"Edmundson writes with a Thoreau-like incisiveness and fervor."
– *THE WASHINGTON POST*

The Heart of the Humanities

Reading, Writing, Teaching

Mark Edmundson

Contents

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR”

Introduction

Reading, writing, teaching: they form a triad. They are at the heart of the humanities.

We know all too well that these are not the most lavishly rewarded of pursuits. No one grows rich from reading and teaching. And though fame and fortune may arise from writing, they are anything but certain. So why would anyone want to spend a life in reading, writing, and teaching? Why would one want to be, in the broadest sense of the term, a humanist?

The world often seems to believe that reading, writing, and teaching are passive pursuits. The reader sits quietly, book in hand, not moving, making an occasional note: the image of passivity. And the writer? The writer is off on the sideline, not immersed in the worldly fray. The writer tries to make the record, standing apart from the pulling and hauling, and watching and wondering at it all. Statesmen and generals and business moguls write books, yes. But not until their *real* lives are over, not until they have done what they have come into the world to do. Then it is time for appraisal, and (often) self-sanctification.

And as to teachers, who are they? Aren't they people who have not quite grown up? They never gathered the strength to leave school and make their mark on the world, or fail trying. They stand in the bleachers cheering their students, on. But do they have the wherewithal to enter the game themselves and see what they can do? The teacher, to some, stands in suspended animation between youth and true maturity, unwilling to leave the cloisters and engage with the life of the world. Maybe he knows that having passed and failed so many he would be destined for failure in

the larger sphere. He chooses to be a demigod, lording it over the tiny kingdom of his classroom, satisfied with small honors and grudging deference. In the darker, more determining provinces of his heart lies a certain muted anxiety: he is, he fears, frightened of life.

Reading, writing, teaching: at best they are not life, but preparations for life. At worst, they are evasions of life: activities the worldly ones hold in mild approbation when the lights are up, but sneer subtly at when they move off together into paneled rooms, amber glasses in hand, away from the ears of children.

But "do not think so, you shall not find it so," as Shakespeare's prince says: at least if you ponder the question. Reading and writing and teaching are potentially magic: they turn one object into another, though not with a flash of the hand and a stirring of the wand, but through work, hard and (why not say it?) noble work.

Reading, to start with. If it's not common knowledge, it should be: you can read your way out of your life. You can read your way from one state of mind toward another. For all writing that matters testifies to a fundamental truth: there are multiple ways of seeing the world. There are many angles; complex adjustments; visions and revisions.

My way isn't the only way, the beginning reader learns. And then the corollary: there may be better ways out there. Or at the very least I should experiment with the possibility that there are. We are all socialized one time. We grow up immersed in the manners and morals and the rituals of our tribe. We are told by our parents, our first teachers and coaches, and our religious leaders what life is: what to value and what to shun. All honor to them: all respect to parents and teachers and clergy. They give us terms for comprehending experience: they instill their preferred vocabularies. They help turn us from bawling, scrapping creatures into boys and girls and then young men and young women.

But most of these figures of authority know only one way and too often they feel it to be the sole right way. They do not know they speak one language and that in truth there are many. They believe that because they have the first words in a young person's life, those words must be the last. They often do not know that life is multiple, rich, and strange and forever coming to be.

But the great writers do know that. They know that they themselves could not quite find peace with the language of their tribe and have had to strike out and find a new idiom. John Keats valued life in a way that none of his contemporaries and none of his precursors ever quite did. He knew something about love, something about enchantment, and something

about failure and pain that they did not understand. Keats loved Shakespeare as much as anyone ever has, but beyond Shakespeare there were surely other worlds: Keats was determined to find them. He began his quest by reading: he was inspired by Chapman's translation of Homer; the myth of Eros and Psyche; the tales of the god Hyperion. "Let us have the old poets and Robin Hood!" Keats says. Keats brought the riches of the past into the present and caused them to live on into the future.

You can read your way out of your own life and then in time you can enter a new one—though to do that, you will probably need to learn *writing*. But by reading, you can begin to make a move. Think of Malcolm X in jail in Norfolk, Massachusetts. At the time of his incarceration he was a petty thief and drug dealer. In time he would become a leader of the Nation of Islam, and then, breaking with the Nation, an independent warrior for racial justice.

The Malcolm Little who went off to prison had a lively mind: he had ideas, no one thought more or harder than he did. But when he stepped into debates in the prison yard, he was easily bested. He had no facts to buttress his arguments; didn't know what was new and what old. He'd done no real reading.

So he ordered books from the prison library, loaded his cell, and set to work reading. He was determined to read the best works: the great philosophers, the economists, the analysts of society as it is and ought to be. But he could make nothing of the books: his vocabulary was too small. But there were dictionaries. So Malcolm Little got one and went to work, looking up every word that puzzled him. But he spent so long in the dictionary that by the time he returned to the bottom of the page of his book, he forgot what the substance of the top had been. He was weak where he needed to be strong.

But the mind is a muscle. You can expand it and make it more powerful, adroit, and graceful, much as you can your body. You can build up your mind, if you have the grit and courage and the time. (Malcolm Little was not short on any of these.) So the prisoner set to work.

He did so by copying out the dictionary starting at aardvark and going to "z." He copied the words and he copied the definitions. That's slow work, even if you have an abridged dictionary on your hands. Malcolm copied out the dictionary all the way through and as he did, he learned the words, really learned them. You could say that he taught himself to read. And when he finally could read, the world opened up. Malcolm changed himself and he did it as prelude to changing the world. He reinvented himself with his reading: he transformed his mind the way a dedicated

athlete changes his body: through hard work—demanding labor, that is also infinitely pleasurable. Some people don't like the life they've been given, some people don't like the words they've inherited: so they throw them back in and then try to acquire new ones. As Kanye West says, "I ain't played the hand I was dealt, I changed my cards."

Suddenly Malcolm Little made contact with all that he had been missing: he learned history and geography, and political thought. He learned some sociology and he read some philosophy books: Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Spinoza. The world cracked and opened up.

He writes, "I suppose it was inevitable as my word base broadened, I could pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge."

Malcolm Little was interested in the fate of black people and what white people had done to them over the years. He was interested in other matters, too. He wanted to learn everything, or everything he could. Years later when he thought back over his life, he said that if all had been fair in the world and in America, he would have gladly spent his life as a scholar, reading and writing and learning. But there was other work to be done. It all came down to the humanistic triad: he read and he wrote and he taught, and he did so on a national and then on an international stage. One might not always concur with Malcolm X's vision, but there is no doubting his force and provocative power. Emerson talked about the American Scholar as someone who used solitude, books, and the contemplation of his past experience to remake himself. He probably did not imagine that anyone like Malcolm Little would step forward to fill the role. But that's exactly what happened.

The American Scholar, as Emerson envisions him, begins as a reader. She wants to know everything; she wants to meet up with the best that has been thought and said. The American Scholar isn't a passive reader. She guards against over-influence; she knows that there is, as Emerson famously says, a creative reading as well as a creative writing. The Scholar reads. The past is a treasure trove, and the Scholar wants to encounter all of the riches she can—for she will make that treasure her own in time. But in the beginning the young scholar reads for the pure joy of reading. She sees more, knows more, perceives more and in more

intricate detail: in Stevens's words, in what may be his most affirmative poem, "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," the scholar's "green mind bulges with complicated hues."

There are those who never stop reading and never stop taking their identity from being readers. They explore words for as long as the world allows them to do so. Such people have a becoming sense of modesty. There are so many marvelous books, so many splendid writers, why shouldn't they spend eternity, or whatever fraction of eternity is given them, consorting with the great? Why turn away from the heavenly chorus, for though ever changing, it never goes out of tune and there is never a false note?

Says Virginia Woolf, whose work has broken down doors for numberless women writers and artists: "I have sometimes dreamt … that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards—their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, 'Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.' " For Woolf, the best books have the power to perform an "operation on the senses. One sees more intensely afterwards; the world seems bared of its coverings and given an intenser life."

