learning, and the fact that many will only take one or two literature courses in university, there are valid and compelling reasons to emphasize close reading, especially in lower-division courses. For students who attended secondary school in the Korean educational system, their experience with literature involves, in no small part, being taught to interpret twentieth-century Korean texts according to well-established narratives of the colonial period emphasizing Japanese oppression and nationalist resistance (Hughes 206; Hanscom 8–9; Eckert 369).¹³ In this regard, there is an indelible link between pedagogy and literary criticism. Literature scholars in South Korea today firmly agree that modern Korean literature emerged in tandem with the forced modernization of the peninsula by the Japanese imperium (Kim 117). At the same time, critics such as Kim Yoon-shik insist that the criterion for evaluating “the greatness or the pettiness of a [modern] work” is “the degree to which it could contribute, directly or indirectly, to the restoration of national sovereignty. This is beyond dispute” (117).

In their responses, many of the Korean students noted the prevalence of colonial-era works in the high school curriculum; they also reported being taught to interpret these works, for example, as “a political statement crying for national independence” or “a protest against psychological pressure caused by repressive Japanese colonial rule.” More generally, they describe a pedagogy in which literature is understood contextually: “In high school, teachers would first explain the historical background of when a certain work was written and do their interpretation of the

text along that background.” One also stressed, with apparent cynicism, that high school students are instructed not to “twist [the work] away from its proper political function.” Done responsibly, historical contextualization can be invaluable in creating more nuanced knowledge of literary works, and there are many fine examples of sensitive criticism that shuttles back and forth between the literary text and its contexts. The students’ testimony, though, indicates that their previous literature learning has tended to be rigid and unidirectional: interpretations of the work need to align with a pre-established context, and they have felt significant pressure to know the “correct” context.¹⁴ My point is not to criticize but to underscore the fact that close reading is a new skill for students in the university classroom, one that enables them to achieve different knowledge of literary texts while heightening their awareness of the potential losses and gains of contextual approaches.

Most students believe English literature to be considerably different from Korean literature; nevertheless, they bring their reading habits from studying Korean literature to the English classroom. Modifying them requires a sustained effort, but concrete classroom experience has revealed the need for me to adapt my own teaching habits according to the demands of the particular text and learning context. Trained as a modernist, I frequently assign students literary works that present significant difficulty. Understandably, when we read *Heart of Darkness*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, or Langston Hughes’ poetry, the reflex of many students is to immediately grasp for a context with which to explain it. While I want their initial engagement to be with the text, some historical information is indispensable for students to effectively interpret it. In part, such experiences confirm Graff’s argument that the line between “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” interpretation is labile and indeterminate (*Professing* 190), but they also reveal that there is no such thing as a “pure” close reading. In introductory courses, I have adopted a pragmatic stance; wary of letting contextual information dictate their interpretations, I try to give students the minimum amount of context necessary to perform an effective reading. This is far from an exact science, and students, justifiably, sometimes perceive the approach as arbitrary. It is through these negotiations with text and context, however,

that I now appreciate the value of “mak[ing] our values more explicit for students who are not yet experts” (Chick et al. 401). Simply being clear about why I ask them to close read and the skills I wish for them to develop makes students more likely to persist in their efforts and find some sense in the method. But even with such explicitness, close reading, for many students, can still seem disconnected from larger concerns within English literature and irrelevant to other contexts, both in and outside the university.

II. Teaching the Conflicts

Michael Bérubé has stated how little his approach to teaching undergraduates has changed over the past couple of decades: “I still want them to read closely, to reflect on what it means to read closely, and to compose coherent arguments about literary texts” (11). What most appeals to me in his account is the second part, the stress on reflectiveness in the reading process. The capacity to persistently reflect on their modes of reading and thinking might be the most valuable ability students can take from their English instruction. Achieving this, however, is not a simple task, for it does not come about solely through reading literary texts closely. Instead, there needs to be a deliberate method, and the most effective one I have discovered is to make reflection on literary reading a focal point of the course. The seminar I have designed exposes students to the history, theory, pedagogy, and politics of reading literature and asks them to propose their own concrete and theoretical interventions in their literature education. One virtue of this approach is that it denaturalizes the reading process, provoking students to see reading as a decision that inevitably shapes what they derive from a text, literary or otherwise.

Admittedly, the idea of devoting an entire semester to “The New Criticism and Its Discontents,” as the current seminar is subtitled, in a Korean general education curriculum might strike some as retrograde, perhaps even neo-imperialist. For a nation that experienced such a turbulent and painful twentieth century, focusing on the criticism of a group of dead white men, several of whom held dubious political views, bears some irony. There are, though, several advantages to teaching such

a course in this Asian context, beyond offering students a generative supplement to the practice of close reading. For one, most students do not have the same type of investment in English as they do in Korean literature or whatever their own national literature happens to be.¹⁵ Not feeling constrained by nationalist narratives and concerns, they are much more willing to be critical with and of the material. The course also brings to light other contentious issues within the discipline, perhaps most significantly the politics and ideology of canon formation.¹⁶ Lastly, the focus on pedagogy offers students a new lens through which to reflect on their own learning histories and their complex institutional setting.

