



JOMECE Journal
Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Published by Cardiff University Press

Teaching and the Ethics of Literature

Mark Edmundson

University of Virginia

Email: mwe@virginia.edu

Keywords

Books

Teachers

Milton

Faulkner

Woolf

Abstract

The piece approaches the problem of the political content of books by way of an analogy. It suggests that we see books as teachers. We should consider them as similar to the human beings who have taught us the most in life. Those teachers will offer many good things, but given that fine teachers are almost always strong and idiosyncratic personalities, they will offer us some lessons that are less than edifying. We shouldn't throw them out for that. We should sift their lessons and learn from their best. As the Band sings it: You take what you need and you leave the rest.

Contributor Note

Mark Edmundson is University Professor at the University of Virginia. His most recent book is *Why Write?*

Citation

Edmundson, Mark (2016), 'Teaching and the Ethics of Literature', *JOMEK Journal* 10, 'Teaching and the Event', ed. Éamonn Dunne.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10084>



There's a good deal of concern out there now among teachers about the ethics of literary study, and there has been for at least the last couple of decades. Often the concern involves the tension between what we might call Then and Now. Many of the writers that have been most highly valued over time are perceptibly out of tune with contemporary values – or at least with what one might call progressive contemporary values. And most teachers of English think of themselves as progressive. They are especially attuned to issues involving race and gender and sexuality – and hope for what they perceive as forward motion on them. Many of what have been called the great and canonical works do not share the professors' views. What is to be done?

One answer is to find a new canon and teach new texts. Now teachers of literature are, when they have a choice, often inclined to teach contemporary works of literature that contain, or seem to contain, values that they can endorse. They are also inclined to teach works that come from diverse cultures around the world, under the belief that such books enhance students' levels of understanding and of compassion for others. If this trend continues, we will probably not have departments of English and American literature ten or twenty years down the line. That is, there will be few departments that focus on what were once the canonical works. There will be departments of world literature. In those departments much of the work will be taught in translation and much of it will be contemporary. The professors' politics will merge fully with his teaching and all will be well in the world.

For from an enlightened perspective (a phrase I use with only a dash of irony),

there is much to complain about in the old canon. Few of my colleagues are fully at ease with Faulkner's depiction of race; with Milton's depiction of women; or with Conrad's vision of the imperial mission, to name just a few sites of unease. There are even those professors who find Virginia Woolf's perceived commitment to bourgeois life, or Austen's, to be so far out of keeping with their own values that they cannot abide either. But mainly gender and race have far outdistanced class as a source of professorial concern.

So what is to be done? One solution is not to assign transgressing books at all. They are out of date; they are outmoded; their attitudes are poisonous; or at least harshly tainted with various flavors of bile. Let's simply have done with them: no more Faulkner; no more Conrad; no more Milton; no more of anyone, really, who is promulgating attitudes that are out of date and potentially destructive. For books matter! Books change people. Virginia Woolf talks about dating a new epoch in one's life from the reading of a book. Surely she's thinking about a positive and productive sort of beginning. Surely she's talking about a flourishing change.

But if books can change people for the better, then surely books can change them for the worse, too. Might one date a new, anti-Semitic epoch in one's life from the day one finished Pound's *Cantos* and the radio broadcasts assembled under the title, *Ezra Pound, Speaking?* Might not one nourish that anti-Semitism on a certain sort of reading of *The Merchant of Venice*? Then on, maybe, to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, with a brief sojourn in *Mein Kampf*? So let us simply throw these books aside. Let's cast them all from the curriculum. We're not talking about banning books here, and surely not



about burning them. We're talking about sliding the offenders out of the university and letting them suffer the gentle fate that most books suffer, quiet oblivion.

In their place let us teach good books, contemporary books that are high in literary quality and that are conducive to the good. Many professors now load their courses with what they call contemporary world literature: exemplified often by novels from the post-colonial world that dramatize the lives of others, and especially others who have suffered from Western crimes. Let us use literature to expand our sympathetic imaginations and see the world as it appears to others: the victims, the resisters, the chroniclers of despoilment and loss. So let us read Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Sherman Alexie, Marjane Satrapi and Tahereh Mehrjani Coates.