But, says a certain sort of reader, wonderful as the music of the great writers may be, it's not mine. I've got to make the record in my own fashion: I've got to tell the story as I see it, even if my story limps and stumbles, when other stories travel smoothly on the road. I'm not going to despise my life simply because it's mine. For an incessant reader, Emerson can be radically uncomfortable with reading. He's afraid he'll become addicted to the thoughts of others. He's afraid they'll mute his originality. He starts his greatest essay "Self-Reliance" by affirming that when we hear the best ideas of others we recognize them as having been our own: our thoughts come back to us with "a certain alienated majesty."

Emerson wanted to be original. He spent much of his writing trying to rev himself up to the point where he could write something without precedent. He bullied and inspired himself; he wheedled and cajoled and prayed. And if it did not quite work with him—he never became the poet he aspired to be—it did work for others. Emerson seeded the ground with inspirations for those to come—those who wrote against him and (often without saying as much) in his name. He is the great seed sower of American literature.

You almost cannot read him without wanting to write—for as much as Emerson loves reading, he insists that writing is its fulfillment. Writing is where reading leads, logically and naturally, because no one can whistle your ditty or compose your symphony, but yourself.

Emerson would have relished Walter Benjamin's story about the village schoolmaster who lived on a pittance but was committed to high intellectual ideals. When the book catalogs came to him from Berlin, the schoolmaster couldn't help but moon over all the enticing titles that he wanted to buy and read but could no more afford than a down payment on the near side of the moon. The solution? This was an Emersonian and enterprising schoolmaster. He sat down and wrote the books himself. Writers, Benjamin says, write books because the ones on hand are not the ones that they want to read. They want to conduct their own music: they want to put together their own band and play a number or two, and if anyone rises to dance, well and good. But making the music is the thing.

Why write? Writing gives you the chance to make up your own mind, not only in the primary sense of figuring out what you think, but in the larger sense: creating a mind that more or less hangs together, a mind in which the ideas don't jostle too much with one another or cancel each other out. I mean not having a mind that's devoted to pacifism but also delights in fantasias of war. I mean a mind at peace with itself, or at least aware of its warring factions, its proclivities for mental fight, its ongoing arguments with itself (those inner arguments that Yeats says are the source of poetry). Writing makes up your mind. Writing makes the intellect strong and the imagination, too. For the imagination grows dim in the day to day. The imagination grows weary.

Now what precisely do we mean by imagination? What is this faculty that has been so much celebrated and so feared? The imagination is often defined and frequently dissected. But to put it all most simply, one might only say that the imagination is the faculty that envisions life as it is and life as it might be. Surely it tells us where we are; it tells the imaginer where he or she is in the world. But it does more than function as a map. The imagination also creates, directly or implicitly, a version of the world as it might be. It is, in other words, a utopian faculty—sometimes indirectly, sometimes overtly. What the great Northrop Frye says is true: human beings live in two worlds. One is the world of their actual experience; the other is the world that they dream of living in, either with their fellows or (hush this thought in the current oversocialized world) all alone.

Writing unleashes the imagination. One never knows what one wants

until the moment one asks what it might be. Writing, real writing, says that none of the books on the shelf will do because (again we must proceed sotto voce) the writer feels that there never has been a being quite like herself. As the sage says, “few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually *am*.” She wants to find the truth, her truth, and if that happens to be truth for others, then let the celebrations begin and the bestowal of awards commence. If not, she will be satisfied that she has expanded her own consciousness, made up her own mind.

You can read your way out of your own life. But your chances of coming into a new one increase vastly if you are willing to learn how to write. Writing is always autobiography: it’s making the record after your own fashion. It’s going back to the start and beginning the process of socialization one more time, except this time you are the guide as well as the pupil. Your readers may jeer or smile: it hardly matters: you’ve made yourself again, made yourself of words: the most evanescent and enduring material that humans possess. Words are nothing but air, or the scratching of a pen or tapping of a set of keys. Shakespeare writes of how: “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” In his case, he is surely right. Sports commentators have a line about the fate of aging athletes approaching the ends of their careers. Father time, they say, is undefeated. Perhaps so. But if humanity has any chance against Father Time it is in the realm of words. People write to keep on living after they are gone. People write because when they do, they join all the others who have written well and said their piece. A paradox: all writers are different and make themselves so, otherwise they would not be worth reading. But. But all writers are of a movement, a guild. Keats called it the “immortal freemasonry of intellect.” A little grand? Maybe. But for me it does well enough.

The third pole of the humanities, the one that makes it a tent, a dwelling, no matter how vulnerable, is teaching. And though it is the most frequently practiced art of the humanities, it is also the most mysterious. Reading gives pleasure, immediate pleasure, when you’ve found the right books. And writing, though a difficult pleasure, is pleasure nonetheless. But teaching is often hard labor. Teaching can be a grind. It is one of what Freud called the impossible professions, along with governing and (of course) psychoanalysis. However well it goes, it never seems to go well enough, and sometimes it goes very badly.

Teaching, one might say, is often the way the writer prepares to write. As a teacher, she reads the books she needs to read. And she talks about those books with students. She does so over and over again and in time

that talk becomes the rough draft for the books and essays—or the journal entries and letters—that she will write. In front of a group of students, or at the head of a table, the teacher gets to practice again and again what she will, in time, commit to paper. She reads as a teacher and she rehearses for the primary satisfaction, the satisfaction of writing.

But why teach? Assuming that you don't need the money, or you could do something else and get by. Assuming that there are other ways to get some reading done and other ways to create first drafts. Not all students want to learn, not all schools are congenial, not on all days does one want to step up in front of the class and try to do something that is so hard: get people to enlarge the sphere of their thoughts.

It is, finally, a mystery why we teach, when there are so many other more immediately prestigious and materially rewarding ways to live in the world. But I wonder: maybe we teach out of a certain sort of kindness and a certain sort of gratitude. We teach because we are grateful to those who came into our lives and helped us, often against considerable odds, to change our lives by changing, in the largest sense possible, our minds.

We've been done a favor—we've been given a break. To see a young person leap forward into mental freedom in the way that we once did is to be reminded of the best moments of our lives. We break out of the cocoon one more time; we feel what might really be wings begin to emerge; we rise with them, our charges, and have a look at the world from the air, as though for the first time. It looks different from there; it looks both less pressing and more significant. Do we understand? For a moment, we do not so much under-stand as over-look, and that is something to be grateful for.

There is a social aspiration in teaching too. Every student who has broken through and begun to think will one day be part of a citizenry less susceptible to lies and evasions than it might have been without him. The individual who joins the group and stays a just man or woman, who will speak her peace, as Milton so wanted to do, affirming always the powers of "one just man" or woman, can remake that group, bringing it at least a step toward sanity. Men and women in groups can careen quickly toward madness: you don't need Freud and Nietzsche and Canetti to show you that, though they will. The educated man or woman is in the group but not fully of it: the soul who thinks individually is the braking mechanism on a vehicle that will, all too often, merrily drive itself over the cliff, or into the oncoming.

Milton loved the stalwart angel Abdiel; loved the prophet Ezekiel, even half loved Satan because they stood up for what they believed in in

the midst of what they saw as tyranny. The majority is a tyrant—almost always a tyrant. The educated individual raises the group level, but struggles against the whole idea of groups with their binding magic.

To turn away from teaching is to turn away from collective human hopes and though one is often tempted to make such a turn, the fact remains that democracy is a grand experiment and not to be denigrated, even though (whisper this) the great virtue in the government by the collective is that it somehow and half-miraculously gives more room for the individual to govern or even to misgovern himself.

Reading and writing and teaching: they compose the triad that creates that grand and vulnerable structure of hope that we call the humanities. Is this life of contemplation and expression and teaching and learning the very best of lives? It can be lonely, it can be frustrating (for who listens?), it can be tedious as one makes one's way through the necessities. (Says Frye: What is old to the teacher is new to the student.) But is there any other life in which one can be so free? Is there any other life in which you can help others to liberate themselves so well? The humanist is the liberator of his own soul. In promise, the humanist is the liberator of mankind.

PART 1: *WHY READ?*

For Matthew, Beloved Son

Literary Life

Reading through a volume of modern poetry not long ago, I came upon some lines that seemed to me to concentrate a strong and true sense of what there is to gain from great writing. The lines were by William Carlos Williams and they ran this way: “Look at / what passes for the new,” Williams wrote. “You will not find it there but in / despised poems. / It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” Williams asserts that though all of us are surrounded all the time with claims on our attention—film, TV, journalism, popular music, advertising, and the many other forms that pass for the new—there may be no medium that can help us learn to live our lives as well as poetry, and literature overall, can.

