

The Bridge from Matric to Beyond: Encounters with the Works of Thornton Wilder in Teaching and Learning

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Summary

In this article the author uses self-reflection and literary theory to address the teaching and learning methodology used in an English classroom in the 1970s, in which the author was a student, and the consequent influence on the author's life-long learning. The text under consideration is Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the matter of re-reading the text is central to the article's focus. The article investigates matters that are pertinent to the making of meaning in the reading of Wilder's text, including historical context, how Wilder's works were critically received, and how a different methodology could have resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of the novel. The article also addresses how studying the novel in matric had an effect on the author's later reading and teaching.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel gebruik die outeur introspeksie en literêre teorie om ondersoek in te stel na onderrig- en leermetodes wat in 'n Engelsklas in die 1970's, toe hy 'n student was, gebruik is, en die invloed wat dit daarna op sy lewenslange leer gehad het. Die teks wat hy gebruik, is Thornton Wilder se *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, en die herlees van hierdie teks is die artikel se sentrale fokuspunt. Die artikel ondersoek vraagstukke van toepassing op betekenisgewing tydens die lees van Wilder se teks, insluitende die teks se historiese konteks, hoe Wilder se werke deur kritici beskou is en hoe 'n ander metodologie 'n dieper begrip van die roman sou kon meebring. Die artikel kyk ook hoe 'n studie van die roman in matriek die outeur se latere lees- en onderrigpraktyke beïnvloed het.

Studying a prose set-work in the field of literature is a standard practice in South African high schools. In addition, the curriculum documents emphasise the value of life-long learning, and the ability to use what is learned at high school in later life – and, in the case of literary study, to learn critical thinking skills relating to literary works as well as lived experience. The studying of literature in schools is therefore regarded as one form of preparation for life.

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In this article I will reflect on how the studying of a particular literary work in my matric (Grade 12) year, in 1976, prepared me for life. However, I will also explore how this particular learning experience was not entirely effective in terms of providing me with knowledge and skill with regard to literary interpretation. The article considers two aspects of literary study at high school and later life: (1) the value of reading a literary work, and re-reading it some years later, and (2) matters which could have been included in the teaching methodology in order to facilitate more comprehensive learning in my matric year.

The issue of re-reading or revisiting a literary work is central to this article, because it deals with learning conducted decades ago and requires a revisiting of the book that was studied in order to draw certain conclusions. In order to address this idea of re-reading, I will make reference to the work of Alberto Manguel and Tim Parks, both of whom have written in the field of re-reading. In addition, I will consider the work of various theorists who address how we should study or read literature. Furthermore, I will consider the methodology used to teach and study the book I read for matric, and I will make reference to alternative methods that could be of value.

This article will explore the knowledge and understanding of a reader of an English set-work for the matriculation certificate in 1976, and indicate how that learning experience contributed to the reader's ability to explore and understand further texts written by the same author but encountered at various points after completing school. In addition, a re-reading in 2014 of the 1976 text, together with a consideration of various academic resources including critical papers on the school set work, shows that the reader's initial understanding of the text, as a school student, was flawed.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) which pre-dated the current curriculum statement (CAPS) states that, in terms of the type of learner that is envisaged, the idea of life-long learning is desirable (Department of Education 2007: 5). The CAPS document states the following:

A good reading of a text incorporates the whole text in interpretative, creative, personal, and exploratory practices.

(Department of Basic Education 2011: 12)

The curriculum statement expresses the desire, therefore, that the study of literature in high school will have a positive effect on students in terms of life-long learning. In order to explore this idea, I revisited the novel I studied in matric – Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (Wilder 1927) – and explored how this novel had affected my life.

To begin with, I made notes regarding my memory of the text. Despite my best efforts, the notes were neither lengthy nor detailed. In effect, I remembered the following:

The book was a slim volume, somewhat similar in length to Orwell's *Animal Farm* (approximately 100 pages in the Penguin paperback edition); the book was set in Peru some hundreds of years ago; the plot of the book involved the collapse or failure of a bridge across a deep gorge, and the subsequent deaths of several people who were cast into the void; the book presented accounts of each of the people who had died in the disaster, thus exploring the significance of life, and also death. I could remember no characters' names, but recalled that there were both men and women who had died. I had vague memories that the main theme in the novel was that people died when it was appropriate for them to do so, at a point of self-realisation.