There's a second option as well, for the teacher who is determined to help students develop virtue. That is to bring the classic works up before the bar of contemporary justice and identify their faults and flaws. There is nothing personal in this, to be sure. There is no intent to libel, not really. The flaws of the author are often, all too often, images of the society's flaws. The retrograde author's sexism and racism and the rest may be overt. (Pound's hatred for Jews is anything but hidden, especially in the radio broadcasts.) If it is overt, direct one's teacher's pointer to the offense, then perhaps use the pointer as a rod to chasten the offender. If the 'problems' are subtle, all the better. Then one can use all of one's literary critical skill to coax them to the surface. As racism is often quiet and calm in a genteel society, so into the mannered pages of the classic text, racism may well silently slither its way.

Scholarship too must play its part: works on Pound and prejudice needed to be written, and they were; essays on Conrad and imperialism had to come forth, and lo: they did so; Faulkner and race: how could we continue forward without work on this fraught matter? So out come works that drive hard under one category – gender or race or sexuality – on to enlightenment, or at least on to literary critical illumination and maybe tenure, to boot.

Confession: I'm not entirely out of sympathy with any of these approaches. I'm no advocate of sexism and racism and the rest. I may not be the most stalwart warrior struggling against these forces, but I see the value of the fight and overall subscribe to it.

However.

Let me offer an approach to reading fraught books that by now ought to be commonsensical, but isn't: not even close. It's fairly simple to express, though not always so simple to enact. And I'll describe it using the most direct conceivable analogy.

What are books? A book is so complex an object that it is not possible to answer that question in simple terms. A book is a product. A book is a commodity. A book is an expression of spirit. A book is a testimony to its times. A book is paper and ink and cardboard. A book is a tree that has been despoiled. But when a book is going to be put to use in a classroom, perhaps the most illuminating metaphor that one can find is a metaphor that comes readily to hand.

Try thinking of books as teachers. Try to imagine that the book before you has presented itself to you in the guise of an

instructor, a reality instructor maybe, to borrow a term from Saul Bellow. Try thinking of a book as a human being with wisdom to impart – or who aspires to impart wisdom. This is not so far-fetched: for one might say that a good book is the best that has been known and thought by a given individual. The writer gives it her best, gives it her all. (No surprise then that the writer is sometimes depleted by the effort and can give to the world and to the day to day something a bit less palatable.) So, as Whitman says: he who touches this book touches a man – or a woman, or someone who has passed beyond some of the limitations of gender.

Now if you'll allow the trope of book as teacher and teacher as book, perhaps you'll allow the next step. Think for a moment of the people in your life who have taught you the most. I don't only mean schoolteachers, though there may well be some of them in the group. (I surely hope that there are.) But think of all the people who have imparted some form of skill, or power or even wisdom. You'll no doubt come up with a varied group, a sort of rainbow of influences. This will be true, especially if you've had a fortunate life.

One of my reality instructors growing up was my uncle Bill. Bill was a construction worker, a master cement mason who specialized in laying foundations for giant buildings. He was extremely good at his job: he was highly skilled, he had a strong reputation, and by the standard of my working class neighborhood, he made a lot of money. He liked to work hard and make money and enjoy himself. He drank albeit very moderately with his friends after work, he played softball in a league. (I saw him pitch once and he could burn it over.) He said what

he thought. He had the reputation of being something of a hot shit.

He was also proud of his work, very. When I drove through Boston with him once, he pointed to one massive structure after another and said: 'We built that!' and 'My crew and I laid the foundation for that one'. And 'That one there, that's ours too'. It was as though all of these grand buildings where office workers buzzed and hummed were monuments to what my uncle Bill and his crews had done. And weren't they? Skyscrapers are miracles. In a given spot there is nothing and then more nothing. But an engineer and a construction crew show up and within a year (unless you piss off the union), there's a gleaming bright tower that will stand up against a hurricane. We built that.