In the current seminar, we are reading essays in criticism and textbooks written by Brooks, Robert Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and T.S. Eliot. Alongside these New Critics, we are looking at several of their detractors and (qualified) apologists, including Eagleton, Graff, Stephen Schryer, Mark Jancovich, Paul de Man, Gallop, and the contributors to *Rereading the New Criticism*. The course focuses on close reading and how the method can be situated in relation to important New Critical concepts such as the organic unity and objectivity of the poem, the intentional and affective fallacies, tension and irony, and tradition and the canon. We also question the accuracy of conventional narratives about the New Critics—whether close reading, as they conceived it, was in fact a “de-historicized, exclusive, mechanized practice” (Lockhart 200), or the extent to which they actually considered literature and its criticism to be detached from history, culture, and politics. At the same time, in order to directly engage the “discontents,” each student is responsible for giving a presentation on a critical movement that emerged, in some manner, as a response to New Criticism. The presentations are spread throughout the semester, and, for each one, the presenter is required to distribute a selected bibliography of some of the movement’s key texts in order to assist their peers in writing the final paper. The presentation topics include deconstruction, reader-response criticism, canon critique, new historicism, postcolonial studies, feminist criticism, African-American criticism, and queer theory. The students’ task in the final paper—and the ultimate goal of the course—is to make

an extended critical argument about how literature ought to be taught in the early twenty-first century, particularly in an international liberal arts college such as our own.

For practical reasons, I shall direct the rest of my attention to the first version of “Literature and Pedagogy,” as I am in a better position to gauge its actual outcomes. This seminar was more expansive and intended to provide an overview of the history of English literature pedagogy on both sides of the Atlantic over the past century or so. As the course description explains, we were “to consider some of the fundamental questions, assumptions, and critical debates that have informed and determined the teaching of literature at universities in the English-speaking world.” I also expressed my desire for students to “gain a finer understanding of the ways in which pedagogic and scholarly practice exist in a mutually constitutive relationship.” After reading Eagleton’s account of “the rise of English” (*Literary Theory* 15–46), we looked back to Matthew Arnold, considering his definition of criticism as “*a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world*” (824; emphasis in original). Next was the Cambridge English, with I. A. Richards’ “practical criticism” and the Leavises’ *Scrutiny* movement, which aimed, through the study of English, to cultivate a mature and discriminating critical minority to act as a bulwark against the forces of standardization and mass civilization. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” served as a bridge to the New Criticism; here, we read Ransom, Brooks, Wimsatt and Beardsley, as well as sections of Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*. We then made forays into deconstruction (de Man), canon critique (Richard Ohmann and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba), reader-response theory (Stanley Fish), cultural studies (Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall), new historicism (Stephen Greenblatt), and postcolonial studies (Edward Said and Spivak). The final readings of the term included excerpts from Graff’s *Professing Literature* and Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins*. The latter’s critique of the modern, corporatized “University of Excellence” provided students with a vocabulary and framework for addressing many of the tensions and seeming contradictions they were experiencing in their own educational lives.

The course readings helped students put together a final project, which required them to create a teaching artifact, such as a course syllabus, along with a theoretical justification for its particular content, shape, and methods. To further this aim, the last two weeks of class were devoted to presentations based on students' final projects. This proved to be quite valuable, as it offered the students a forum for sharing ideas and debating the merits of each project and its underlying rationale; the structure of the presentations also enabled students to make meaningful modifications, which strengthened their projects. Because our college does not have an English major—there is, instead, Comparative Literature and Culture (CLC)—the CLC majors strove to make the final projects more relevant to their actual academic context. Consequently, many of these students were inspired to look beyond the course readings, to scholars more explicitly concerned with comparative and world literature, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism, such as Chow, David Damrosch, Jessica Berman, Jahan Ramazani, and Susan Stanford Friedman. The non-CLC majors ended up designing a syllabus for a prospective English literature course. Individual course designs thus comprised the majority of projects, but one student proposed an independent study project for CLC majors, while another ambitiously set out to reform the entire CLC curriculum.

In rereading these final projects, which were quite elaborate, I have identified four overlapping points of emphasis: the value of active learning or creating knowledge, especially through close reading; the need for inculcating greater reflectiveness in students about their reading; the importance of teaching texts that are not part of the traditional canon; and students' interest in understanding the structure of the modern, globalized university and "the generalized imposition of the rule of the cash-nexus" (Readings 3) within it.

