

TEACHING THE TRUTHS

STANDING IN FRONT of me is the World Spirit, the zeitgeist, the Rude Beast Slouching Towards Bethlehem, or at least he's a significant contender for the role. But the odd thing is that the Spirit, who is decked in thick glasses, weary heel-worn shoes, and an affectionately tended goatee, is refusing to act the part. Before *him* is a lot of the sort of detritus that ought to be swept into the dustbin of history—me, that is, and a handful of other humanities professors—and he has a right, it would seem, to scoff at us human irrelevancies once or twice, then flourish the broom. But that's not what he's doing. The Spirit of the Age talks a lot, almost uncontrollably, about his great love, computers, and he flies off occasionally into hyperlinked digressions, mentally double clicking on phrases from off-the-point sentences past, but by and large the Spirit seems a pretty nice guy.

We're here, we half a dozen or so professors, to learn how to "integrate computing into humanities instruction." In return for sitting through a few training sessions and promising to use technology in a course sometime, we each get temporary use of

a jazzy laptop computer. Integrating computing into humanities instruction: This is code, really, for transferring as much as possible of what we know and can do over to the computer. I'm learning how to set up websites full of information about the courses I'm teaching. At the website for my class on dystopias and utopias, *Beyond 1984*, you should be able to access all the reading, the relevant articles, my notes for lectures and presentations, your classmates' essays. In the chat room I could set up, you'd talk on with your fellow dys- and utopic students. If I arrange things right, another university computer advocate has informed me, my workload will sink "exponentially."

"Exponentially." Hmmmm. In fact, as I figure it, the workload will near the vanishing point. I'll only be needed to grade the papers. I won't be gone, *per se*; tenure will probably protect me, no matter how flagrantly irrelevant I become. No, I'm heading to the metaphorical dustbin, but my graduate students may be going there literally. We humanities professors are, it would seem, over, played out. The World Spirit doesn't need to gloat; he can just pass serenely through, like the whirlwind angel in Exodus, blowing the husks and shells into the desert and away.

The Exodus angel may be on to something. We humanities professors *have* been working to put ourselves beside the point. (Though maybe it's not too late . . .) So there's no reason why, if things continue in their current course, the cheerful logorhelic in front of me won't have his way.

One example: The teaching of writing has been all but transformed over the past decade. Many teachers once regarded writing as a way to unfold and even to discover an inner self. Writing was, to take a phrase from Keats, a form of "Soul-making." A flexible, potent individual style signified supple, developing

character. Now we know better. Writing, it turns out, is a technology. It's a way of transferring information from one site to another. Thus it needs to be clean, clear, fluent, but also rather anonymous, unclouded by excess metaphor or perplexing irony. One learns "communication," not self-excavation, self-making.

Now that the computer is at the center of every course, every area of inquiry is more and more defined by the resources of the computer. Computers are splendid research tools. Good: More and more the curriculum turns in the direction of research. We don't attempt to write as Dickens would, to experiment with thinking as he might, were he alive today. Rather, we research Dickens. We delve into his historical context, learn what the newspapers were gossiping about on the day installment one of *Bleak House* hit the stands. We shape our tools, as Marshall McLuhan famously said, and thereafter our tools shape us.

One can be fully grateful for the best blessings of technology. One can be receptive to many of the pleasures that come out of American popular culture. Yet one can still feel, as I do, that education needs to be about more than training and entertaining, about learning how to do a lucrative job and how to disperse the money that job creates. William Carlos Williams said that people die every day for want of what's to be found in "despised poems." Hyperbolic as the line may be, I think there's something to it. We need the study of history and literature and art, and as more than modes of diversion and more than testing grounds for practical skills.

But what is it precisely that the humanities offer? Pragmatically, what can they do?

The answers I'll offer are both old and new, both conservative and radical, geared to bring full comfort to neither left nor

right. And the answers begin where good taste demands that, as of now, one shouldn't tread.

I teach at the University of Virginia, and not far from me down Route 29, in Lynchburg, Virginia, is the church of Jerry Falwell. Falwell, it's well-known, taught the word of God, the literal, unarguable truth as it was revealed to him in the Bible, and as it must be understood by all heaven-bound Christians.