Uncle Bill was proud of what he did and who he was. He was in a union and he demanded top wages and respect from his employees. And when he got that – he and his guys – they did top-notch work. No one slouched; no one ducked. You got full out effort and you got results. We built that.

From Uncle Bill and some of the other working class guys I grew up around I learned something about the pride and dignity of deeply skilled people who build. They build bridges and build tunnels and they build houses and skyscrapers. And the work is dangerous. One windy day a massive piece of concrete blew down and knocked Bill over. It broke his back. Doctors said he would not walk again. But that's not how it turned out. Bill went at rehab much the way he went at pouring cement: he cut no corners; he did all he was supposed to do. He walked out of the hospitals. When I see an especially gleaming new building or cross a bridge,

most any bridge (I love bridges), I think about Bill and the guys (and now gals) who pride themselves in making super-human structures and making them the right way.

So I learned some things from Bill and I admired him a lot. I still do. But – let me put this as diplomatically as I can – Bill's opinions touching matters of race and gender would not be well received in the average American English department. He thought what he thought and he expressed himself in a salty enough way. Sometimes it seemed to be nothing but salt. He liked throwing a jolt at his college-educated nephews, my brother Phil and me, sure. But he wasn't saying what he did just for theatre value – though the riffs sometimes got a little theatrical.

Well, OK, you see what I'm saying. Bill was a teacher of mine, and teachers are not always perfect. If you think about the people you've learned the most from, you'll probably agree: people who can show you something often burn very brightly, and that means they hold nothing back. 'If you hold down one thing, you hold down the adjoining', as Bellow's Augie March says. So you get what they've got, which is almost always a mixed serving.

As The Band sings it: You take what you need and you leave the rest.

The best books are bountiful teachers and the best of them are mixed in their bounties. You may find a contemporary writer who is more pleasing in his views

than John Milton. But I wish you all the luck in finding one who is as soaringly eloquent, as conceptually powerful, as independent and upright, as daring and fresh as he is. If you run into a current author who asks as many rich questions about God, about evil, about sin, about pride, about love and asks them as well, let me know at your next opportunity.

But if you want to say that Milton's sense of what women are all about is not our own and shouldn't be, I'm probably with you. (Though calling him a misogynist is going too far.) But if you want to write a book, or teach a class, in which all you talk about is Milton's retrograde attitude to women, then though on some level I love you (I love most anyone who devotes a portion his or her life to Milton), then you and I see things differently. There's too much strong and valuable stuff in the magnificent poet to pounce on the bad, sink in your claws, and see how much blood you can draw. Take what you need and leave the rest – and show your students how to do so, too.

Grand books are like grand women and men, flawed but grand still. If you are only willing to be instructed by a politically pure angel, you may have to wait a long time before one floats down in your backyard, or in your bookstore.

The great old books still have too much to teach us to give them the heave-ho. Take what you need. Leave the rest.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

www.cardiffuniversitypress.org

This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal*

JOMEC Journal is an online, open-access and peer reviewed journal dedicated to publishing the highest quality innovative academic work in Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. It is published by Cardiff University Press and run by an editorial collective based in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, committed both to open-access publication and to maintaining the highest standards of rigour and academic integrity. *JOMEC Journal* is peer reviewed with an international, multi-disciplinary Editorial Board and Advisory Panel. It welcomes work that is located in any one of these disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary work that approaches Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies as overlapping and interlocking fields. It is particularly interested in work that addresses the political and ethical dimensions, stakes, problematics and possibilities of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

To submit a paper or to discuss publication, please contact jomecjournal@cardiff.ac.uk

Editors: Evelina Kazakeviciute and Alida Payson

Executive Editor: Professor Paul Bowman

www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal

Twitter: @JOMECjournal

ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. Based on a work at www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal.

