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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an Owen Wister poem published in 1920 in "The Atlantic Monthly" and brought to the attention of a university class without any information as to its context or its references, and read in various ways by various individuals, as information about the poem's context was gradually discovered. The central issue explored in the paper is the role of that information and the way in which it either is, or is not, relevant to different readers depending on their own enculturation into the society of readers of poetry. The paper first provides the context of the poem's discovery--in a class which is an interdisciplinary introduction to university study and to the culture of academia and scholarship--and tells the story of the poem's discovery by a student who was browsing through back issues of "The Atlantic Monthly" and who probably did not realize that it was not a new poem. As part of the class, students wrote "reflections" on their readings in reading logs meant for anyone in the class to read. The paper describes two class seminars in which the poem and its context were discussed. (NKA)

# Conditions of Reception: The Strange Case of "Mons, Anzac, and Kut."

by Russell A. Hunt

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**Conditions of Reception:  
The Strange Case of "Mons, Anzac and Kut"**

We often talk about literary "reception" as though it were either a passive act -- the text having its way with the reader -- or, on the other hand, as though the reader were somehow autonomous, independent not only of the text and the intentions of the "author," but independent also of the society around her. We know, of course, that it's not that simple, but we don't have a language which allows us to avoid slipping into either trivialization. It is useful, as a way of reminding ourselves not only how complicated the transactions we characterize as "reception" can be, but how much actually can be understood about them, to stop occasionally and consider specific cases. Here is one.

Let's begin with the text.

AFTER READING 'MONS, ANZAC AND KUT'  
BY OWEN WISTER

'Sad stories chancèd in the times of old'  
Have held me oft by candle's faltering light,  
When all outside my bed was winter-cold,  
And shy, small noises crept about the night.  
Myself thus safe, of perils have I learnèd,  
And ancient strifes, that I have never shared;  
Thus have I tasted, while my wick still burnèd,  
Comfort from that discomfort I am spared.  
Thus have I hasted on from page to page  
With tingling blood that other's blood should flow  
From piercèd bodies in a far-off age  
Fabled to stir me by their pageant woe.

Your terrible true tale of our to-day  
Thus holds me, till my candle melts away.

What I'd like to consider here is a process of reading whereby a poem produced originally in 1920, and rooted inextricably in the culture of the post-World War I era, is read in the context of a first-year university class in 1998. Questions about the nature of contextual knowledge, the circumstances under which it is relevant and seen as relevant, institutionalized attitudes toward poetry, and the role of warranting, ownership, and underlying dialogic social transactions are, I believe, raised if not illuminated.

This poem, published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1920, is stumbled upon by a student in 1998, brought to the attention of a class without any information as to its context or its references, and read in various ways by various individuals, as information about the poem's context is gradually discovered. The central issue I want to explore is the role of that information and the way in which it either is, or is not, relevant to different readers depending on their own enculturation into the society of readers of poetry.

## The context

I teach in a first year program which is designed to be a year-long interdisciplinary introduction to university study and to the culture of academia and scholarship, and to achieve this at the same time as offering the students first year courses in three separate disciplines. My main responsibility in our section of the program, which enrolls a group of 20-40 students in this "learning community," is to see that the students experience the equivalent of a conventional "introduction to literature" course. (Further information about the course and the program is available on the university's [Web site](#).)

One thing we ask students to do is spend much of the first two weeks of the winter term reading whatever they like as long as it has appeared in a list of journals and magazines which we issue to them to start the process. These periodicals have been selected by the three teachers to represent a range of more or less intellectual journals, not so scholarly or recondite as to be daunting, but challenging enough to present them with new and important ideas and reflections. We give out a general statement of how much they need to read each week; beyond that they are on their own.

For each item they choose and read they are asked to write a "reflection" in which they describe their reading -- it might be an article, a story, a poem -- and indicate ways in which it might be of interest to others in the class. They post these "reading logs" on a course "web site," situated on the university's local area network in a directory where anyone in the course can read what they've written, simply by following hypertext links from the main course Web site to a directory of student names to each student's "home page," which includes a list of readings, each of which is described by a sentence or two on the main page, and which is then "hotlinked" to the student's longer reflection on the reading.

## The story

Robyn first came across the poem. She was apparently browsing through bound volumes of back issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*. These volumes are bound by year, without obvious covers or separations into issues, and printed in a double-column format which looks very much like an older-style literature anthology. Part of our aim in inviting students to read in a wide range of periodicals was to offer them a chance to see some of what periodical publication entails (almost none of our first year students have ever opened a periodical other than a newsstand special interest or news magazine), but it seems unlikely that Robyn was aware that what she was reading had once been delivered every month by subscription.