People die miserably every day for lack of what is found in despised poems—in literary artwork, in other words, that society at large denigrates. My own life and the lives of many others I’ve known offer testimony for what Williams has to say. Reading woke me up. It took me from a world of harsh limits into expanded possibility. Without poetry, without literature and art, I (and I believe many others, too) could well have died miserably. It was this belief in great writing that, thirty years ago, made me become a teacher.

Yet most of the people who do what I do now—who teach literature at colleges and universities—are far from believing Williams. Nearly all of them would find his lines overstated and idealizing. Many now see all of literature—or at least the kind of literature that’s commonly termed canonical—as an outmoded form. It’s been surpassed by theory, or

rendered obsolete with the passage of time. To quote Williams on the value of poetry, without suitable condescension, at the next meeting of the Modern Language Association would be to invite no end of ridicule.

Does everyone who teaches literature hold this dismissive attitude? Not quite. But those who are better disposed to literary art tend to an extreme timidity. They find it embarrassing to talk about poetry as something that can redeem a life, or make it worth living. (Though they may feel these things to be true.) Those few professors who still hold literature in high regard often treat it aesthetically. Following Kant, they're prone to remove literary art from the push and toss of day-to-day life. They want to see poems and novels as autonomous artifacts that have earned the right to be disconnected from common experience. One admires great literary works as aesthetic achievements. But on actual experience, they should have no real bearing at all.

Other professors who still call themselves humanists are often so vague in their articulated sense of what great writing offers—it cultivates sensitivity; it augments imagination; it teaches tolerance—that their views are easily swept aside by the rigorous-sounding debunkers. Yet Williams is anything but vague. The most consequential poems offer something that is new—or, one might say "truth"—that makes significant life possible. Without such truth, one is in danger of miserable death, the kind of death that can come from living without meaning, without intensity, focus, or design.

The moral of this book is that Williams has it right. Poetry—literature in general—is *the* major cultural source of vital options for those who find that their lives fall short of their highest hopes. Literature is, I believe, our best goad toward new beginnings, our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth. However much society at large despises imaginative writing, however much those supposedly committed to preserve and spread literary art may demean it, the fact remains that in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation. This book is addressed to teachers. We teachers of literature, and of the humanities overall, now often stand between our students and their best aspirations, preventing them from getting what literary art has to offer. With all the resources at hand to help our students change their lives for the better, and despite real energy and dedication, most of us still fail in our most consequential task. Purportedly guides to greater regions of experience, we have become guards on the parapets, keeping others out.

This book is also written to students and potential students of literature —to all those who might dream of changing their current state through

encounters with potent imaginations. You are invited to read over the shoulders of your teachers. You are invited, if need be, to supplant them: For much of what teachers can offer, you can provide for yourself. It is often simply a matter of knowing where to start. It's a matter of knowing what you might ask for and get from a literary education.

In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, there is a passage that gets close to the core of what a literary education should be about. The passage offers a deep sense of what we can ask from a consequential book. Proust speaks with the kind of clarity that is peculiarly his about what he hopes his work will achieve. In particular, he reflects on the relation he wants to strike with his readers. "It seemed to me," he observes, "that they would not be 'my' readers but readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers—it would be my book but with it I would furnish them the means of reading what lay inside themselves. So that I would not ask them to praise me or to censure me, but simply to tell me whether 'it really is like that.' I should ask whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written."

What Proust is describing is an act of self-discovery on the part of his reader. Immersing herself in Proust, the reader may encounter aspects of herself that, while they have perhaps been in existence for a long time, have remained unnamed, undescribed, and therefore in a certain sense unknown. One might say that the reader learns the language of herself; or that she is humanly enhanced, enlarging the previously constricting circle that made up the border of what she's been. One might also say, using another idiom, one that has largely passed out of circulation, that her consciousness has been expanded.

Proust's professed hope for his readers isn't unrelated to the aims that Emerson, a writer Proust admired, attributes to the ideal student he describes in "The American Scholar": "One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, 'He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies.' There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world."

For Emerson, the reader can do more than discover the language of herself in great writing. Emerson's reader uses a book as an imaginative goad. He can begin compounding visions of experience that pass beyond what's manifest in the book at hand. This, presumably, is what happened

when Shakespeare read Holinshed's *Chronicles* or even Plutarch's *Lives*. These are major sources for the plays, yes, but in reading them Shakespeare made their sentences doubly significant, and the sense of their authors as broad as the world.

Proust and Emerson touch on two related activities that are central to a true education in the humanities. The first is the activity of discovering oneself as one is in great writing. The second, and perhaps more important, is to see glimpses of a self—and too, perhaps, of a world—that might be, a self and world that you can begin working to create. "Reading," Proust says in a circumspect mood, "is on the threshold of the spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it."

Proust and Emerson point toward a span of questions that matter especially for the young, though they count for us all, too. They are questions that should lie at the core of a liberal arts education. Who am I? What might I become? What is this world in which I find myself? How might it be changed for the better?

We ought to value great writing preeminently because it enjoins us to ask and helps us to answer these questions, and others like them. It helps us to create and re-create ourselves, often against harsh odds. So I will be talking here about the crafting of souls, in something of the spirit that Socrates did. "This discussion," Socrates said, referring to one of his philosophical exchanges, "is not about any chance question, but about the way one should live."

I think that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to give people an enhanced opportunity to decide how they should live their lives. So I will be talking about the uses of the liberal arts for the conduct of life. I will be describing the humanities as a source of truth. I will be asking teachers to think back to the days when reading and thinking about books first swept them in and changed them, and asking them to help their students have that kind of transforming experience.

A reader removed from the debates about the liberal arts that have been going on over the past few decades would, on hearing the aims for this book, perhaps smile at how superfluous and unoriginal they seem. Of course, universities should present humanities students with what Matthew Arnold called "the best that is known and thought" and give them the chance to reaffirm or remake themselves based on what they find.

To the charge of lacking originality, I plead guilty. I have already cited Proust and Emerson; this book will be filled with the wisdom of many others, often similarly well-known. But as to my argument being

superfluous: I can assure you that is not the case. Universities now are far from offering the kind of experience that Allan Bloom, a writer with whose work I have something like a love-hate relationship, is describing when he observes that "true liberal education requires that the student's whole life be radically changed by it, that what he learns may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and hence re-evaluation. Liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything."

By this definition, true liberal education barely exists in America now. It is almost nowhere to be found. We teachers have become timid and apologetic. We are not willing to ask the questions that matter. Into the void that we have created largely by our fear, other forces have moved. Universities have become sites not for human transformation, but for training and for entertaining. Unconfronted by major issues, students use the humanities as they can. They use them to prepare for lucrative careers. They acquire marketable skills. Or, they find in their classes sources of easy pleasure. They read to enjoy, but not to become other than they are. "You must change your life," says Rilke's sculpture of Apollo to the beholder. So says every major work of intellect and imagination, but in the university now—as in the culture at large—almost no one hears.

Total Entertainment All the Time

I can date my sense that something was going badly wrong in my own teaching to a particular event. It took place on evaluation day in a class I was giving on the works of Sigmund Freud. The class met twice a week, late in the afternoon, and the students, about fifty undergraduates, tended to drag in and slump, looking slightly disconsolate, waiting for a jump start. To get the discussion moving, I often provided a joke, an anecdote, an amusing query. When you were a child, I had asked a few weeks before, were your Halloween costumes id costumes, superego costumes, or ego costumes? Were you monsters—creatures from the black lagoon, vampires, and werewolves? Were you Wonder Women and Supermen? Or were you something in between? It often took this sort of thing to raise them from the habitual torpor.

But today, evaluation day, they were full of life. As I passed out the assessment forms, a buzz rose up in the room. Today they were writing their course evaluations; their evaluations of Freud, their evaluations of me. They were pitched into high gear. As I hurried from the room, I looked over my shoulder to see them scribbling away like the devil's

auditors. They were writing furiously, even the ones who struggled to squeeze out their papers and journal entries word by word.