These points were the sum total of my memory of the book. Considered thus it would seem that my matric set-book had no real impact on my life.

However, there is more to my studying of the novel than this brief account. In terms of the process of textual analysis, I recall that the matric class engaged in a page by page reading and interpretation of the book, directed in their reading by the teacher – in effect the close reading that is a hallmark of the theoretical position of practical criticism, developed by the Cambridge School in the early to mid twentieth Century under the leadership of Richards, Empson, and Leavis. (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 1997: 23) A similar process is associated with the New Critics in the United States of America:

... New Criticism is ... not concerned with context ... it is not interested in the “fallacies” of “intention” or “affect”; it is concerned solely with the “text in itself”, with its language and organization.

(Selden et al 1997: 18)

Selden does, however, acknowledge that Leavis, and the Cambridge school, differed from the New Critics because the British theorists emphasised the significance of a moral imperative in their work.

At the time that I studied literature in school, I did not know about the theoretical positions that underpinned the practice of practical criticism. However, there was a simple logic to the idea of close reading and interpretation, and it was a style of analysis that the class encountered in the teaching and studying of other texts such as Shakespeare and poetry; in effect, it was a practice that was established through teaching and learning conventions and the process itself was not critiqued by the students attending the classes. The nature of literary criticism conducted in the school context would prepare me for the more complex but similar literary criticism encountered at university.

Stanley Fish is one theorist who considers how we make meaning from our reading. He refers to a “perspective called an “affective stylistics” ... (in which) ... “he concentrates on the adjustments of expectation to be made by readers as they pass along the text” (Selden et al 1997: 58). In essence, he regards the process as one in which the reader uses a form of additive

knowledge creation as each word is read and the meaning recorded. Meaning through reading is therefore continuously adjusted. In consideration of this, Terry Eagleton makes the following point about Fish:

For Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what a text means, but a process of experiencing what it *does* to you ... What the text “does” to us, however, is actually a matter of what we do to it, a question of interpretation; the object of critical attention is the structure of the reader’s experience, not any objective structure to be found in the work itself.

(Eagleton 1983: 85)

Eagleton’s concern that Fish fails to differentiate the idea of meaning being made during the reading process from the interpretive engagement of the reader is echoed by Jonathan Culler, who, whilst agreeing with Fish about some elements, does not entirely support him. He makes the point that we need to consider the conventions of reading, and we should also acknowledge that there is no evidence that we read in a piecemeal way. (Selden et al 1997: 59) Culler’s point about conventions of reading relates to the need to address the way(s) in which readers interpret texts. (Selden & Widdowson 1993: 62) In one example, he argues that there could be two different interpretations of Blake’s poem “London” that are both acceptable. However, he points out that such a position is problematic because it foregrounds the role of interpretation, but does not treat material issues in the same way. In other words, although both interpretive processes might be acceptable, one interpretation could be better because it conforms more effectively to historical or material realities reflected in the text. (Selden & Widdowson 1993: 63).

To return to the process of learning I encountered at school, in which the text was addressed as if it were not located in a context of writing or reading, there were aspects of this style of learning that were somehow incomplete. In typical formalist manner, the literary criticism in which the class engaged did not acknowledge the biography of the author to any great extent. Instead, the book was studied in a manner that rejected notions of historical context for either book or author. The brief author biography in the volume – less than one page long – was the only element I read that indicated anything about the author himself. From this I noted that Thornton Wilder was an American author who lived during the 20th Century. This information suggested that the choice of this text for purposes of study at high school was somewhat unusual – normally authors who were studied at school were people like Shakespeare or Dickens, who had been dead for some time. The idea that a contemporary author’s work could be acceptable for study was refreshing and shifted the perspective of the reader regarding what texts were worthwhile; there was no need for a text to stand the test of centuries in order to be deemed good enough for study.

I have since established many things about Thornton Wilder that I did not know at the time of studying the book for matric purposes. One thing is that Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for prose in 1928, for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (Castronovo 1986: x), and he also won the Pulitzer Prize for drama on two occasions – once for *Our Town*, in 1938, and again for *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943 (Castronovo 1986: x). This achievement – to win in the two categories – was unique at the time and provided a sense of Wilder’s diverse ability in the field of written expression.