For some time, I thought that we at the University of Virginia had nothing consequential to do with the Reverend Falwell. Occasionally, I get a book through interlibrary loan from Falwell's Liberty University; sometimes the inside cover contains a warning to the pious suggesting that though this volume may be the property of the Liberty University library, its contents, insofar as they contradict the Bible (which means the Bible according to Falwell), are of no particular value.

It's said that when a certain caliph was on the verge of burning the great library at Alexandria, scholars fell on their knees in front of him and begged him to reconsider. "There are two kinds of books here," the caliph reputedly said. "There are those that contradict the Koran—they are blasphemous. And there are those that corroborate the Koran—they are superfluous." And then: "Burn the library." Given the possibilities that the caliph's behavior opened up, it's a good thing that Liberty has a library at all.

Thomas Jefferson, our founder, was a deist (maybe worse than that, the orthodox of Virginia used to whisper). The architecture of the university's central grounds, designed by Jefferson, is emphatically pre-Christian, based on Greek and Roman models. In fact the Rotunda, once the university's library, is designed in homage to the Roman Pantheon, a temple to the twelve chief pagan gods. As soon as they saw the university, local divines

became apoplectic. Where was the church? Unlike Princeton and Harvard, the university didn't have a Christian house of worship in its midst. From pulpits all over Virginia, ministers threatened the pagan enclave with ruin from above.

Jefferson—deist (maybe worse), scientist, revolutionary, seems to have believed that the best way to deal with religion was to banish it, formally, from the university, then go on to teach the useful arts of medicine, commerce, law, and the rest. The design of my university declares victory over what the radicals of the Enlightenment would have called superstition, and what most Americans currently call faith or spirituality. And we honor Jefferson now by, in effect, rendering unto Falwell that which is Falwell's.

In fact, humanists in general have entered into an implied bargain with Falwell & Company. They do the soul crafting. They administer the spiritual education. They address the hearts of the students—and in some measure of the nation at large. We preside over the minds. We shape intelligences; we train the faculties. In other words, we teachers cut an implicit deal with religion and its promulgators. They do their thing, we do ours. But isn't that the way it should be? Isn't religion private? Spirituality, after all, is everyone's personal affair. It shouldn't be at the core of college education; it should be passed over in silence. What professor would have the bad taste to puncture the walls of his students' privacy by asking them uncomfortable questions about ultimate values?

Well, me. But then, I got into the teaching business for the reason, I suspect, that many people did. I thought it was a high-stakes affair, a place where, for want of a better way to put it, souls are won and lost. I thought Socrates' line about summed it up: "This discussion," he said, referring to an exchange with

his students, "is not about any chance question, but about the way that one ought to lead one's life."

"How do you imagine God?" If you're going to indulge in embarrassing behavior, if you're going to make your students "uncomfortable" (still often the worst thing for a student to be now), why not go all the way? This, or some variant, is the question that lately has been inaugurating my classes—not classes in religion but classes in Shakespeare, in Romantic poetry, in major nineteenth-century novels. That is, the embarrassing question begins courses of study with which—according to Jefferson, according to Falwell, according to the great majority of my colleagues in the humanities—such a query has nothing to do.

What kind of answers do I get? Quite marvelous ones, often. After the students who are disposed to walk out have, sometimes leaving an editorial sigh hanging in the air, and there's been time for reflection and some provisional writing, answers come. Here I can provide only a taste of them.

Some of the accounts are on the fluffy side. I've learned, or relearned, the view that God is love and only love; I've heard that God is nature, that God is light, that God is all the goodness in the universe. I hear tales about God's interventions into the lives of my students, interventions that save them from accidents and deliver them from sickness while others fall by the way. There's a whole set of accounts that are on the all-benevolent side—smiling, kindly, but more than a little under-ramified, insufficiently thought-out. If God is all things, or abides in all things, as I've heard it said, what is the source of evil? (By now it's clear to the students that bad taste is my *métier*—once this is understood, they can be quite indulgent.) A pause, then often an answer, sometimes not a bad one. The most memorable of the exponents of smiling faith was a woman named Susan

who called her blend of creamy benevolence—what else?—Susanism.