One student's project, a course called "Introduction to English Literature," highlighted "qualitative learning," which she defined as putting the "how" over the "what" in teaching undergraduates. "It is crucial," she wrote in both her justification and syllabus, "that students not just passively swallow the given information, but be actively engaged with it." For her, this meant combining the "slow and careful reading" of

a few literary texts, to be chosen by the students, with critical texts that demonstrate such reading methods. Another student envisioned a seminar called "Introduction to Poetry," which was intended "to prioritize students' active participation over the instructor's one-sided guidance" and make students understand "the definition of poetry and the reasons why we should read poetry." The greatest difficulty in teaching poetry to undergraduates, he argued, based on a student survey he had conducted, is that they perceive poetry to be too difficult. To address this issue, he invoked Brooks and Warren's assertion "that poetry, it is clear, is not cut off from life, but is basically concerned with life" (9). By attending to "the complexity of the experience of poetry," he suggested, "we become more aware of our emotions and feelings." The students would closely read a handful of poems each week, taken from different historical periods and national literatures, "based upon a particular poetic device such as metaphor, tone, or rhyme."

Most students saw active learning as closely related to reflection about reading, even if they were not always successful in articulating how to engender this reflectiveness. One emphasized "not giving students preformed interpretations so they can develop more informed reading skills," while another wrote in her syllabus: "[Y]ou should realize why I am giving you poems that you probably haven't read before to close read and write a commentary on." The attention to reflectiveness was apparent in two course designs that, like our seminar, focused on literature pedagogy. Both were, in different ways, concerned with investigating the value "of Western teaching traditions in Korean and East Asian universities." One of these explained that "students will explore what benefits and disadvantages close reading could bring to our reading of a text in a Korean university"; the former involved developing critical skills, while the latter concerned the dangers of reading works ahistorically, independently of the contexts that informed their production. For an introductory literature course, another student promoted teaching "controversial books," especially those by women and postcolonial writers, to foreground debates related to canon formation and what she called "the ideology of literature pedagogy." The independent study project, which was informed by Graff, asserted the significance of "position-

ing students as intellectuals who can engage in an intellectual discourse.” In preparing the prospectus for their independent study, students were to ask themselves: “How do you determine which books and poems to include in your canon? How do you read, interpret, and evaluate a given work of literature?” For the prospectus, the students were also required “to justify the texts and materials and provide the methodology that will be used to interpret them” and “explain how [their] individual stud[ies] will fit into the larger framework of the major.”

Several students also addressed what they viewed as a problematic relation between close reading and contextualization. One student noted a “significant problem,” namely that “many students, rather than closely reading a poem or novel, decide to interpret it through biographical information.” Another spoke of the need for combining close reading with careful and responsible “historical contextualization,” cautioning that the latter “is the only vehicle through which most Korean students are taught to view their national literature.” A handful of students broached the issue of nationalism directly. The syllabus of a proposed course which would guide students “to learn how nationalism shapes the education of a country as well as the interpretation of a text” posed the question: “Are there correct ways to interpret a poem or a novel?” The students, then, would “learn about how to break out of a nationalist framework and put a literary text under a transnational context, specifically drawing from Ramazani’s [*A Transnational Poetics*].”

The final projects also gave students the opportunity to interrogate the university in terms of its corporatized structure and the “commodification of knowledge” (Becher and Trowler 10). One student lamented that literature, in the Korean university, is “continually asked to justify its existence in terms of the number of graduates that immediately secure an office job,” while another critiqued the governmental and institutional pressures “to deliver a band of prepared professionals into the waiting hands of society.” A general trend was to decry the positioning of “students as consumers in the neoliberal university.” Several, therefore, stressed the importance of making explicit to students “the problems of the university and its education that include the fact that it is like a highly consumeristic and market-oriented corporation.” More

concretely, one included the college's official brochure in his syllabus for students to "close read," presumably in order to examine the correspondence between its rhetoric and their actual experiences in a global liberal arts institution. Overall, most seemed to agree that students ought to be given a conceptual framework that allows them to relate their course readings and educational experiences to the bigger picture, whatever that might be. "Student learning," wrote one in her rationale, "derives from numerous social, political, and economic forces." She added: "It is important that students learn that knowledge is mediated by these forces."

While the seminar introduced students to conflicts and debates in the discipline of English and (global) higher education, it did little in the way of resolving them. Many students found it cathartic to express their frustrations with the inconsistencies they perceived between the institution and the uncertain labor market awaiting them. At the very least, though, students' capacity for reflectiveness developed in striking ways, and they began to feel authorized to act as full-fledged participants in their own education. Furthermore, while the seminar did not necessarily reveal the point or relevance of close reading in their post-undergraduate lives, students became more attentive and reflective readers all the same. It thus seems fair to say that they learned to see close reading not as the only way to read but as a method that enables more singular types of knowledge about texts. They became more critical of the explanatory power of larger, more generalized narratives and contexts.