Various elements of Wilder’s background, and his relevance in the American canon, were not covered during my matric year. Part of the difficulty lay in the fact that the text was taught without due reference to other American authors of the time. In an interview with Wilder in 1953, *Time Magazine* noted that he wryly claimed that he was the only American writer of his generation who did not go to Paris in the 1920s. (Burbank 1978: 17) He thus established himself as different from his peers, and as aware of that difference. As a result of this he is not easily located within a particular school, and this has reduced his critical reception.

There were two other elements of criticism about which I was not aware as a matric student; the publication of Wilder’s third book, *The Woman of Andros*, led to an attack by the left-wing critic Mike Gold. (Burbank 1978: preface), (Castronovo 1986: 14) Wilder was presented by Gold as being indifferent to the material concerns of Americans because the novel did not address contemporary American experiences, but instead provided a narrative of a woman removed from the USA in both space and time.

Gold was encouraged to read Wilder’s books by the critic Edmund Wilson (Folsom 1972: 197) and thereafter launched an attack on Wilder’s writings. His commentary is expressed thus:

And this, to date, is the garden cultivated by Mr Thornton Wilder. It is a museum, it is not a world. In this devitalized air move the wan ghosts he has called up, each in “romantic” costume. It is an historic junkshop over which our author presides.

(Gold 1930: 199)

Gold rejected Wilder’s work on the basis that it was concerned with selected elements of history which had no relevance in the world of America in the Twentieth Century. He argues that, from the books, there is nothing to identify Wilder as an American author – he “could be a Swede, or a Greek”. (Gold 1930: 201).

Apart from his animosity to Wilder’s choice of topic, Gold also disliked Wilder’s style, and stated the following:

Wilder has concocted a synthesis of all the chambermaid literature, Sunday-school tracts, and boulevard piety there ever were. He has added a dash of

the prep-school teacher's erudition, then embalmed all this in the speciously glamorous style of the late Anatole France.

(Gold 1930: 200)

From the above it is clear that Gold regards Wilder as having little or no value as a writer. Part of this anger derived from Gold's disdain for the bourgeoisie, and he clearly saw Wilder as an author admired by this class. This position is ironic, to a degree, because as Folsom points out, "Gold was really a bourgeois." (Folsom 1972: 11). Gold's father was a businessman or entrepreneur, although he was not successful or wealthy.

Another element of Gold's personal history is of interest; from his commentary on Wilder, Gold wished for literature that addressed the American condition. He felt that Wilder somehow lacked credibility because he wrote inauthentic texts based on a romanticised history. However, Gold's real name was Itzok Isaac Granich, and he took the name "Michael Gold for a protective pseudonym." (Folsom 1972: 10). There is irony in the fact that Gold demanded authenticity but did not even write under his own name.

The publication of Wilder's book *The Woman of Andros* and its subsequent critical reception, took place at the start of the Great Depression, and the matter of wealth and class-division, and Gold's concern about literature not being a cosy bourgeois phenomenon, possibly had a significance that might not seem so important today. Wilder's reputation was to some extent negatively affected by Gold's criticism.

As a matric student I was unaware of any of the issues addressed by Gold. In retrospect, it would possibly have been of value to consider the social and material circumstances in which writing is created, and in which it is received. Literature would, therefore, have taken on another dimension as a consequence.

The second element of negative criticism related not to Wilder's prose but rather to his play *The Skin of our Teeth*. In 1942, approximately one month after the play opened on Broadway, two critics named Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson accused Wilder of plagiarising Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (Castronovo 1986: 20). Castronovo points out that Wilder had been reading Joyce over a period of years, and that he used similar techniques such as conflation of time and a comparison of ancient and modern human societies, but he adds that Wilder was working in a different genre – drama, rather than prose – and that he had introduced many other aspects to the play that were not linked to Joyce. In addition, there is the irony of Joyce acknowledging his own debt to other authors suggesting the ongoing revisioning of written texts.

In his article entitled *Deeply Indebted: On Thornton Wilder's Interest in James Joyce*, Sidney Feshbach, writing in 1994, discusses the many aspects of Joyce's influence on Wilder's writing. Feshbach states that Wilder became interested in the work of Joyce soon after the publication of *A*

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. In addition, Wilder was a member of the James Joyce society from 1954. (Feshbach 1994: 496).