Some of the responses are anything but under-elaborated. These tend to come from orthodoxly religious students, many of whom are well trained, maybe overtrained, in the finer points of doctrine. I get some hard-core believers. But it would be difficult to call them Falwell's children, because they're often among the most thoughtful students in the class. They, unlike the proponents of the idea that God is light, period, are interested in major questions. They care about knowing the source of evil. They want to know what it means to live a good life. And though they're rammed with doctrine, they're not always creatures of dogma. There's often more than a little room for doubt. And even if their views are sometimes rock-wall solid, these students don't mind being tested. They're willing to put themselves into play because, given their interests, they don't mind that this "is not about any chance question, but about the way that one ought to lead one's life."

Religion is a good place to start a humanities course, even if what we're going on to do is read the novels of Henry James, in part because religion is likely to be the place where you can find what the philosopher (and anti-philosopher) Richard Rorty calls a person's "final vocabulary." A final vocabulary is the ultimate set of terms that we use in order to confer value on experience. It's where our principles lie. When someone talks about the Ten Commandments, or the Buddha's four noble truths, or the innate goodness of human beings in their natural state, or history being the history of class conflict, and does so with a passion, then in all likelihood the person has revealed the core of her being. She's touched on her ultimate terms of commitment, the point beyond which mere analysis cannot go. Rorty

puts it this way: "All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt of our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives."

Sometimes there's apparently no "there" there. That is, the students seem to have no ultimate vocabularies. The anti-philosophy of "whatever" is in place. But that can be a merely superficial condition. If you keep asking, values often do emerge. And when they don't, the students sometimes are willing to ask themselves why. Somehow they feel the pain of that void. They feel what Kundera, thinking of Nietzsche, called an unbearable lightness of being. Within that void, or against the solid wall of conviction, humanistic learning can fruitfully take place.

In Rorty's idiom, the word "final" is ironic. That is, a major step in educating oneself comes with the conviction that all of one's most dearly held beliefs should be open to change. One's final vocabulary is final only for now. Certain people, says Rorty, "are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves." Rorty believes that such people are the exception, not the rule. I'm not so sure. I think that one can begin by assuming that any student who turns up in a humanities course is open to influence, open to change.

It's time, perhaps, for something like a thesis statement: The function of a liberal arts education, as I see it, is to rejuvenate, reaffirm, replenish, revise, overwhelm, replace, reorder, or maybe just slightly retouch the web of words that Rorty calls the final

vocabulary. A language, Wittgenstein thought, is a way of life. A new language, whether we learn it from a historian, a poet, a painter, or a composer of music, is potentially also a new way to live.

While I'm asking my questions about imagining God, what's going on in the classrooms of colleagues down the hall and across the country?

Often some very good things. (It's not all training, not all entertaining.) No matter what humanities teachers may profess in their published papers, in the classrooms matters are often much different. Professors of literature and history and philosophy and religious studies generally have something in common. They attempt to teach one essential power, and they often do so with marked success. That one thing is reading. They cultivate attentiveness to written works, careful consideration, thoughtful balancing, coaxing out of disparate meanings, responsiveness to the complexities of sense. They try—we try, for I'm of this party, too—to help students become more and more like what Henry James said every author should be, someone on whom nothing is lost. Attentiveness to words and, with the habits of concentration developed on words, an attentiveness to life—that is one aim of a humanities education.

But there are limits to close reading. It's said that the Harvard scholar Walter Jackson Bate used to do a Marx Brothers-style routine to dramatize them. "Close reading," he'd mutter, and push the book up near his nose. "Closer reading"—chuckling, digging his face down into the book. Then, finally, "very close reading," where nose and book kissed and not a word of print was legible. The point is that with a certain kind of exclusive

attention to the page, life disappears. The connection between word and world goes dark.

This is the fate of reading when we do not move beyond interpretation. It is possible, I fully believe, to read a book in such a way that we can bring forth an interpretation that the author would approve. We can, with careful study, with disciplined effort, concoct a vision of Wordsworth's *Nature* that the poet would find acceptable; we can imagine what Shelley meant by liberty. We can evoke uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts when those are a poet's Keatsian designs. Critics who do not believe that this is possible may forget how often in day-to-day life we're called upon to relay the story of a protracted illness, a divorce, a long-worked-for triumph as we've heard it recounted by another. Are poems so much more difficult to render?

But then comes the next step, the critical one. I've asked my students what they believe. I've asked them what the word at hand means. Now the final question: Is the work true? That's a question simple to phrase but hard to answer.