But why was I distressed, bolting out the door of my classroom, where I usually held easy sway? Chances were that the evaluations would be much like what they had been in the past: they'd be just fine. And in fact, they were. I was commended for being "interesting," and complimented for my relaxed and tolerant ways; my sense of humor and capacity to connect the material we were studying with contemporary culture came in for praise.

In many ways, I was grateful for the evaluations, as I always had been, just as I'm grateful for the chance to teach in an excellent university surrounded everywhere with very bright people. But as I ran from that classroom, full of anxious intimations, and then later as I sat to read the reports, I began to feel that there was something wrong. There was an undercurrent to the whole process I didn't like. I was disturbed by the evaluation forms themselves with their number ratings ("What is your ranking of the instructor?—1, 2, 3, 4, or 5"), which called to mind the sheets they circulate after a TV pilot plays to the test audience in Burbank. Nor did I like the image of myself that emerged—a figure of learned but humorous detachment, laid-back, easygoing, cool. But most of all, I was disturbed by the attitude of calm consumer expertise that pervaded the responses. I was put off by the serenely implicit belief that the function of Freud—or, as I'd seen it expressed on other forms, in other classes, the function of Shakespeare, of Wordsworth or of Blake—was diversion and entertainment. "Edmundson has done a fantastic job," said one reviewer, "of presenting this difficult, important & controversial material in an enjoyable and approachable way."

Enjoyable: I enjoyed the teacher. I enjoyed the reading. Enjoyed the course. It was pleasurable, diverting, part of the culture of readily accessible, manufactured bliss: the culture of Total Entertainment All the Time.

As I read the reviews, I thought of a story I'd heard about a Columbia University instructor who issued a two-part question at the end of his literature course. Part one: What book in the course did you most dislike? Part two: What flaws of intellect or character does that dislike point up in you? The hand that framed those questions may have been slightly heavy. But at least they compelled the students to see intellectual work as a confrontation between two people, reader and author, where the stakes mattered. The Columbia students were asked to relate the quality of an encounter, not rate the action as though it had unfolded across the big

screen. A form of media connoisseurship was what my students took as their natural right.

But why exactly were they describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? Why were they staring into the abyss, as Lionel Trilling once described his own students as having done, and commending it for being a singularly dark and fascinatingly contoured abyss, one sure to survive as an object of edifying contemplation for years to come? Why is the great confrontation—the rugged battle of fate where strength is born, to recall Emerson—so conspicuously missing? Why hadn't anyone been changed by my course?

To that question, I began to compound an answer. We Americans live in a consumer culture, and it does not stop short at the university's walls. University culture, like American culture at large, is ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images. We Americans are six percent of the world's population: we use a quarter of its oil; we gorge while others go hungry; we consume everything with a vengeance and then we produce movies and TV shows and ads to celebrate the whole consumer loop. We make it—or we appropriate it—we "enjoy" it and we burn it up, pretty much whatever "it" is. Someone coming of age in America now, I thought, has few available alternatives to the consumer worldview. Students didn't ask for it, much less create it, but they brought a consumer Weltanschauung to school, where it exerted a potent influence.

The students who enter my classes on day one are generally devotees of spectatorship and of consumer-cool. Whether they're sorority-fraternity denizens, piercer-tattooers, gay or straight, black or white, they are, nearly across the board, very, very self-contained. On good days, there's a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement. But there is little fire, little force of spirit or mind in evidence.

More and more, we Americans like to watch (and not to do). In fact watching is our ultimate addiction. My students were the progeny of two hundred available cable channels and omnipresent Blockbuster outlets. They grew up with their noses pressed against the window of that second spectral world that spins parallel to our own, the World Wide Web. There they met life at second or third hand, peering eagerly, taking in the passing show, but staying remote, apparently untouched by it. So conditioned, they found it almost natural to come at the rest of life with a sense of aristocratic expectation: "What have you to show me that I haven't yet seen?"

But with this remove comes timidity, a fear of being directly

confronted. There's an anxiety at having to face life firsthand. (The way the word "like" punctuates students' speech—"I was like really late for like class"—indicates a discomfort with immediate experience and a wish to maintain distance, to live in a simulation.) These students were, I thought, inclined to be both lordly and afraid.

The classroom atmosphere they most treasured was relaxed, laid-back, cool. The teacher should never get exercised about anything, on pain of being written off as a buffoon. Nor should she create an atmosphere of vital contention, where students lost their composure, spoke out, became passionate, expressed their deeper thoughts and fears, or did anything that might cause embarrassment. Embarrassment was the worst thing that could befall one; it must be avoided at whatever cost.

Early on, I had been a reader of Marshall McLuhan, and I was reminded of his hypothesis that the media on which we as a culture have become dependent are themselves cool. TV, which seemed on the point of demise, so absurd had it become to the culture of the late sixties, rules again. To disdain TV now is bad form; it signifies that you take yourself far too seriously. TV is a tranquilizing medium, a soporific, inducing in its devotees a light narcosis. It reduces anxiety, steadies and quiets the nerves. But it also deadens. Like every narcotic, it will, consumed in certain doses, produce something like a hangover, the habitual watchers' irritable languor that persists after the TV is off. It's been said that the illusion of knowing and control that heroin engenders isn't entirely unlike the TV consumer's habitual smug-torpor, and that seems about right.

Those who appeal most on TV over the long haul are low-key and nonassertive. Enthusiasm quickly looks absurd. The form of character that's most ingratiating on the tube, that's most in tune with the medium itself, is laid-back, tranquil, self-contained, and self-assured. The news anchor, the talk-show host, the announcer, the late-night favorite—all are prone to display a sure sense of human nature, avoidance of illusion, reliance on timing and strategy rather than on aggressiveness or inspiration. With such figures, the viewer is invited to identify. On what's called reality TV, on game shows, quiz shows, inane contests, we see people behaving absurdly, outraging the cool medium with their firework personalities. Against such excess the audience defines itself as worldly, laid-back, and wise.

Is there also a financial side to the culture of cool? I believed that I saw as much. A cool youth culture is a marketing bonanza for producers of the right products, who do all they can to enlarge that culture and keep it humming. The Internet, TV, and magazines teem with what I came to

think of as persona ads, ads for Nikes and Reeboks and Jeeps and Blazers that don't so much endorse the powers of the product per se as show you what sort of person you'll inevitably become once you've acquired it. The Jeep ad that featured hip outdoorsy kids flinging a Frisbee from mountaintop to mountaintop wasn't so much about what Jeeps can do as it was about the kind of people who own them: vast, beautiful creatures, with godlike prowess and childlike tastes. Buy a Jeep and be one with them. The ad by itself is of little consequence, but expand its message exponentially and you have the central thrust of postmillennial consumer culture: buy in order to be. Watch (coolly) so as to learn how to be worthy of being watched (while being cool).

To the young, I thought, immersion in consumer culture, immersion in cool, is simply felt as natural. They have never known a world other than the one that accosts them from every side with images of mass-marketed perfection. Ads are everywhere: on TV, on the Internet, on billboards, in magazines, sometimes plastered on the side of the school bus. The forces that could challenge the consumer style are banished to the peripheries of culture. Rare is the student who arrives at college knowing something about the legacy of Marx or Marcuse, Gandhi or Thoreau. And by the time she does encounter them, they're presented as diverting, interesting, entertaining—or perhaps as objects for rigorously dismissive analysis—surely not as guides to another kind of life.

As I saw it, the specter of the uncool was creating a subtle tyranny for my students. It's apparently an easy standard to subscribe to, the standard of cool, but once committed to it, you discover that matters are different. You're inhibited, except on ordained occasions, from showing feeling, stifled from trying to achieve anything original. Apparent expressions of exuberance now seem to occur with dimming quotation marks around them. Kids celebrating at a football game ironically play the roles of kids celebrating at a football game, as it's been scripted on multiple TV shows and ads. There's always self-observation, no real letting-go. Students apparently feel that even the slightest departure from the reigning code can get you genially ostracized. This is a culture tensely committed to a laid-back norm.