In any case, her listing of the poem on her web site shows, I think, that she did not realize -- at least on that reading -- that the poem had been published in 1920 (or what that might mean):

3. Wister Owen, "After Reading Mons, Anzac, and Kut. ." *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 20, 1998, P.612

What she said about the poem as a one-line introduction suggests the same thing. For her - and, I think, for most students, as a result of generations of literature taught by instructors conditioned by "New Criticism" - literature exists in a kind of synchronous world, a continuing "now."

This is a poem that I enjoyed very much. It discusses the state our world is in today.

Her longer reflection, which was hotlinked to this sentence, reinforces this impression. Some of the sense of presentness is probably due to the fact that first year students don't usually understand exactly how the convention of discussing literature in the historical present works.

"After Reading Mons, Anzac, & Kut'. By Owen Wister.

I really liked this poem. Wister begins to explain how at night he will curl up with a good novel, a thriller, or, a mystery, and will find comfort in the fact that he is not suffering the way the characters in the novels he is reading are. At the end of the poem, Wister says that the horrible true story of the way our world is, holds him even stronger than the thriller and mystery novels do, this is because the tale is even more horrific.

It is obvious that Wister wrote this poem as a commentary on our world today. The poem shows that he is very upset at the corruption we now face. This poem is a poem that warns us of the destruction we will cast on to ourselves. It says in a very powerful way, that our world is more exciting and fearful than a novel written for the purpose of scarring people.

In any case, it is interesting to note how she assimilates a generalized idea of "corruption" into what seems, in the poem as read by most people I've shown it to, a concern with "perils," "strifes," "discomfort," and "blood."

A week or so later we introduced the idea that students -- who, theoretically, were already reading in each others' reading logs in order to find things to read which might be of interest to themselves -- were to find a specific reading in someone else's log, go locate the text and read it, and write their own reflection (and in the process, create a hypertext link back to the original reflection). Katie was apparently intrigued by Robyn's reflection, and chose to search out "After Reading 'Mons, Anzac and Kut'" as well. She noticed that it had been published in 1920 -- or at any rate she dated it accurately in her listing -- and she said, on her main page:

This selection which I found by reading Robyn's Reading Log Page was a poem about the ability of literature to release one from the turmoil of the real world, and whether or not this is a necessary facet of existence.

And in her reflection she said this:

This was a short poem about the ability of literature to take it's reader away into worlds not unlike our own but different enough to allow the reader some relief from the world we live in. It speaks of the authors desire to read about the pain and turmoil of someone else as opposed to himself while he lies comfortable and warm in his own bed. It accentuates the fact that he feels that we are trapped in this world we live in, but though literature there are no bounds to our existence. Whether this is a meaningful existence or not is debated but through comparison with other poems of the same genre, it is evident that Wister is merely taking a break from the hassles of the daily world and delving into something that makes him feel better about his own place on this planet. One may call this ignorance to the more important matters that need attending to but I see it as a necessary break from reality. Robyn was the first to read this poem

and it was through reading her reflection that I have come to the conclusions that I have.

Here is a very different reading -- one which apparently draws on experience of understanding literature as escape ("relief from the world we live in"). Both, however, make the same fundamental move, inquiring about the message of the poem for us. And, interestingly, neither raises even for an instant the problem of the title.

At this point, I had seen none of this writing. About 35 students were writing an average of five or six reflections every week; I regularly browsed through them, but had not noticed the pair of writings on this poem.

### **The seminar**

Early in the term we began a series of weekly seminars in which a third of the class (about 13 students) met with one of the three instructors to address issues of particular interest to their discipline. I set up a series of "English seminars." At the first seminar, I handed out a prompt which asked the students to be on the lookout for "literary" texts in their reading, and to bring photocopies of one they thought worth talking about to the next meeting. The next week, Robyn brought the Wister poem.

At that meeting, on January 22, the group read all the texts and the supporting documents students brought with them (Robyn's explanation of her choice was a printout of her reading log text), and decided on three to explore further. A subgroup was to work with each of the texts and prepare to structure a half-hour discussion of it for the next seminar. Katie and Robyn became the sub-group preparing a discussion of "Mons, Anzac and Kut."

This was the first time I had ever seen the poem. As I read it and listened to the discussion -- which led to the decision that it should be one of the three texts to which more attention should be paid the following week -- I realized that the poem was a golden opportunity to help students see how much difference contextual information might make to their understanding.