Feshbach makes the point that Wilder was interested in a sense of continuity between ancient and modern societies. Thus, we find in Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala*, the setting is post World War I Rome, whereas in *The Ides of March* the setting is ancient Rome. Feshbach makes the additional point that, in *The Cabala*, there is a scene in which a cardinal is surrounded by many books, including a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Feshbach adds that *Ulysses* was conceived partly as a response to Rome's past and present, and its presence in Wilder's text is therefore apt. (Feshbach 1994: 496).

In addition to this, Wilder embeds one line from *Finnegan's Wake* in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and he does this as a form of homage to Joyce and the novel. Feshbach points out that, during the years of World War II, Wilder read *Finnegan's Wake* as a kind of therapy; as such, he was immersed in it. He wrote his plays in between reading, and the influence of the novel is not surprising. (Feshbach 1994: 508).

Feshbach quotes Wilder's commentary on the influence of *Finnegan's Wake* on his play; he points out that there are four elements or themes to *Finnegan's Wake*, and that he, Wilder, made use of one such element – that ancient man could be an ever-present double for modern man. The other three elements in the novel, according to Wilder, were not suitable for the stage, although they could work in a novel (Feshbach 1994: 509).

The idea that the past is connected to the present was affirmed by Wilder's lived experience, as Goldstein makes plain. In 1920-21 Wilder was involved in an archaeological dig in Rome. He unearthed an Etruscan road, and this made him aware of the connectedness between the past and the present:

Here was the evidence that the past is a sustaining force in present life and that the present itself is only a segment of an endless continuum.

(Goldstein 1965: 1)

It is clear from this that, although the idea of ancient man being an ever-present double for modern man might be evident in Joyce's work, the lived experience of Wilder as an author offered another source for this concept. It is possible – even probable – that the lived experience and the literary source provided a sense of intersection that informed Wilder's writing.

Goldstein adds another point that is of interest with regard to the Wilder-Joyce connection, and this is that Wilder met Sylvia Beach while he was in Paris; Sylvia Beach was the publisher of Joyce's *Ulysses*. This meeting, however, does not suggest plagiarism, but instead suggests that Wilder was interested in and influenced by Joyce's work. Bearing in mind that Joyce was a significant talking point in terms of the literature of the early 20th Century, it is not surprising that another author would express interest in, and study, the work produced by him.

Feshbach's final comment on the issue of Wilder's use of other authors' works is as follows:

I prefer to regard Wilder's use of the work of other writers not as plagiarism, which it is not, but instead his expression of the two-thousand-year-old tradition and practice of *imitation* and *emulation*, adaptation as well as translation. When Wilder took what he did from *Finnegan's Wake*, he would not have felt that he was doing anything wrong. The use of other's writing had been his approach for more than twenty years, and he had received no complaints, and in fact, had been rewarded for it.

(Feshbach 1994: 511)

The two examples given above – the issue of class-awareness, and the issue of textual borrowing and influence – were never addressed in my matric class. The classes were dominated by a close reading of the text and an interpretation thereof, in the manner of textual study of the day. I do not claim that such a reading was of no value, but I do feel that there were elements associated with the novel that could have been explored so as to provide a greater and more textured appreciation of the novel, as well as exposing the matriculation candidates to a greater understanding of matters relating to reading and understanding.

A consideration of the text in terms of social issues of the day – such as class consciousness, and whether the novel addressed these matters appropriately, as well as a discussion about authorial borrowings and the intellectual rights of authors, would have been of value. On the one hand the themes of the novel could be held up for scrutiny in terms of the society in which the readers/students lived, and on the other hand the notion of the creative process and the influence of previous works/authors on a writer is in itself of moral value.

Having considered the biographical issues and the teaching methodology issues that were not covered during my matric year, I wish to consider my re-reading of the novel and theoretical positions that relate to this issue. The theorists to whom I will refer are Alberto Manguel and Tim Parks.

In re-reading the novel at the end of 2014 I noticed several things. The first, and perhaps most important, was that the details of the novel came flooding back as I moved through the book. The names of the characters, and their various relationships, came back to me very quickly indeed. In addition to this, the feel of the book – the sense of the detail, and my associated thoughts and feelings, returned. The mental images I had of Peru re-established themselves very swiftly and my mind moved through the images like those of a previously-seen film. Several of the statements made by various characters, studied more than 30 years ago, regained their significance with the new reading.