In the current university environment, I saw, there was only one form of knowledge that was generally acceptable. And that was knowledge that allowed you to keep your cool. It was fine to major in economics or political science or commerce, for there you could acquire ways of knowing that didn't compel you to reveal and risk yourself. There you could stay detached. And—what was at least as important—you could

acquire skills that would stand you in good financial stead later in life. You could use your education to make yourself rich. All of the disciplines that did not traduce the canons of cool were thriving. It sometimes seemed that every one of my first-year advisees wanted to major in economics, even when they had no independent interest in the subject. They'd never read an economics book, had no attraction to the business pages of the *Times*. They wanted economics because word had it that econ was the major that made you look best to Wall Street and the investment banks. "We like economics majors," an investment banking recruiter reportedly said, "because they're people who're willing to sacrifice their educations to the interest of their careers."

The subjects that might threaten consumer cool, literary study in particular, had to adapt. They could offer diversion—it seems that's what I (and Freud) had been doing—or they could make themselves over to look more like the so-called hard, empirically based disciplines.

Here computers come in. Now that computers are everywhere, each area of enquiry in the humanities is more and more defined by the computer's resources. Computers are splendid research tools. Good. The curriculum turns in the direction of research. Professors don't ask students to try to write as Dickens would, experiment with thinking as he might, were he alive today. Rather, they research Dickens. They delve into his historical context; they learn what the newspapers were gossiping about on the day that the first installment of *Bleak House* hit the stands. We shape our tools, McLuhan said, and thereafter our tools shape us.

Many educated people in America seem persuaded that the computer is the most significant invention in human history. Those who do not master its intricacies are destined for a life of shame, poverty, and neglect. Thus more humanities courses are becoming computer-oriented, which keeps them safely in the realm of cool, financially negotiable endeavors. A professor teaching Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper," which depicts the exploitation of young boys whose lot is not altogether unlike the lot of many children living now in American inner cities, is likely to charge his students with using the computer to compile as much information about the poem as possible. They can find articles about chimney sweepers from 1790s newspapers; contemporary pictures and engravings that depict these unfortunate little creatures; critical articles that interpret the poem in a seemingly endless variety of ways; biographical information on Blake, with hints about events in his own boyhood that would have made chimney sweepers a special interest; portraits of the author at various stages of his life; maps of Blake's London. Together the class might

create a Blake–Chimney Sweeper website: *www.blakesweeper.edu.*

Instead of spending class time wondering what the poem means, and what application it has to present-day experience, students compile information about it. They set the poem in its historical and critical context, showing first how the poem is the product and the property of the past—and, implicitly, how it really has nothing to do with the present except as an artful curiosity—and second how, given the number of ideas about it already available, adding more thoughts would be superfluous.

By putting a world of facts at the end of a key-stroke, computers have made facts, their command, their manipulation, their ordering, central to what now can qualify as humanistic education. The result is to suspend reflection about the differences among wisdom, knowledge, and information. Everything that can be accessed online can seem equal to everything else, no datum more important or more profound than any other. Thus the possibility presents itself that there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. No thought is a challenge or an affront to what one currently believes.

Am I wrong to think that the kind of education on offer in the humanities now is in some measure an education for empire? The people who administer an empire need certain very precise capacities. They need to be adept technocrats. They need the kind of training that will allow them to take up an abstract and unfelt relation to the world and its peoples —a cool relation, as it were. Otherwise, they won't be able to squeeze forth the world's wealth without suffering debilitating pains of conscience. And the denizen of the empire needs to be able to consume the kinds of pleasures that will augment his feeling of rightful rulership. Those pleasures must be self-inflating and not challenging; they need to confirm the current empowered state of the self and not challenge it. The easy pleasures of this nascent American empire, akin to the pleasures to be had in first-century Rome, reaffirm the right to mastery—and, correspondingly, the existence of a world teeming with potential vassals and exploitable wealth.

Immersed in preprofessionalism, swimming in entertainment, my students have been sealed off from the chance to call everything they've valued into question, to look at new ways of life, and to risk everything. For them, education is knowing and lordly spectatorship, never the Socratic dialogue about how one ought to live one's life.

These thoughts of mine didn't come with any anger at my students. For who was to blame them? They didn't create the consumer biosphere whose air was now their purest oxygen. They weren't the ones who

should have pulled the plug on the TV or disabled the game port when they were kids. They hadn't invited the ad flaks and money changers into their public schools. What I felt was an ongoing sense of sorrow about their foreclosed possibilities. They seemed to lack chances that I, born far poorer than most of them, but into a different world, had abundantly enjoyed.

As I read those evaluation forms and thought them over, I recalled a story. In Vienna, there was once a superb teacher of music, very old. He accepted few students. There came to him once a young man whom all of Berlin was celebrating. Only fourteen, yet he played exquisitely. The young man arrived in Austria hoping to study with the master. At the audition, he played to perfection; everyone surrounding the old teacher attested to the fact. When it came time to make his decision, the old man didn't hesitate. "I don't want him," he said. "But, master, why not?" asked a protégé. "He's the most gifted young violinist we've ever heard." "Maybe," said the old man. "But he lacks something, and without this thing real development is not possible. What that young man lacks is inexperience." It's a precious possession, inexperience; my students have had it stolen from them.

Cool School

But what about the universities themselves? Do they do all they can to fight the reign of consumer cool?

From the start, the university's approach to students now has a solicitous, maybe even a servile tone. As soon as they enter their junior year in high school, and especially if they live in a prosperous zip code, the information materials, which is to say the advertising, come rolling in. Pictures, testimonials, videocassettes, and CD-ROMs (some bidden, some not) arrive at the door from colleges across the country, all trying to capture the students and their tuition dollars.

The freshman-to-be sees photographs of well-appointed dorm rooms; of elaborate phys-ed facilities; of expertly maintained sports fields; of orchestras and drama troupes; of students working joyously, off by themselves. It's a retirement spread for the young. "Colleges don't have admissions offices anymore, they have marketing departments," a school financial officer said to me once. Is it surprising that someone who has been approached with photos and tapes, bells and whistles, might come to college thinking that the Shakespeare and Freud courses were also going to be agreeable treats?

How did we reach this point? In part, the answer is a matter of demographics and also of money. Aided by the GI Bill, the college-going population increased dramatically after the Second World War. Then came the baby boomers, and to accommodate them colleges continued to grow. Universities expand readily enough, but with tenure locking in faculty for lifetime jobs, and with the general reluctance of administrators to eliminate their own slots, it's not easy for a university to contract. So after the baby boomers had passed through—like a tasty lump sliding the length of a boa constrictor—the colleges turned to promotional strategies —to advertising—to fill the empty chairs. Suddenly college, except for the few highly selective establishments, became a buyers' market. What students and their parents wanted had to be taken potently into account. That often meant creating more comfortable, less challenging environments, places where almost no one failed, everything was enjoyable, and everyone was nice.

Just as universities must compete with one another for students, so must individual departments. At a time of rank economic anxiety (and what time is not in America?), the English department and the history department have to contend for students against the more success-ensuring branches, such as the science departments and the commerce school. In 1968, more than 21 percent of all the bachelor's degrees conferred in America were humanities degrees; by 1993 that total had fallen to about 13 percent, and it continues to sink. The humanities now must struggle to attract students, many of whose parents devoutly wish that they would go elsewhere.

One of the ways we've tried to be attractive is by loosening up. We grade much more genially than our colleagues in the sciences. In English and history, we don't give many D's, or C's, either. (The rigors of Chem 101 may create almost as many humanities majors per year as the splendors of Shakespeare.) A professor at Stanford explained that grades were getting better because the students were getting smarter every year. Anything, I suppose, is possible.

Along with easing up on grades, many humanities departments have relaxed major requirements. There are some good reasons for introducing more choice into the curricula and requiring fewer standard courses. But the move jibes with a tendency to serve the students instead of challenging them. Students can float in and out of classes during the first two weeks of the term without making any commitment. The common name for this span—shopping period—attests to the mentality that's in play.

One result of the university's widening elective leeway is to give students more power over teachers. Those who don't like you can simply avoid you. If the students dislike you en masse, you can be left with an empty classroom. I've seen other professors, especially older ones, often those with the most to teach, suffer real grief at not having enough students sign up for their courses: their grading was too tough; they demanded too much; their beliefs were too far out of line with the existing dispensation. It takes only a few such incidents to draw other professors into line.