Teaching English literature in Korea will continue to bear with its fears of cultural imperialism. However, such fears can motivate teachers like myself to persistently reflect on our pedagogy and remain attuned to the needs and interests of students. To this end, a future seminar will foreground the question of close reading in relation to postcolonial studies and the current "transnational" or "cosmopolitan" turn. My hope is that this course will be equally effective, if not more so, in engendering new forms of reflectiveness while non-coercively promoting more particularized critiques of nationalism, colonialism, and globalization. In closing, it seems that an enabling effect of globalization is that we need not think of the study of English literature and its critical methods as being

“owned” by any particular nation or people. Making this fact explicit to students in the global academy constitutes a meaningful step in blunting the potential of English literature to foster cultural hegemony. It also empowers students to see their contributions to the discipline as being just as valid and insightful as those of their peers in London, Toronto, or New York.

Notes

- 1 The mission statement of my college, for instance, emphasizes three main values: creative and critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and global leadership (UIC 19).
- 2 Perhaps the two most visible issues relating to the colonial period today involve so-called “comfort women”—young Korean women coerced into becoming sex workers for Japanese soldiers during World War II—and the contested sovereignty of Dokdo, a group of small islets located between Korea and Japan.
- 3 Jay draws his notion of the “post-postcolonial” from the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid; the term, as Jay writes, refers to the “generation of writers whose experiences grow out of the postcolonial condition but are informed even more by the forces of globalization” (92).
- 4 Koreans use the acronym SKY to refer to the three most prestigious universities: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. The first is a public university, while Korea and Yonsei are private institutions.
- 5 Major courses, on the other hand, are run by Korean faculty from departments within the larger university. While the college has recently added several interdisciplinary majors, most students have one of six majors: Economics, Political Science, International Studies, Life Science and Biotechnology, Comparative Literature and Culture, or Asian Studies.
- 6 A significant number of the Korean students have lived overseas, receiving at least part of their education in international schools.
- 7 Economically, the international success of large companies like Samsung is a source of national pride. Almost daily, the local media reports on the spread of *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, which refers to the consumption of Korean culture—especially K-Pop, cinema, and television dramas—elsewhere in the region and world.
- 8 I do provide an informative context prior to reading, explaining, for instance, the Emancipation Act of 1833 and the novel’s relation to *Jane Eyre*; experience has shown, however, that the singularities of Rhys’ Caribbean context do not fully register with students until they engage with the details of the text.
- 9 The responses cited in this essay come from students I have taught in the past few years, both in introductory courses and upper-division seminars, includ-

- ing the one I describe. Eighteen students provided responses for this voluntary survey, which asked them to reflect on the value of close reading and other approaches to reading literature, particularly in relation to their prior literature learning and their global liberal arts education. “Mere reading,” as used by this student, is in reference to de Man’s essay “The Return to Philology” (*Resistance* 21–26).
- 10 The Korean economy is dominated by *Chaebol*, the massive, family-run conglomerates like Samsung and Hyundai. Jobs in these companies are highly prized and competition for them is fierce.
 - 11 I should add that most of the students who enroll in the seminar have already been exposed to the practice of close reading in an introductory literature course.
 - 12 Reed is referencing Eagleton’s lament that few of today’s students “are sensitive to questions of literary form” (*How to Read 2*) and capable of engaging in what he “had been trained to regard as literary criticism” (1). Levinson also writes: “With remarkable regularity, one reads that New Criticism was more historical and more activist in its notions of form than reputation has it” (563).
 - 13 International students from elsewhere in Asia have also indicated that studying their national literature in high school often involves learning to interpret texts according to prevailing national narratives. For instance, a Vietnamese student wrote: “In high school we mostly study Vietnamese texts, and these texts are chosen not merely for their literary aesthetics, but mainly, I believe, for the ideological values they carry.”
 - 14 During high school Korean students are required to reproduce their literature learning on a standardized national exam. This is a multiple choice exam, and, according to students, there is only one correct answer to each question.
 - 15 Several students, in their responses, argued that Korean literature, as opposed to English or Western literature, should be taught contextually, with an emphasis on history and politics, because “Korea experienced uncommon stages in its modern history.” Another wrote: “One of the reasons why Korean literature classes focus on [historical] reading is because of its unusual history.”
 - 16 The question of the canon is not one that initially registers with most students. A significant reason for this is the patriarchal nature of Korean society and what Lee describes as the deeply embedded sense of cultural, racial, and linguistic homogeneity (15), which means that the Korean canon is predominantly composed of male Korean writers. Nevertheless, this is a complex issue, as Korea is slowly becoming more multicultural and achieving greater gender equity.

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