Some of the things which came back to me, and which I regard as important, are the sense of order – the novel starts with a chapter entitled

“Perhaps an Accident”, and ends with one entitled “Perhaps an Intention”. Between these two chapters the story is told as a series of flashbacks, as each character is explored. In addition, the chapters are inter-related, in that the characters are repeated in each chapter, and they become more boldly drawn, and more detailed. Furthermore, there is the suggestion of a story within a story, because the character who begins the initial investigation is Brother Juniper, and it is his version of each character’s story that is presented to us by Wilder. This notion of authorial shift, and the intertextual dimension of the novel itself, in that a range of voices and episodes are recounted, was not effectively considered during my matric year, as far as I remember.

The most important element for me was that there has been a change in my final understanding of the book. I had always thought that the theme of the novel was that we die at appropriate times, when we have gained a sense of insight into the world and our lives. However, I now agree with McNeil (1962) that the central theme of the novel is that of love: ““There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning’. The dominant motive is love – the unselfish devotion to another human being or to humanity in general – which covers a multitude of sins.” (McNeil 1962: xvii) This statement suggests a generalisability of the theme to broad human experience. The emphasis of the connectedness of humans is of value.

I will now address theorists who consider the issue of re-reading. To begin with, I will consider the work of Alberto Manguel. In his book *Into the Looking Glass Wood* (Manguel 2000), he makes the following statement:

A book becomes a different book every time we read it.

(p. 10)

This statement is deceptively simple but requires some consideration. Clearly it is not the book that is different, because the words and sentences are the same, but it is the reading experience that alters, and causes the book to seem different. A re-reading of a book is different from a first reading because the reader is different. The reader’s experience and accumulated knowledge is different and this affects the way in which s/he approaches the book, interprets the meaning of the words, and judges the book. Certain episodes which were previously ignored might take on a new significance, and other episodes which were regarded as important might lose value in a re-reading. In addition, subtleties of meaning might be more apparent to an experienced eye. Furthermore, a person who has more lived experience might approach a literary work with less innocence or a greater degree of cynicism. It is also possible that a person’s command of language might improve with age, and the ability to read with greater understanding might change the nature of a reader’s interpretation. Finally, the social circumstances in which a book is read might affect the reader’s response.

For example, anti-apartheid literature read during the apartheid era had a vitality and urgency, whereas the same works read in the post-1994 era might be interpreted through a historical frame of reference, rather than having a sense of immediacy. Another, more mundane, example would be in the genre of murder mystery novels. A re-reading is less satisfactory in many cases because the solution has already been presented. A particular example would be Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the narrator is the murderer, and the solution – one of the great surprise endings – is presented in the final pages. Anybody re-reading the book does so from an informed position and this changes our reading process.

If we consider Manguel's statement again, we realise that his claim has value, but it is the book that *seems* to be different. Essentially, then, our reading process is a fluid, transcendent one, in which we create temporary meaning that is shifted when revisited.

For Manguel, re-reading of a book is a renegotiation of meaning, in which the episodes of life are associated with and inform our understanding. Because we evolve, and because the world in which we live is ever-changing, our re-reading provides us with a revised understanding of a book. Manguel uses the example of Lewis Carroll's two books regarding Alice's adventures – initially, as a child, he read them as adventures, but later interpreted the books as examples of surrealism, and later still in terms of structuralist theory (Manguel 2000: 10-11).

Manguel makes the following comment about reading in terms of the experiences that we accumulate, and about the social dimension of our reading experiences:

The task of naming belongs to every reader. Others who do not read must name their experience as best they can, constructing verbal sources, as it were, by imagining their own books. In our book-centred societies, the craft of reading signals our entrance in to the ways of the tribe with its particular codes and demands allowing us to share the common source of recorded words; but it would be a mistake to think of reading as a merely receptive activity. On the contrary: Mallarme proposed that every reader's duty was "to purify the sense of the words of the tribe" To do this readers must make books theirs.

(p. 14)

Re-reading a book is one way of a reader making a book theirs. The renegotiation of the written words affirms a previous experience and embeds the book into the reader's experience. In addition, reading additional texts written by an author grant the reader several points of reference that support intertextual and complex meaning-making.