Before students arrive, universities ply them with luscious ads, guaranteeing them a cross between summer camp and lotusland. When they get to campus, flattery, entertainment, and preprofessional training are theirs, if that's what they want. The world we present them is not a world elsewhere, an ivory tower world, but one that's fully continuous with the American entertainment and consumer culture they've been living in. They hardly know they've left home. Is it a surprise, then, that this generation of students—steeped in consumer culture before they go off to school; treated as potent customers by the university well before they arrive, then pandered to from day one—are inclined to see the books they read as a string of entertainments to be enjoyed without effort or languidly cast aside?

So I had my answer. The university had merged almost seamlessly with the consumer culture that exists beyond its gates. Universities were running like businesses, and very effective businesses at that. Now I knew why my students were greeting great works of mind and heart as consumer goods. They came looking for what they'd had in the past, Total Entertainment All the Time, and the university at large did all it could to maintain the flow. (Though where this allegiance to the Entertainment-Consumer Complex itself came from—that is a much larger question. It would take us into politics and economics, becoming, in time, a treatise in itself.)

But what about me? Now I had to look at my own place in the culture of training and entertainment. Those course evaluations made it clear enough. I was providing diversion. To some students I was offering an intellectualized midday variant of Letterman and Leno. They got good times from my classes, and maybe a few negotiable skills, because that's what I was offering. But what was I going to do about it? I had diagnosed the problem, all right, but as yet I had nothing approaching a plan for action.

I'd like to say that I arrived at something like a breakthrough simply by

delving into my own past. In my life I've had a string of marvelous teachers, and thinking back on them was surely a help. But some minds—mine, at times, I confess—tend to function best in opposition. So it was looking not just to the great and good whom I've known, but to something like an arch-antagonist, that got me thinking in fresh ways about how to teach and why.

The World According to Falwell

I teach at the University of Virginia, and not far from me, down Route 29 in Lynchburg—whence the practice of lynching, some claim, gets its name—is the church of Jerry Falwell. Falwell teaches "the word of God," the literal, unarguable truth as it's 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'd get a book through interlibrary loan from Falwell's Liberty University; sometimes the inside cover contained a warning to the pious suggesting that though this volume might be the property of the Liberty University library, its contents, insofar as they contradict the Bible (which means the Bible according to Falwell) were 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 relent. "There are two kinds of books here," the caliph purportedly said. "There are those that contradict the Koran—they are blasphemous. There are those that corroborate the Koran—they are superfluous." So: "Burn the library." Given the possibilities for fundamentalist literary criticism that the caliph opened up, it's a good thing that Liberty has a library at all.

Thomas Jefferson, the University of Virginia's founder, was a deist, maybe something more scandalous than that, the orthodox of Virginia used to whisper. The architecture of my university's central grounds, all designed by Jefferson, is emphatically secular, 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. Where the statues of those gods stand in the Pantheon, there, in the Rotunda library, were books. Books were Jefferson's deities, invested with powers of transport and transformation equal to anything the ancient gods possessed. As soon as they saw the new university, local divines went apoplectic. Where was the church? Unlike Princeton and

Harvard, the state university didn't have a Christian house of worship at its center. From pulpits all over Virginia, ministers threatened the pagan enclave with ruin from above. In 1829, the Episcopal bishop William Meade predicted the university's ruin, because, as he put it, the "Almighty is angry" about the Rotunda. (It's probably only fair to report that in 1895 the Rotunda did burn down.)

Jefferson—deist (maybe worse), scientist, cosmopolitan—seems to have believed that the best way to deal with religion was to banish it, formally, from the university, and instead 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, we—and I don't mean only at the University of Virginia; I mean humanists in general—have entered into an implied bargain with Falwell and other American promulgators of faith, most of whom have much more to recommend them than the Prophet of Lynchburg. They do the soul-crafting. They administer the spiritual education. They address the hearts of our students, and in some measure of the nation at large. We preside over the minds. We shape intelligences; we train the faculties (and throw in more than a little entertainment on the side).

In other words, we teachers strike an unspoken agreement with religion and its dispensers. They do their work, 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 the substance 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, to invade their inner lives, by asking them uncomfortable questions about ultimate values?

Well, it turned out, me. I decided that I was, in a certain sense, going to take my cue from religion. After all, I got into teaching for the same reason, I suspect, that many people did: because I thought it was a high-stakes affair, a pursuit in which souls are won and lost.

"How do you imagine God?" If you are going to indulge in embarrassing behavior, if you're going to make your students "uncomfortable," why not go all the way? This question has moved to the center of many of 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 with which, according

to Jefferson, according to Falwell and other, more tempered advocates of faith, and according to the great majority of my colleagues in the humanities, it has absolutely nothing to do.

What kind of answers do I get? Often marvelous ones. After the students who are disposed to walk out have, sometimes leaving an editorial sigh hanging in the air, and after there's been a weekend for reflection, answers come forth.

Some of the accounts are on the fluffy side. I've learned 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, deliver them from sickness while others fall by the wayside. There's a whole set of accounts that are on the all-benevolent side—smiling, kindly, but also underramified, insufficiently thought-out. If God is all things, or abides in all things, then what is the source of evil? (By now, it's clear to the students that bad taste is my game; already I'm getting a little by way of indulgence.) A pause, then an answer, sometimes not a bad one. The most memorable exponent of smiling faith was a woman named Catherine, who called her blend of creamy benevolence—what else?—Catherinism.

But I respected Catherine for speaking as she did, for unfolding herself bravely. In general, humanities classes, where questions of ultimate belief should be asked and answered all the time, have nothing to do with those questions. It takes courage to make this first step, and to speak candidly about yourself.

Some of the responses are anything but underelaborated. These tend to come from my orthodoxly religious students, many of whom are well trained, maybe overtrained, in the finer points of doctrine. I get some hardcore believers. But in general it wouldn't be fair 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 and that's all you need to know in life, are interested in delving into major questions. They care about understanding 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 addicted to dogma. There's often more than a little room for doubt. Even if their views are sometimes rock solid, they don't mind seeing them besieged. Because given their interests, they're glad that "this discussion is not about any chance question, but about the way one should live."

Final Narratives

Religion is the right place to start a humanities course, for a number of reasons, even if what we're going on to do is to read the novels of Henry James. One of them is that religion is likely to be a major element in my students' Final Narratives, a term I adapt from Richard Rorty. A Final Narrative (Rorty actually says Final Vocabulary; I modify him slightly) involves the ultimate set of terms that we use to confer value on experience. It's where our principles are manifest. When someone talks feelingly about the Ten Commandments, or the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, or the innate goodness of human beings, or about all human history being the history of class conflict, then, in all likelihood, she has revealed something close to the core of her being. She's touched on her ultimate terms of commitment, the point beyond which argument and analysis are unlikely to go, at least very quickly. 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 for 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."

Rorty's word "final" is ironic, or potentially so. His sense is that a "final" language ought to be anything but final. He believes that we ought to be constantly challenging, testing, refining, and if need be overthrowing our ultimate terms and stories, replacing them with others that serve us better. 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." But Rorty believes that most people never stray far from their initial narratives, the values that they're imprinted with while they're growing up. Most of us stay at home.

Rorty calls people capable of adopting new languages "ironists," because they inflect even their most fervent commitments with doubt. It's possible, they know, that what today they hold most intimately true will be replaced tomorrow by other, better ways of seeing and saying things. They comprehend what Rorty likes to call the contingency of their own current state.

Appreciating this contingency is very close to appreciating one's own mortality. That is, Rorty's ironists are people who know that they exist in time because it is time and the changes it brings that can make their

former terminologies and their former selves obsolete. Terms that serve your purposes one day will not necessarily do so the next. The ironists' willingness to change narratives, expand their circles of self, is something of a brave act, in part because all awareness of existence in time is awareness of death. To follow the ironists' path is to admit to mortality.

In trying to make contact with my students' Final Narratives, I ask about more than religion. I ask about how they imagine the good life. I ask, sometimes, how they picture their lives in ten years if all turns out for the best. I want to know what they hope to achieve in politics, in their professions, in family life, in love. Occasionally, I ask how they conceive of Utopia, the best of all possible worlds, or of Dystopia, the worst. But usually, for me, the matter of religion is present, a central part of the question.