Does the work contain live options? Does it offer paths they might wish to take, modes of seeing and saying and doing that they can put into action in the world? How, to phrase the matter in slightly different terms, does the vision at hand, the author's vision, cohere with or combat (or elaborate, or reorder, or simply fail to touch—the possibilities are endless) your own vision of experience, your own final vocabulary?

Do you want to affirm Wordsworth's natural religion? It's not as far-fetched a question as it might sound at a moment when many consider ecological issues to be the ultimate issues on the world's horizon. Is it true what Wordsworth suggests in "Tintern Abbey" about the healing powers of Nature and

memory? Can they fight off depression? Not an empty question in an age when antidepressive drugs have become so sadly common. Is Milton's Satan the shape that evil now most often takes—flamboyant, grand, and self-regarding? Or is Blake's Satan—a supreme administrator, mild, bureaucratic, efficient, and congenial, an early exemplar of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil"—a better emblem? Or, to strike to the center of the tensions that often exist between secular and religious writing, who is the better guide to life, the Jesus of the Gospels or the Prometheus of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who learned so much from Christ but rejected so much as well—in particular Jesus' life of committed celibacy?

Yes, one might say, but those are Romantic writers, polemicists, authors with a program. How about other writers? How about, for instance, the famous poet of negative capability, who seems to affirm nothing, Shakespeare? The most accomplished academic scholars of Shakespeare generally concur: They cannot tell for certain what Shakespeare believed on *any* consequential issue.

But in fact Shakespeare has been the object for what may be the most formidable act of literary criticism yet performed. If Sigmund Freud drew on any author for his vision of human nature—right or wrong as that vision may be—it was Shakespeare. The Oedipal complex, to cite just one of Freud's Shakespearean extractions, ought just as well to be called the Hamlet complex. From Shakespeare, Freud might also have drawn his theories of sibling rivalry; of the tragic antipathy between civilization and the drives; of bisexuality; of patriarchal presumption; of male jealousy; of the intertwinings of love and authority; of humor as an assault on the superego—of a dozen matters more. In larger-scale terms, Freud's tragic sense—his

commitment to stoical renunciation as the best response to life's inevitable grief—finds considerable corroboration in the world of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare may not have affirmed any ideas directly; he is not, it's true, a polemicist in the way that Blake is. But Freud's contestable truths can be fairly extracted from Shakespeare, put on display, and offered to the judgment of the world. (Rather implicitly and quite brilliantly, Freud succeeds in befriending the spirit of Shakespeare's work in the way that I described in the chapter against readings.) Does Shakespeare/Freud work? Does their collaboration, if it is fair to call it that, illuminate experience, put one in a profitable relation to life? Does it help you live rightly and enjoy your being in the world?

But what does all of this have to do with religion? Why ask, on day one, the grating question about God?

Because in a fundamental sense Matthew Arnold's view on the relations between poetry and faith is, I believe, an accurate one. If religious faith wanes in the world—or in a given individual—then the next likely source of meaning may well be literature. The literature we have come to value, most especially the novel, is by and large anti-transcendental. It does not offer a vision of the world as existing under the guidance of a deity. It suggests, though often it does not assert, that we humans have to make our own way without the strains and the comforts of faith.

The teaching of literature I want to commend does not argue that always and for everyone a secular, imaginative vision must replace faith. Rather, this sort of teaching says that a most pressing spiritual and intellectual task of the moment is to create a dialogue between religious and secular approaches to life. Many of my students leave class with their religious convictions

deepened. They are more ardent and thoughtful believers than when they began. The aim is not conversion. It is the encounter between the transcendental and the worldly. The objective is to help the students place their ultimate narratives in the foreground and render them susceptible to influence.

Most professors of the humanities seem to have little interest in religion as a field of live options. Most of them, from what I can see, have had their crises of faith early in life and have adopted, almost as second nature, a secular view of experience. Others keep their religious commitment separate from their pedagogy and have been doing so for so long that they are hardly aware of it.

But what is old to the teacher is new to the student. The issue of belief matters greatly to the young, or at least it does in my experience. They want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do. Matters of faith or worldliness are of great import to our students, and by turning away from them, by continuing our treaty with Falwell where we tutor the mind and he takes the heart and spirit, we do them injustice.