I also knew, however, that simply giving them the information wouldn't do. There are at least three reasons for this. First, I did not believe my primary aim was to help them understand this particular poem (in part because I didn't, and don't, think it a particularly good poem, but also because, in general, I'm much more interested in reading they might do ten years hence than in the reading they're doing right now. Second, I don't think you learn by having someone answer questions you haven't asked: there's lots of evidence that information offered about literary texts has little effect on student reading. Finally, of course, in fact I didn't *have* the information to give them.

I knew that *my own* questions during the class discussion had to do with the phrase "Mons, Anzac and Kut" and with the identity of the author, and I was surprised that no one in the discussion raised them. I became interested in why not, and what it might take to provoke someone to raise them.

### **Two other readers**

Back in my office, I puzzled over the poem. It wasn't too difficult to get the basic shape of it -- but I had no idea what the title of whatever the speaker had been reading *meant*, nor who Owen Wister was (though I

vaguely associated his name with "the Western"). The historian across the hall was in his office. "Bill, what do you know about Owen Wister?" I asked. "The name doesn't ring a bell at all," he said, "why?"

Within an hour we'd amassed a trove of information of the kind that only a couple of curious scholars would put together. I'd found that Owen Wister was an American writer primarily known for one blockbuster novel, *The Virginian* (1902), which has become a classic of sorts -- there's a substantial literature about it, it's on university reading lists and has been published as a Penguin classic, and was made into a very well known movie starring Gary Cooper).

Bill had immediately recognized "Mons" as the site of a World War One battle, and after some reconnaissance through his memory, had come up with "Australian and New Zealand Army Corps" for "Anzac." We were both stumped by "Kut" for a while, but eventually, in a search through the online Library of Congress catalog, discovered what the poem's occasion was. The previous year (1919) had seen the publication of a book about three World War One battles, by the Honorable Aubrey Nigel Henry Molyneux Herbert, titled *Mons, Anzac and Kut*.

The problem remained, however: what to do with this information? I was now in a position to answer a question if anyone asked, but I was not sure I wanted to be in that position, since my aim wasn't to supply information about the poem but to help them become people who would *want* information in the first place, would know what sort of information might be useful, and would be able to use it to enrich their experience.

### **Another seminar**

At class the next time, Katie and Robyn had prepared a "lesson," one which shaped the experience of the poem as an "English class" experience rather than a communicative one. They had brought copies of Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison." They distributed them and asked the other students to read both poems and write a short comparison of them. They then went round the circle, asking their colleagues to comment. The discussion turned much more heavily on the Lovelace than on the Wister -- in part, I surmised, because some at least of the students had encountered the Lovelace poem in high school and felt they had something to say about it. My notes on the seminar discussion are sketchy, but make it clear that most made some connection between the idea of freedom as they found it in the Lovelace and what we might call the escapist reading of the Wister poem. Robyn (whose original reading of the poem was not an escapist one) made the point that both speakers were in places that restricted them and that outside "things were crumbling." But, she said, both could get "mental freedom," Wister through books and Lovelace through his love. So, she said, we're talking about freedom in the soul or imagination.

There was a continuing discussion, primarily focused on the Lovelace poem. My notes indicate that, just before the end, and after a long pause in the conversation, Michelle raised what seemed to me the critical question. "What does 'Mons, Anzac and Kut' mean?" Robyn suggested they might be the names of authors. I restrained myself. It was only later that I realized that no one apparently knew the significance of the quotation marks around the phrase -- that is, that the subject of the poem was a published text. In any case, the discussion turned directly back to issues of why society restrains people, and what mental freedom might mean. Katie rounded the discussion off -- bringing it back to Wister -- by noting that "the guy in the Wister poem is trapped, too -- they're just trapped in different ways."

I resisted the urge to impose my own closure on the discussion, hoping that someone had heard Michelle's question. We went on to discuss a short story that another subgroup had prepared, and only at the very end of the seminar, in the conversation as we packed up our papers, did I find it impossible to resist saying, "I thought it was interesting that Michelle raised that question about the Wister poem and nobody found it important." A number of people agreed, but no one suggested we stay to discuss it.

### **Michelle takes a hint**

As part of the process of ensuring that students read each others' logs, I suggested again that people should feel free to go back and read works we'd discussed and reflect on them. About a week later, I found the poem listed in Michelle's reading log, with this introductory sentence:

This poem concerns how tragic the battles of Mons, Anzac and Kut' and how the author is happy he is spared them.

This selection, was given as part of the English seminar and its source is Robyn's Web Page.