There is nothing new about beginning a humanistic inquiry in this way. At the start of *The Republic*, Socrates asks his friends what they think justice is. And for Socrates, justice is the public and private state conducive to the good life. The just state and the just soul are mirror images of each other, comparably balanced. Socrates is quickly answered. Thrasymachus, aggressively, sometimes boorishly, insists that justice is the interest of the stronger. Socrates isn't put off by Thrasymachus, not at all. For Socrates recognizes that getting his students to reveal themselves as they are, or appear to themselves to be, is the first step in giving them the chance to change.

Posing the question of religion and the good life allows students to become articulate about who and what they are. They often react not with embarrassment or anxiety, but with surprise and pleasure, as if no one has ever thought to ask them such a question and they've never posed it to themselves.

But beginning here, with religion, also implies a value judgment on my part—the judgment that the most consequential questions for an individual life (even if one is, as I am, a longtime agnostic) are related to questions of faith. I also believe, for reasons I will get to later, that at this historical juncture, the matter of belief is crucial to our common future.

Most professors of the humanities have little interest in religion as a field of live options. Most of us have had our crises of faith early, if we've had them at all, and have adopted, almost as second nature, a secular vision of life. Others keep their religious commitments separate from their pedagogy, and have for so long that they're hardly aware of it. But what is old to the teacher is new to the student. This question of belief matters greatly to the young, or at least it does in my experience. Asking it can

break through the ideologies of training and entertaining. Beneath that veneer of cool, students are full of potent questions; they want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do. Matters of faith and worldliness are of great import to our students and by turning away from them, by continuing our treaty with the dispensers of faith where we tutor the mind and they take the heart and spirit, we do our students injustice.

We secular professors often forget that America is a religion-drenched nation. Ninety percent of us believe that God knows and loves us personally, as individuals. More than the citizens of any other postindustrial nation, we Americans attend church—and synagogue, and mosque. We affirm faith. We elect devout, or ostensibly devout, believers to the White House; recent presidents have been born-again Christians. Probably one cannot be elected president of the United States—cannot be our Representative Man—without professing strong religious faith. The struggle over whether America's future will be sacred or secular, or a mix of the two, is critical to our common future.

Some may well disagree with me about the centrality of religious matters, matters of ultimate belief, in shaping a true literary education. I teach in the South, one of the more religiously engaged parts of the nation, after all. Fine. But I think the point stands nonetheless. Get to your students' Final Narratives, and your own; seek out the defining beliefs. Uncover central convictions about politics, love, money, the good life. It's there that, as Socrates knew, real thinking starts.

Circles

Rorty is a pragmatic philosopher, and like his pragmatic forebears Dewey and James, his preeminent task is to translate the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson into the present. Behind Rorty's reflections on Final Vocabularies, there lies one of the most profound passages that Emerson wrote. The passage is from the essay "Circles," and it stands at the core of the kind of literary education that I endorse.

In it Emerson brings forward a marvelous image for the way growth takes place in human beings, and perhaps, too, in society. The image he summons is that of the circle, the circle understood as an image of both expansion *and* confinement. "The life of man," he writes, "is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end."

So far Emerson has made the process of human expansion seem almost automatic, as though it were a matter of natural evolutionary force. But, as

is his habit, Emerson goes on to revise himself, expand himself through refinement. “The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance,—as, for instance, an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,—to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life.”

Emerson’s insight is dialectical. Whatever gains we make in our knowledge of the self and the world, however liberating and energizing our advances may be, they will eventually become standardized and dull. What once was the key to life will become deadening ritual, common practice, a tired and tiresome Final Narrative. The critic Kenneth Burke is thinking of something similar when he talks about “the bureaucratizing of the imaginative”; Robert Frost touches on the point when he observes that a truth ceases to be entirely true when it’s uttered even for the second time.

Emerson understands education as a process of enlargement, in which we move from the center of our being, off into progressively more expansive ways of life. We can see this sort of thing happening on the largest scale when the author of *Julius Caesar* becomes capable of creating the vast work that is *Hamlet*. Yet *Hamlet* is an outgrowth of *Caesar*; the character of Brutus expands—another circle on the great deep, if you like—into the revealing mystery that is Hamlet. But such rippling outward happens every day, too, as when a child leaves her family and goes out into the painful, promising world of school. Then the child’s circle of knowing has to expand to meet the new circumstances, or she’ll suffer for it.

The aim of a literary education is, in Emerson’s terms, the expansion of circles. One’s current circle will eventually “solidify and hem in the life.” “But,” Emerson immediately continues, “if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over the boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to intense and innumerable expansions.”

This passage, eloquent as it is, breeds many questions. How shall we understand the substance of these expanding rings? What is their human content? How does one know that this or that new circle is conducive to better things than the old? Where does the impetus for enlargement come from? Is it always time to move outward, or is there a time in life when it

makes sense to fall back, or to stand pat? What role do books have in this process? And what part does a teacher play? How does the student put herself in the way of the kind of expansion that Emerson describes? How does she know that it's coming to pass? Is it painful, pleasurable, both? Are such changes always for the better? Might they not also be changes for the worse?

For the purposes of literary education, I want to see these Emersonian circles as being composed of words. But the circles will also be alive with feeling. They will be rife with the emotions—the attractions and powers and taboos—that infuse the words that mean the most to us. Words like "mother" and "father" and "God" and "love" and "America" are not just blank counters in a game designed to fill up a stray hour. They are words with a history, personal and collective, words differently valued, differently felt, by each of us. We define them in ways partially our own, based on our experiences. And of course, the words also define us. So we might think of Emerson's circles as Rorty's Final Narratives. And we might think of the question about religion as a way to tap into one's ultimate terms, to make contact with one's outer-lying circles, and in so doing to initiate the process of growth.

It's time, no doubt, for a provisional thesis statement: the function of a liberal arts education is to use major works of art and intellect to influence one's Final Narrative, one's outermost circle of commitments. A liberal education uses books to rejuvenate, reaffirm, replenish, revise, overwhelm, replace, in some cases (alas) even help begin to generate the web of words that we're defined by. But this narrative isn't a thing of *mere* words. The narrative brings with it commitments and hopes. 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 a new way to live.

Grateful as I am for Rorty's translation and Emerson's luminous passage, there is one place where I must part company with them both (and with Allan Bloom as well). For my hopes, I think, are larger than theirs. I believe that almost anyone who has the opportunity to enjoy a liberal education—and such educations are not only to be had in schools; the world is full of farmers, tradesmen and tradeswomen, mechanics, lawyers, and, up to some crucial moment, layabouts, who've used books to turn their lives around—almost anyone is likely to be able to cultivate the power to look skeptically at his own life and values and consider adopting new ones. This ability—to expand one's orbits—is central to the health of democracy. The most inspired and inspiring Americans have

always done so: others can and will join them. But the process is not an easy one. Allan Bloom is quite right: liberal education does put everything at risk and requires students who are willing to risk everything. Otherwise it can only touch what is uncommitted in the essentially committed student.

But Bloom, much, much more than Emerson and Rorty, believes that such risk and such change are only for the very few. Bloom sees Socrates' path as exclusively for an elite. It is not so.

For Ignorance

"What that young man lacks is inexperience": so said the maestro of the young prodigy. Part of what I hope to do by asking students to brood publicly about God and ultimate commitments is to let them recapture their inexperience. They need a chance to own what may be the most precious knowledge one can have at the start of an education, knowledge of one's own ignorance.

Plato and Aristotle both say that philosophy begins in wonder. But Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps closer to the point, thought that people came to philosophy, to serious thinking about their lives, out of confusion. The prelude to philosophy was a simple admission: "I have lost my way." The same can be true for serious literary study. At its best, it often begins with a sense of dislocation; it begins with a sense that one has lost one's way.

The best beginning reader is often the one with the wherewithal to admit that, living in the midst of what appears to be a confident, energetic culture, he among all the rest is lost. This is a particularly difficult thing to do. For our culture at large prizes knowingness. On television, in movies, in politics, at school, in the press, the student encounters authoritative figures, speaking in self-assured, worldly tones. Their knowingness is intimidating. They seem to be in full command of themselves. They appear to have answered all the questions that matter in life and now to be left musing on the finer points. They demonstrate their preternatural poise by withholding their esteem. Not to admire anything, Horace said, is the only way to feel consistently good about yourself. Most of the cultural authorities now in place, in art, in the media, and in academia, are figures who programmatically hoard their esteem and apparently feel quite good about themselves in the process.