The British author and commentator Tim Parks wrote a column for *New York Review of Books* with the subtitle "Reading is Forgetting" (Parks 2015a) in which he makes the following comments on re-reading. For the

most part he is responding to the claims of Vladimir Nabokov regarding the need to re-read in order to understand a text more fully:

“Curiously enough,” the author of *Lolita* tells us, “one cannot read a book: one can only reread it.”

(Parks 2015a: 2)

Parks addresses this issue because, he says, Nabokov claims that initial readings of books are too superficial, and that additional readings are required in order to make sense of a literary work.

According to Parks, Nabokov claims that the reading process itself is laborious – the movement of the eyes, the physical process of reading – stands between us and artistic appreciation. Parks challenges this, and says that eye-movement and associated efforts regarding reading are not laborious. However, “What is different on a second and subsequent readings is our growing capacity for retention, for putting things in relation to one another.” (Parks 2015a: 2)

For Nabokov knowledge lies in depth, not extension. However, for Parks:

Since a reader could only achieve such mastery with an extremely limited number of books, it will be essential to establish that very few works are worth this kind of attention. We are pushed, that is, toward an elitist vision of literature in which aesthetic appreciation requires exhaustive knowledge only of the best. It is the view of writing and reading that was taught in English departments forty years ago: the dominance of the canon, the assumption of endless nuance and ambiguity, the need for close textual analysis.

(Parks 2015a: 2)

The teaching/lecturing process is based on an assumption that teachers/lecturers have significantly better/more knowledge of a text than their students have. In the case of teaching an English text, there is an implied familiarity through re-reading. However, the re-reading also limits the possibility of wider reading, thus ensuring that the list of texts is unchanged, or changes rarely, as stated by Parks:

This process of rereading ensures that lecturers and critics remain “ahead” of students, who have not read the same text, say, ten times or more (which the professors have, because they teach them). This also implies that the canon remains the same because there is little or no time to read beyond it.

(Parks 2015a: 3)

Parks questions Nabokov’s understanding of rereading:

Is it really a gradual and always positive accumulation of greater and greater control and retention, or is it rather a precarious process in which each new engagement with the text cancels and alters earlier ones?

(Parks 2015a: 4)

For Parks, Nabokov's concept implies the sense of a greater and greater accumulation of knowledge about a text through re-reading. There is an implicit linear dimension to this learning. For Parks, however, knowledge of a text does not accumulate in a linear way, but includes the possibility of negation or erasure of previous ideas through the renegotiation of a text.

Parks makes a further point that "The purpose of reading is not to pass some final judgement on the text, but to engage with what it has to offer to me now." (Parks 2015a: 4) This point is of significance because it implies a continuous process that does not lead to final understanding. The process itself is of value, rather than establishing a final answer. Parks is acknowledging that reading itself is a process that might lead to temporary answers or understandings.

In a later column in the same magazine, Parks comments on his previous piece, in which he says that Nabokov's attitude to rereading "amounts to an elitist agenda, an unhappy obsession with control, a desire to possess the text (with always the implication that very few texts are worth possessing) rather than accept the contingency of reading moment by moment." (Parks 2015b: 1).

In this later article Parks refers to the work of Riccardo Manzotti, in which the philosopher puts forward the idea that: "The mind is not devising a key to decipher the text, it is disposing itself in such a way as to allow the text to become a key that unlocks sensation and "meaning" in the mind." (Parks 2015b: 2) In other words, the mind is the lock and the text is the key to unlocking the ideas. In addition, the process of using a text as a key becomes something to which we are accustomed, and the reader engages in this process more quickly with extended reading of texts. The implication here is that broader reading, rather than reading in depth, plays a role in providing a reader with the negotiation of meaning.

Parks also points out that he (and the implication is that other people) does not go back to a book and reread it in its entirety; instead, he rereads apposite sections. However, in order to do this, the reader must have a significant degree of knowledge of a text; without this knowledge, how is a valid selection of sections chosen? In addition, re-reading sections can skew a reader's understanding of a text if s/he does not have a significant knowledge of the work as a whole – and this tends to be established through reading in a focused way, and repeating the process. Unlike Parks, I would be in favour of re-reading a text in its entirety, in order to engage in re-reading that is, so to speak, "fair" to the text.