Is it a form of therapy that I am endorsing here? Yes and no. Yes, in that this form of teaching, like Socrates', like Freud's, offers possibilities for change that are not only intellectual but emotional as well. When we're talking about ultimate values, feelings come into play; tensions similar to those met with in a Freudian therapeutic exchange can arise. But there is also a crucial difference. Patients come to psychoanalysis because they suffer from the past—their experience of various events prevents their living with a reasonable fullness in the present. The form of pedagogy I am describing, which is anything but new, assumes a certain ability to live within the present (that is to say, a certain

sanity) and so aims itself directly at the future. What *will* you be? What *will* you do?

There is a story about a psychoanalyst who, at the end of the first-day intake interview, asked his patients an unexpected question. "If you were cured, what would you do?" There would come forth a list. "I'd get married." "I'd travel." "I'd come back and study law." To which the therapist sometimes replied, "Well, then, why don't you simply go out and do those things?" At the moment when he posed the possibility, the therapist stopped being a therapist in the Freudian sense and became something rather different.

A scene of instruction can illustrate the kind of teaching I want to commend. One of my recent students, a young woman, professes herself to be an ardent Christian. She believes in doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, in turning the other cheek. She believes Jesus to be the most perfect being. But she reads *The Iliad* and, after a period of languor, she's galvanized by it. What sweeps her in is the vision of a life where triumph matters over everything. The warriors in the poem seek first place all the time. Envy is not a vice to them; it's entirely creditable. The young woman who, it comes out, wants to be a well-to-do corporate lawyer has no trouble seeing something of herself in the unapologetic ambitions of Homer's heroes.

But then, too, she wants to be a Christian. Jesus' originality lies in part in his attempt to supersede the ambition and self-vaunting of Homer's heroes—qualities still very much alive in the Roman empire into which Jesus was born. Which will it be, my student needs to ask herself, Jesus or Achilles? Of course, what she needs is some live synthesis of the two. And it is her

task to arrive at it. But without the encounter with Homer, and without our raising the simple and supposedly elementary question of identification—is there anything in you that is Achillean?—she might not have had access to her own divided state. This was an instance not only of reading and interpreting a book—we spent a long time coming to understand the heroic code and considering Homer’s highly equivocal attitude toward it—but of allowing the book to interpret and read the reader. It was a moment, I would say, of genuine humanistic education.

The questions I want to ask may seem elementary compared to the sophisticated queries that a theoretically charged Foucauldian may offer in class. But many of us—teachers and students both—do not know what we think about major personal issues. And it is with them that we need to begin. Being a beginner in humanistic inquiry is something to be treasured; sophistication too rapidly attained can be self-defeating. Thus that great violinist on hearing a young, technically brilliant prospective student: “I will never be able to teach him anything. He lacks inexperience.” Or Emerson, in a lovely moment from his journals: “Don’t let them eat their seed-corn; don’t let them anticipate, ante-date, and be young men, before they have finished their boyhood.”

What is the teacher’s role in this? I think it begins with a realization of what literature and art, at least since the Romantic period, have offered to us. This is the view that there are simply too many sorts of human beings, too many idiosyncratic constitutions, for any simple map of human nature, or any single guide to the good life, to be adaptable for us all. This realization, which coincides with the foundations of widespread de-

mocracy as well as with the flourishing of novels, holds that there are multiple ways of apprehending experience and multiple modes of internal organization, or disorder. Accordingly, there are many, many different ways to lead a satisfying, socially constructive life. This, or something like it, is what Milan Kundera is getting at when he calls the characters—and by implication the narrating voices—encountered in fiction “experimental selves.” There are multiple ways to go, and confining theories of the self, even those as admirably worked out as, say, Plato’s or Kant’s, cannot encompass the range of human difference.

The teacher, in other words, begins the secular dialogue with faith by offering the hypothesis that there is no human truth about the good life, but that there are many human truths, many viable paths. To set his students on them, he offers them multiple examples of what Arnold (in what is justifiably the most famous phrase about the objectives of literary education) called the best that has been known and thought. This multiplying of possibilities—a condition enhanced by the rapid diffusion of culture around the globe—makes literature, which is inevitably the effusion of an individual mind, the most likely starting place. I would even say it’s the center of humanistic education. As literary works are multiple, so are the number of possibly usable human visions of experience.

