MAKING YOUR READING COUNT
(Writing an informal reading response)

Soothing preamble: Ralph Waldo Emerson said in "The American Scholar" that engaging with literature involves creative *reading* as well as creative writing: it calls for paying critical attention to your own struggle, both as an individual and as a member of a reading community, to *make sense* of a challenging work. When you read something—that is, when somebody is saying something to you for pages on end—it's only natural that you should be in a position to talk back, to say something of your own in response. You're *not* reading primarily to get something vague and mysterious like The Main Point or the Secret Meaning of Symbols or even little nuggets of truth to jot down on three-by-five cards. Lemme explain.

When you read, you try to pay attention, even when you don't completely understand what's being said, trusting that it'll make *some* sort of sense eventually, and relating what the writer says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn. Even if you don't quite grasp everything you're reading at every moment (and you may not), and even if you can't remember everything you've read (no one does), you can begin—guided by your own impressions and questions—to see the outlines of a writer's project, the patterns of his or her particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

When you stop periodically along the way to think and make notes or to talk about what you're reading, that's when you take over and begin to make sense of what this other person has said. At this point the writer and text become something you construct out of what you remember and notice as you go back through their words a second or third time, working from specific passages of your choosing but filtering them through your own predispositions and sensibilities. Reading, in other words, should be the occasion for you to analyze and synthesize, to take things apart and put them back together, to notice this idea or image or character rather than that one, to follow a writer's announced or covert ends while simultaneously following your own. That's what's involved in forging a reading of a story (or novel or play or poem or film—or even a chapter in a biology textbook, for that matter). It's an aggressive, labor-intensive process, but a satisfying one, too. It's worth it in the long run, and it beats the hell out of feeling helpless, daunted, or mystified along the way.

How to proceed. Keep a notebook on hand as you read. Stop to write in it—and in the margins of your book—often. About what? Whenever I manage to get my act together, I'll ttoss out some reading questions ahead of time that may help you focus your attention or jumpstart your thinking. *Even if you don't use them to guide your writing, look them over carefully and think about how you'd start to answer them before you come to class.* But here are some points of departure from which you can always improvise:

- How are you affected by certain passages, or by the text as a whole? (Delight, confusion, anger, repulsion, interest, boredom, amusement, suspense, sympathy with the narrator or characters, etc.—all of these are possible, valid reactions.)
- Why do you think the text is having this effect on you? (To answer this, *begin* by marshalling your powers of observation: closely examine the nature of the text itself—its language, structure, subject matter, characters, and themes; its adherence to or deviation from any literary conventions you're familiar with; etc. Then: review any prior knowledge and expectations you might have about the text or its author, about its subject matter or its historical or social context, and about your own reading patterns and strategies, as well as your un/conscious values and ideologies—e.g., your assumptions about literature, culture, race, gender, etc. Any or all of this may have played a part in your reaction.)
- Keep track of questions that occur to you or puzzles that arise (and the points at which they do or don't begin to be answered or solved), as well as other things that pique your curiosity, or remind you of something in your own life, some other work of fiction or non-fiction, or something going on out in the wider world.
- Keep track of individual images, words, and themes (or groups of them) that seem to be recurring. Note actions and episodes that twist or move along the plot in significant ways, or that reveal something new or develop your understanding of particular characters.
- For future reference, flag things that you suspect are "important," but are not yet quite sure how.
- As your notes get messy and complicated, reorganize them into separate columns or pages for each main character or theme or image or group of related events (or whatever other categories you choose), and fill those columns with progressions of page numbers, shorthand descriptions and references, hierarchical charts, and lines & arrows pointing to cross-references in other columns or pages of your notes.

Using some such *method* as this gives you a base to build on when you go back to skim the whole work and/or look more carefully at certain passages a *second* or *third* time. (Yes: really.) As you complete this process—

begin to piece together your observations and answer your own questions *in writing*—you'll already be generating a "meaning" for what you've read, you'll force yourself to observe and understand better how the text is constructed and how it has worked certain effects upon you, and you'll spark still more questions and observations to follow up on. As with shampoo: repeat if necessary.

Next: So far, what you've done is for you. Before you show it to anyone else (i.e., post it to a Discussion Forum), you'll want to go one step further. Go over your notes, weeding and reorganizing them into some kind of structured form (i.e., sentences and paragraphs), if they're not so organized already. This can be rudimentary and disjointed—a series of your questions, observations, gut-responses, and ruminations strung together more or less randomly, with or without any kind of transitions or interim conclusions from one topic to the next—or it can be a tidy short essay on one or two aspects of the work(s) you've studied, all wrapped up into a neat little package. Or it can be anything in between, just so long as it's a good-faith exercise in thinking-through-writing that'll give you something to say when you join the discussion—and so long as it's at least 400 words (the rough equivalent of two handwritten pages) each time.

> ***N.B.: Blackboard can be funky: if you get distracted and take longer than, say, 20 minutes to compose your piece, it may "time out" on you, and everything you've done will be lost in the ether. It's much safer to write and save your piece in a word-processor, then copy and paste it into Blackboard.***

What you post can be exploratory rather than conclusive, raising questions and identifying problems or puzzles or areas of interest rather than settling them. Still, it should have a point and a shape. If you find you're not managing to find at least a temporary sustained focus at some point(s) in your response, try zeroing in one small portion or aspect of your text(s)—an incident, a character, the narrative "voice," the treatment by two or more texts of a similar theme or idea, or some other specific textual element that intrigues or bothers you. Another useful strategy is to reread and think about a portion of the text that's nagging you or giving you particular trouble; writing about a difficult passage can help you understand it better, and the exercise may spur you to unlock other parts of the text as well.

The main idea behind this regular, informal writing is for you to learn the discipline of developing ideas about whatever you take in through your eyes and ears. A happy by-product of the procedure is that you'll have ready-made material (work-in-progress, anyway) to air and refer to in class, and the rest of us will be able to mark, mull over, and be stimulated by some other ideas besides our own, ahead of time. You'll do this five (5) times over the course of the semester, though you're welcome to contribute (or respond online to someone else) as often as you like, even when you haven't been assigned to do so. (For precise logistics, refer back to the syllabus.) While lively conversation and energetic debate are highly desirable, it should go without saying that you shouldn't be rude or abusive.

This castor oil's good for you. No—really! In principle, this sort of thing is its own reward: it fosters your ability to organize and develop your own thinking and it gives you an opportunity to steal—er, learn—from other smart people. In a better world, it would also be the basis of graded credit: I'd give you regular evaluative feedback (in the form of lengthy e-mails as well as terse letter grades) on the quality and promise of the thinking you do there. Instead, I'm going to treat these "Reading Responses" like a journal, and assign credit based on quantity alone. (For 400-500 words—the minimum effort—you'll earn something in the "C" range; 600-750 words get you a "B"; 800-1000 words an "A.") Still, I'll gladly respond to any submission you ask me to respond to—especially one that you're thinking of expanding into a formal essay. But whatever else this informal writing does for you will depend almost entirely upon what you make of it. It can be saturated fats and refined sugars or complex carbs and healthy proteins. Junk food or brain food: you decide.