Having covered the issue of Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in some detail, as well as considering matters relating to reading and re-reading, I will now consider the influence that the novel had on my reading choices and my teaching career. This is significant because, as I said earlier, the intention of the studying of school set-works is to have some influence on a reader's/student's life.

The second exposure I got to Wilder was his final novel, *Theophilus North*. (Wilder 1973) I chose to read this book during my initial years at university, shortly after completing matric. I made the choice because of a degree of familiarity with the author because of my school experience; it is unlikely that I would have read this work had I not read Wilder's more famous novel as my matric setwork. *Theophilus North* is not a book which I recall in any detail, but I know that it left a favourable, albeit vague, memory. In addition, it was another aspect of a learning matrix – another point of reference in the vault we call literature.

The next time I encountered Wilder was as a High School teacher, approximately twelve years after matric. His play *Our Town* (Wilder 1962) was a prescribed work for Grade 11 in a school at which I taught. This was a different matter from studying a text in order to write and pass an examination. Instead, I was required to present the text to a class of students so that they could make sense of it, and hopefully find meaning in it. This was in an era prior to the Internet, and consequently I had limited access to teaching material or material for research. For the most part, I made do with close reading and a consideration of character and theme. However, as readers familiar with *Our Town* will know, Wilder's dramatic technique includes experimental sets – the town of Grover's Corners where the play is set, is imagined or suggested – as well as the unusual device of having the Stage Manager as a narrator. These innovations led to an extensive discussion in the class about dramatic traditions, and this went far beyond the narrowly focused close reading of the text.

Having read Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as part of my school education, I approached *Our Town* as somebody familiar with Wilder's work, even though my memory of the novel was sketchy at best. In addition I had also read *Theophilus North*. Furthermore, to assist me in my teaching, I chose to read some of Wilder's other, shorter plays, published as *Plays in One Act* (Wilder 1931) as an additional source of knowledge as a teacher. For me, part of the process of teaching a writer's work was to have a broad understanding of the various works, rather than simply relying on one work as a point of focus. This cross-referential, inter-textual approach provided me with a lush, textured, understanding of the author's work, in theory at any rate. However, the passage of time between the reading of the first novel I encountered, and the reading of the plays, was more than a decade, and the possibility of making meaning between texts read at such different times is doubtful.

The matric reading of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* provided me with an introduction to the work of an American author whose work I would re-encounter as a teacher at a later point in my life. The initial point of engagement was a starting point on a literary journey that is not yet ended. My high school interpretation of the book was flawed – proved to me by my recent re-reading of the novel. In addition, the book was taught to me in the

manner of the formalist school that dominated the thinking of the time – close reading, analysis of figures of speech, identification of themes, and consideration of characters. The lack of context for both author and work itself meant that, as a reader, I treated the text as a book in a narrowly-defined space of learning – it had significance as the novel to be studied for matric.

Despite the obvious limitations of my experience with the novel, it was also a preparation for my further reading, and my life. Because of my matric reading I was inclined to pick up and read *Theophilus North* with some degree of appropriate anticipation. In addition, in approaching my teaching of *Our Town*, I was able to begin with a little knowledge and build on it. Finally, I was able to revisit *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as an adult of mature age and renegotiate the meaning I tentatively created three and a half decades ago. The recognition of my misapprehension, and my restatement of the central theme of the book, is evidence of my continuous learning process, and an echo of Manguel's statement regarding the process of re-reading a literary work.

My conclusion is that in teaching literary works it is better to provide biographical details of the author, together with some historical context pertaining to the literary work, rather than to teach a text as if it is dislocated from time and place. This is not to suggest that the text itself should be supplanted by extensive biographical and historical elements – clearly the object of study is the text, not the context – but some sort of scaffolding should be provided to support learning, so that the literary work is more effectively understood. In my case it would have been of value to be informed of the controversy surrounding the claims of Mike Gold's dismissal of Wilder's work as serving the interests of the bourgeoisie, and Feshbach's discussion of the plagiarism claims levelled at Wilder. These issues would have provided me, the reader, with opinions to consider that went beyond the formalist position adopted by my teacher, and thereby have fostered a higher degree of critical engagement in my reading. The opinions of Manguel and Parks are of value because they direct the reader into how texts could be interpreted and re-interpreted through a process of reading and re-reading, and as such they have a bearing on how literary texts could be taught at secondary school.

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