Beginning with this hypothesis, the teacher’s task is often one of inspired impersonation. Against her students’ final vocabularies, against their various faiths, she, with a combination of disinterest and passion, hurls alternatives. Impersonation: The teacher’s objective, in the approach I’m describing, is to offer an inspiring version of what is most vital in the author. She merges with the author, becomes the creator, and in doing so makes

the past available to the uses of the present. The teacher listens to criticisms, perhaps engenders some herself, but always finally is the author's advocate, his attorney for explication and defense.

Is *The Iliad* a book replete with vital possibilities, or is it a mere historical curiosity? Is it locked in the past, or a potent guide to the present and the future? A number of my students—men and women both—initially thought it was a period piece and nothing more. The way the poem treated women disgusted them. In *The Iliad*, they said, a woman has the status of a few bullocks or a bronze tripod or two. Some, like Helen, are beautiful, and that beauty is a sort of power, but it is a limited and debased one compared to what the men have.

The class was about ready to concur when one of the women students, usually quiet, spoke up. She said that the poem mattered to her because she could see things from Achilles' point of view. The passage that caught her attention first was the one where Achilles' father tells him that he must be the best in every undertaking. He must simply never take second place. "I'm an athlete, I swim," she said, "and that's how I was raised by my parents and my coaches. After a while, though, I had to stop living like that. It's too much."

"Have you ever wanted to go back to it?" someone asked, perhaps me.

"Yes," she said, "all the time. It makes life incredibly intense." And you could see, if you looked hard, that what had once been closed off and left behind began to open again. The life of full unbridled competition is not for everyone, and it will not be approved by all. But if it is your highest aspiration, the thing you most want, then whether you take the path or not, it is worth knowing about your attraction to it. Achilles' life is the life of *thymos*, and if you are, at whatever depths, an individual driven

by *thymos*—by the desire for glory and praise, despite the moral censors you've thrown up against that drive—you need to deal with the fact in one way or another. I know no better means to begin to do so than through Homer.

Every essay on education needs a villain. There has to be someone or something preventing the liberal arts from being the world-changing enterprise we all suspect that they can be. And I suppose so far I have supplied a few. There are the spirits of training and of entertaining, and there's the refusal on the part of professors, even the best intentioned, to engage with questions of belief—to hear, in other words, a famous line of Wallace Stevens's: "Say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose." But of course to be a humanist—and the questions that emanate from humanism are ultimately the ones that this essay endorses—one must declare war on what's been called the cultural left, who are supposedly busy condemning all of Western literature for not living up to their own high political standards.

And in one measure, I'm willing to do that. The kind of teaching I part company with, the kind that seems to me most destructive to the freedom of self-making, is the kind that simply applies a standing set of terms to every text that comes to hand. These forms of teaching are a little like bad translation. Every work, alas, is rewritten in the terms of Foucault, of feminism, of Marx, and that is the end of the story.

Surely there are plenty of good questions about gender to pose to *The Iliad*. But if we simply look for a way to apply the theory, apply the denunciation, and do no more, then the free space that helped one student see her own attraction to the athlete's life and helped another to see her divided mind, her pull

toward the goodness of the Gospels and the potency that Homer describes—that free space collapses.

And as I have suggested, the theorist almost never turns and interrogates the theoretical terms at hand. He never asks how well Foucault could work as a guide to life. (That is, does he tell a truth?) The theorist generally does not pause to wonder how one would live, if one could live, with the wild hatred of all authority that Foucault endorses. Could you really teach in an institution as authority-based as a university and preach the gospel according to Foucault? It seems to me highly unlikely. But for many theorists, the application of the terms is enough. Rather than sending one nineteenth-century novel after another grinding through the mills of Foucault, why not teach Foucault straight out, and see how much of his purported wisdom can really stand the test of experience? (For myself, I find it hard to think of Foucault without thinking of Emerson's marvelous line: "I hate the builders of dungeons in the air.")

And yet there is a good deal to learn from the cultural left. For, to put it bluntly, they are the ones who believe that books can change people. They don't stop at mere interpretation. They understand that what is at issue in a literary education is belief. In some measure, they've kept the spirit of Socrates alive.