Should one believe in God? What is truth? How does one lead a good life? All these questions the cultural authorities appear to have resolved.

Only the smaller matters remain.

But the true student has often not settled these matters at all. Often she has not even come up with provisional answers that satisfy her. And finally, after years of observation and thought, she may be willing to wager that the so-called authorities probably haven't resolved them either. They're performing a charade, dispensing an unearned and ultimately feeble comfort. The true student demands more. And to find it, she is willing, against the backdrop of all this knowingness, to take a brave step. She is willing to affirm her own ignorance.

Beneath acculturation to cool, beneath the commitment to training and skills, there often exists this sense of confusion. And where it is, the student should be able to affirm it, and the teacher to endorse the affirmation.

"You must become an ignorant man again," says Wallace Stevens to his ephebe, or beginning poet. The same holds true for the beginning student of literature, and often for the teacher as well. The student must be willing to become as articulate as possible about what he has believed—or what he has been asked to believe—up until this point. He must be willing to tell himself who he is and has been, and, possibly, why that will no longer quite do. This exercise in self-reflection, deriving often from the sense of displacement, of having lost one's way, can start a literary education. And once a student has touched his ignorance, he has acquired a great resource, for in such ignorance there is the beginning of potential change—of new and confident, if provisional, commitment. As Thoreau puts it, "How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge?"

Again and again, the true student of literature will return to this ignorance, for it's possible that no truth she learns in the humanities will be permanently true. At the very least, everything acquired by immersion in literature will have to be tested and retested along the way. It's for this reason that the teacher often enters a course with a sense of possibility akin to the students'.

One of the most important jobs a teacher has is to allow students to make contact with their ignorance. We need to provide a scene where not-knowing is, at least at the outset, valued more than full, worldly confidence. Thoreau heading to Walden Pond almost empty-handed, or Emily Dickinson going up to her room in Amherst to engage in a solitary dialogue with God, are grand versions of the kind of open and daring endeavor that we can all engage in for ourselves. Emerson says that power abides in transition, in "the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim."

We're most alive when we're moving from one set of engagements to the next. We're in motion then, but not fully sure where we're going, feeling both our present ignorance and the prospect of new, vitalizing knowledge.

Down the Hall

While I'm asking my questions about God and what makes a good life, and affirming, when need be, a certain sort of ignorance, what's going on in the classrooms of my colleagues down the hall, and for that matter, in humanities classrooms across the country? A number of things, all well worth remarking upon. There is training, there is entertaining, no doubt. But many professors go at least some distance in resisting the ethos of the corporate university and of American culture overall. What they do can pass well beyond the university's ad brochures, where the students bask on the grass in all-approving sunlight, or hover around a piece of machinery that's high-tech, high-priced, and virtually unidentifiable.

Many professors of humanities—professors of literature and history and philosophy and religious studies—have something of consequence in common. Centrally, they attempt to teach one thing, and often do so with real success. That one thing is reading. They cultivate attentiveness to written words, careful consideration, thoughtful balancing, coaxing forth of disparate meanings, responsiveness to the complexities of sense. They try to help students become more like what Henry James said every writer ought to be, someone on whom nothing is lost. Attentiveness to words, to literary patterns and their meaning-making power: that remains a frequent objective of liberal arts education.

It was the New Critics who brought the phrase "close reading" to the fore in American education. Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt, and a number of other influential scholars pioneered an approach to reading that continues on, in various forms, into the present. The well-wrought students of Brooks and Warren were ever on the lookout for irony, tension, ambiguity, and paradox. To find these things, they had to scrutinize the page in front of them with exacting care. All to the good.

But what happens in most New Critical readings is that the master terms themselves—call them, if you like, elements in the New Critics' Final Narrative—take precedence over the actual poem. So rather than measuring the particular vision of John Donne, with all his manifold religious commitments and resistances, his sexual complexities, his personal kinks and quirks, the New Critic reworks Donne into a collection

of anointed terms. Donne's "maturity"—to put matters in a compressed way—becomes a function of his capacity to cultivate paradox and irony.

Some writers are more responsive to New Critical values than others, and surely Donne is one of them. His work *is* replete with irony and ambiguity. Yet with the imposition of the rhetorical terms—terms that have no significant place in Donne's own Final Narrative—the poet becomes a function of New Critical values rather than a promulgator of his own.

The New Critical student, by encountering the right poems in the right way, undergoes a shaping, a form of what the Greeks called *paideia*. For the qualities that he learns to value in poems can also be cultivated in persons. So the ideal student (and the ideal professor) of New Criticism is drawn to the ability to maintain an ironic distance on life, the capacity to live with ambiguities, the power to achieve an inner tension than never breaks. The ideal New Critical student, like the ideal New Critical poem, is prone to be sophisticated, stoical, calm, intent, conventionally masculine, and rather worldly. What such a student is not likely to be is emotional, mercurial, rhapsodic, or inspired. The New Critical ethos—what we might call, after Keats, an ethos of negative capability, the capacity to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason"—surely has its value. But it is one ethos among many. To reduce literature to that one ethos, when it contains a nearly infinite number, robs great writing of its diversity, and life of its richness.

The Harvard University scholar Walter Jackson Bate purportedly used a Marx Brothers style routine to capture what he thought of as New Critical close reading. "Close reading," he'd mutter, and push the book up near his nose. "Closer reading": with a laugh, 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. Bate's routine suggests that with a certain kind of exclusive attention to the page, life disappears. The connection between word and world goes dark (or becomes somewhat deviously implicit). The reader is left adrift, uncompassed, in a sea of sentences.

Foucault, Industrial Strength

There was this much to be said for the New Critics: they were prone to specialize in reading and teaching works with which they were spiritually aligned. Donne and the New Critics genuinely do have something in

common, though they also part company at important points. The violence of applying the anointed terms to Donne or Marvell or Keats's odes, or Shakespeare's sonnets is real, though hardly overwhelming. But down the hall in the humanities building now—and on the shelves of the library devoted to recent literary and cultural study—one finds work that is best described as out-and-out rewriting of the authors at hand. In fact, we might call these efforts not so much criticism as transformation.

Terry Eagleton, a Marxist critic drawing on the work of Pierre Macherey, describes a good deal of current criticism as quite simply an exercise in rewriting. One approaches the work at hand, and recasts it in the terms of Foucault, or Marx, or feminism, or Derrida, or Queer Theory, or what have you.

So a current reading of, say, Dickens's *Bleak House* is not so much an interpretation as it a reworking and a revision of the novel. Dickens is depicted as testifying, albeit unwittingly, to Foucault's major truths. In *Bleak House*, we are supposed to find social discipline rampant, constant surveillance, the hegemony of the police, a carceral society. Whatever elements of the novel do not cohere with this vision are discredited, or pushed to the margin of the discussion. (In a Foucaultian reading of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Stephen Greenblatt, often a fine critic, manages to leave Falstaff virtually unmentioned.) Thus the critic rewrites Dickens in the terms of Foucault. One effectively reads not a text by Dickens, but one by another author. Dickens's truth is replaced by the truth according to Michel Foucault—or Fredric Jameson or Hélène Cixous—and there the process generally ends.

It may be that the truths unfolded by Foucault and the rest are of consummate value. It may be that those authors are indispensable guides to life, or at least to the lives of some. If so, all to the good.

If so, they, the critics, ought to be the objects of study in themselves. Let us look at Foucault, for instance, and see how one might lead a life under his guidance. What would you do? What would you do, in particular, as a denizen of an institution that produces precisely the kind of discipline that Foucault so detests? For a university, in Foucaultian thinking, is a production center, a knowledge-producing matrix which creates discourses that aid in normalizing people and thus in making them more susceptible to control. In fact, if you are a university citizen, you live in the belly of the beast. How, given what you've learned from Foucault, will you work your way out?

But these questions are virtually never asked. What usually happens is that professors apply the terminology to the work at hand, to Dickens or

Bloomsbury USA
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Why Read? first published 2004
Why Teach? first published 2013
Why Write? first published 2016
This collection published 2018

ISBN: TPB: 978-1-63286-308-9
ePub: 978-1-63286-309-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com. Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

Bloomsbury books may be purchased for business or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at specialmarkets@macmillan.com.