Feeling that at least I had connected somewhere, I clicked on the link to her log and found this:

World War I, often called "The Great War", was the first war of such magnitude and such killing. Wister obviously had an interest in WWI having lived through it, however, it went beyond that. Wister wrote several books on the First World War on the politics of the War and would have been knowledgeable about the battles that happened. So a poem about Mons, Anzac and Kut fits in with his writings on WWI. So what is Mons, Anzac and Kut and what do they have in common? They were all battles in which the Allies were forced to retreat due to great losses to their men. Throughout the following essay you will see how increased knowledge of WWI will increase your understanding of the poem.

In a 500 word document (it's significant, I think, that she calls it an "essay"), Michelle gives basic outlines of the three battles, and concludes:

Now in light of this new information we can read the poem in the context it was meant to be read as in 1920. The World War is over and the Peace Agreement stage as also ended the world is in time of peace, a time to reflect on what has just happened and a time for news of battles lost and won to get out. Wister and indeed the world by this time would have heard about the terrible losses due to folly that was acquired in the war. Wister is safe in America and his home in which an ocean has separated and protected them from the destruction of the war. However, despite the distances between America and Europe the "terrible true tale" of his today holds his mind and imagination like no book can. It will continue to hold him till the day he died or " till my [his] candle melts away". .

In one way, this was, I thought, wonderful: Michelle (although to some extent prompted by my professional curiosity) had gone through the same sort of scholarly exercise that Bill and I had gone through -- and with much less in the way of resources and sophistication to start with. Although some of her information is wrong (as far as I know, Wister never wrote about the First World War), this little essay is evidence of remarkable scholarly endeavor for a first-year student with only curiosity to drive her.

And yet. It's not clear to me that Michelle's experience of the poem was deepened or even much changed by this infusion of information. What has happened is that she now reads the poem as *about* these first world war battles, where most skilled readers I've consulted see it as an elaborate compliment to the author of the book about them. Essentially, Michelle's new reading, driven by her historical investigation, ignores the first twelve lines of the sonnet, attending only to the title and the concluding couplet.

Further, and more important, I'm not convinced that her approach to the next poem that presents her with the challenge of incomprehensible references will be much altered by this experience. Certainly, she knows that it's possible to explore such references for yourself, and has placed this poem in a larger context of resource materials, but my inference from her text is that her engagement with the poem was far from deepened in this process.

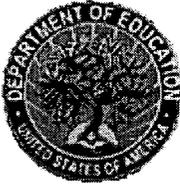
When I contrast her investigation with the one that my historian colleague and I conducted, I can see one important difference: ours helped us to see the way in which the poem was rooted in its time, and to imagine, at least at some distance, what a reader of the poem in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June of 1920 would have known and understood. The title, for that reader, would have been a reference not only to a current best-seller, a book which the reader would recognize, but also invoked the exotic names of famous battles of the recently concluded war, and invited the comparison between those battles and the legendary, historic and romantic ones the octave of the sonnet refers to.

## Reflections

What could possibly save this poem for young readers now? What context could give the reader anything even slightly like the experience a reader of *The Atlantic Monthly* would have had in 1920? One way to think about this is to say that, in 1920, the text was an utterance in a conversation about books conducted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and elsewhere, and depended on an immediate situation in which views of the War were important and in which people would know about Herbert's book. What I wanted -- the reason for creating the reading log process and the exchange of texts among students was for the poem to become an utterance in a conversation in the class. I had hoped that it might be understood as Robyn and Katie's text, even their utterance, rather than one proffered by an institution with the coded message that it is good for you, or even that it's good. It clearly did not. Even for Michelle the poem remained a museum artifact, an occasion for explication of background, a puzzle to be solved. That she was less interested in understanding the poem than in finding some information is, I think, suggested by the fact that she did not inquire about the author's name or note that the phrase "Mons, Anzac, and Kut" was in quotation marks.

That none of the students took the poem as an occasion for a dialogic transaction, either with each other or with the "author," is, I would suggest, evidence of the fact that the context in which the poem was read was shaped, perceived, or constructed by each reader in significantly different ways, with profound consequences for the way the text itself was categorized and thus understood. The work Doug Vipond and I have done on the reading of literary texts by students and professionals, I believe, throws useful light on this phenomenon, by suggesting that engaged literary reading has an intrinsically dialogic component whereby the reader is driven to understand what a writer (or the person who is proffering the text) is "getting at," why the text is being offered here, now, by whoever's "warranting" it. In the situation described here, it seems clear that none of the students took the text in that way -- or, rather that most of the students took it as a school text, proffered by an institution as a test of their ability to construct and phrase

interpretations.



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