The fall of the liberal arts—which seems to many to be impending—isn't so much about heroes and villains as it is about well-intentioned people forgetting to ask and answer the kinds of questions that got them interested in reading to begin with. Professors, when young, read books as if their lives depended on it; older now, they enjoin their students to read and think as though what chiefly depends on it is their careers.

The spirit of education I want to encourage is better enacted and expressed by Harold Bloom. "We all of us go home each

evening and at some moment in time, with whatever degree of overt consciousness, we go over all the signs that the day presented to us. In those signs we seek only what can aid the continuity of our own discourse, the survival of those ongoing qualities that will give what is vital in us even more life. This seeking is the Vichian and the Emersonian making of significance into meaning, by the single test of aiding our survival." This is what we do, or ought to do, with books: turn their signification into meaning, into possibility. So Emerson himself suggests when, asking what the purpose of books is, he says simply that they should contribute to the thing in life that matters most to him. Books should inspire.

And the test of a book, from this perspective, lies in its power to map or transform a life. The question we would ultimately ask of any work of art is this: Can you live it? If you cannot, it may still command considerable interest. The work may charm, it may divert. It may teach us something about the large world; it may convey or refine a remote point. But if it cannot help some of us to imagine a life, or unfold one already latent in us, then it is not a major work, and probably not worth the time of students who, at their period in life, are looking to respond to very pressing questions. They are on the verge of choosing careers, of marrying, of entering the public world. They are in dire need of maps—or of challenges to their existing sense of the terrain.

Popular culture, which is more and more taught at universities, generally cannot offer this. The objective of a good deal of rock music and film is to convey the pleasing illusion that people can live in the way that the singers and the actors comport themselves when they are on. Occasionally, I suppose, a performer comes through. Keith Richards seems to be, in life, the Keith

that he evokes when he's onstage. Most people probably don't have the guts or the constitution for it.

Yet what David Denby says about movie love still strikes me as true: "Movie love puts people in touch with their own instincts and pleasures. Movies can lead to self-reconciliation, and that is one reason why they have inspired an almost unlimited affection." Movies tap into the fantasy life, and insofar as fantasy is being washed over by the gray waves of the reality principle, we need it to be restored. We need a new, larger self-synthesis that pays heed to the more refractory desires, or fantasies. But those fantasies cannot generally be the blueprint for a life, not in the way that the vision of Henry James, say, can conceivably be.

If resistance to popular culture is the teacher's objective, as it often is now, other problems arise. For the simple fact is that analysis will always be in arrears to the production of diverting images. While critique lingers over this or that blockbuster film, it becomes old news, the stuff of yesterday's generation. Brilliant analyses of *Titanic* are still coming out from learned journals and, in class, confronting students who were too young to have seen the film when it came out.

The central question to pose about works of popular culture, it seems to me, is this: Can you live it? Could you build a life around its visions? Given the work at hand, different people will answer differently. Some people will say yes to Bob Dylan (I would), yes to Muddy Waters and the blues tradition he works in, yes to Robert Altman or Stanley Kubrick. But you'll find far fewer people, I think, who'll be able to say yes to the Rolling Stones or Britney Spears. This doesn't mean that the Stones, and, who knows, maybe even Britney, are without their value. Fantasy matters. But I think that teaching such work to

people who are looking for answers to primary questions may not be the best way to use their time.

Some humanities teachers, sometimes the best of them, feel that they're fighting in a lost if noble cause. They believe that the proliferation of electronic media will inevitably put them out of date. They see the time their students spend with TV and movies and on the Internet, and they feel that what they have to offer—words—must look shabby and old-fashioned by contrast. But this is not the case.

When human beings attempt to come to terms with who they are and who they wish to be, the most effective medium is verbal. Through words we represent ourselves to ourselves, we expand our awareness of the world, we step back, gain distance, on what it is we've said. And then we are in a position to change. Images, however exhilarating, do not generally function in this way. Words allow for a precision and nuance that images do not seem, for most people, to be able to provide. In a culture that changes at the velocity that ours does, the power of self-revision is centrally important. Self-aware self-revision is very difficult, if not impossible, outside of language.

Overall there is something to be learned from the analysis of popular culture. But we teachers can do better. We can strike to the central issues that confront the young, rather than working on the peripheries.

The other great apparent alternative to the self-creating approach I am describing goes under the name of multiculturalism. Know the other, says the multiculturalist. I could not agree more. A segment of the curriculum *should* be devoted to studying the literature and arts of cultures that are resolutely different from Western traditions. In them we may sometimes find truths that directly serve our present needs for revelation. We

may read them and say: "Yes, that's how it is." But books from far-flung cultures can also teach us how many different ways of being there are in the world. In fact, this is probably their likeliest gift.

My fear about the multicultural curriculum is that it may ask students to know others before they know themselves. If we learn only or chiefly of difference without taking the time to find, or make, the inner being, we risk being walking voids, readily taken up by, say, commercial interests, ever ready to use our college-won knowledge of others for the purposes of exploiting them. Asks David Rieff: "Are the multiculturalists truly unaware of how closely their treasured catchphrases—'cultural diversity,' 'difference,' 'the need to do away with boundaries'—resemble the stock phrases of the modern corporation: 'product diversification,' 'the global marketplace,' and the 'boundary-less company'?" Where the inner void was, where the unbearable lightness was, there the corporation may well open its franchise.

Most of our ideas about influence are negative. Freud speaks of the transference, the influx of past memories that distort an existing erotic or power relation. Bloom writes of influence anxiety. And so the thought of being remade by the poets can cause people certain qualms. And yet perhaps the process I am describing is often not so much a matter of remaking or conversion as it is of recognition. T.S. Eliot observed that one of the things that poetry does is to find words for feelings that have abided unnamed in the heart. Maybe, on a larger scale, the process I am describing is simply one in which the self recognizes its own larger yet unarticulated order as it is shadowed forth in the thoughts of another. And then, of course, there is work to do, the work of completing the vision. As Nietzsche said, "No

one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows."

Proust, who is probably our preeminent theorist of a benevolent influence, observes that

The mediocre usually imagine that to let ourselves be guided by the books we admire robs our faculty of judgment of part of its independence. "What can it matter to you what Ruskin feels: feel for yourself." Such a view rests on a psychological error which will be discounted by all who have accepted a spiritual discipline and feel thereby that their power of understanding and of feeling is infinitely enhanced and their critical sense never paralyzed . . . There is no better way of coming to be aware of what one feels oneself than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our own thought itself that we bring out into the light together with his.

But the fact remains, as Proust elsewhere admits, that books can only put you on the edge of a spirited secular life. You must claim the rest, pass over the threshold for yourself.

Some will object to this vision of education. They will say that it is dangerous to talk about crucial matters in a classroom. A student's path may be radically changed by such discussion. The path may be blocked. It may become confused. But so may a life be ruined by not thinking. So may a life be ruined that never leaves the provinces of easy, unexamined faith in the transcendent. So may a life be wasted that gives to Falwell what he claims to be his and takes the slim remainder, worshipping diminutive Apollo with his toy computer, or small-time Dionysus with his Saturday nights. People can become distressed when

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they imagine a world in which all of us, inspired by poets and other artists, create our own lives, with only community welfare and our privately perceived failures to rein us in. They fear chaos, they say. They fear disorder. But perhaps what they fear, most truly, is democracy.

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The following pieces previously appeared:

"Liberal Arts & Lite Entertainment" in *Harper's Magazine*; "Dwelling in Possibilities" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; "Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? A Word to the Incoming Class" in *Oxford American*; "Do Sports Build Character?" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; "The Globalists" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; "My First Intellectual" on the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* "Lingua Franca" blog; "The Pink Floyd Night School" in the *New York Times*; "A Word to the Incoming Humanities Professor" in *Hedgehog Review*; "Against Readings" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; "Narcissus Regards His Book/The Common Reader Now" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; "The Uncoolness of Good Teachers" in the *New York Times Magazine*; "Teaching the Truths" in *Raritan*; "Under the Sign of Satan: Blake in the Corporate University" in *Hedgehog Review*.

Published by Bloomsbury USA, New York

All papers used by Bloomsbury USA are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Edmundson, Mark, 1952-
Why teach? : in defense of a real education / Mark Edmundson.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-62040-107-1
I. Education, Higher—United States—Aims and objectives. I. Title.
LA227.4.E36 2013
378.73—dc23
2013000853

First U.S. Edition 2013

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Westchester Book Group

Printed and bound in the U.S.A. by Thomson-Shore, Inc., Dexter, Michigan

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