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# FORUM

## The Education of the Soul: The Forsaken Ideal of Literary Study

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MICHAEL RICHARD BONIN  
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

When I was starting graduate school, sixteen years ago, I took a seminar on the American Transcendentalists. We spent three class sessions discussing *Walden*, along usual graduate-seminar lines: Thoreau's Kantian epistemology; the details of mercantile culture in mid-nineteenth-century New England; the cancellation of meaning by Thoreau's unstable irony. As the class prepared to move on to Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, I tried to prolong the *Walden* discussion with a last question. I was not merely dissatisfied with our treatment of the book; I was having an academic crisis of faith.

*Walden* was the first book I had read as an undergraduate English major, six years earlier, and for me that reading had had the force of revelation. Thoreau's call to live life deliberately, expressed on every page in physically thrilling lines, converted me. Even as I felt it happening, Thoreau described my experience:

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a new book. (Thoreau 73)

Although I dated a new era in my life from *Walden* I did not straightaway build a cabin and live in it. (I did get rid of my stereo — for any college student, an act of nearly Carthusian renunciation.) *Walden's* effect on me was internal, not material. I discovered my love for wise and stirring voices, authors who could cast spells and teach truths.

So the question I asked that day in the graduate seminar was "Is he right?" I meant, "Have Thoreau's words changed your mind? Your life? Have these lines seized your spirit as they seized mine?" No such question had been raised in the

three days of discussion, yet I asked it apologetically, of course, for I was (in the first place) breaking the unspoken agreement palpable in every classroom when a topic is “done” and the next syllabus item can now be covered. Worse yet, I knew how naïve I sounded. I had raised what Falstaff calls “a question not to be asked.” It was met with awkward silence; the professor and the other students were embarrassed for me, and actually averted their eyes. As a graduate student I was supposed to know that *Walden* was not a (perhaps life-changing) book, but a *text*, a verbal or cultural artifact to be categorized, or a *field* for the play of literary theory. We studied literature professionally; we did not learn from it. How unsophisticated and sophomoric literally — since I’d first read *Walden* as a sophomore) of me to ask the class members about a book’s effect on their souls. Did I really intend to have the class examine, defend, and even alter their way of life in light of Thoreau’s personal example and compelling declarations?

I did, despite my diffidence in asking. As far as I could tell, Thoreau had written his book to prompt self-inquisition in his audience. *Walden* is a prolonged exhortation: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (1). It seemed to me intellectually — no, *humanly* — dishonest not to encounter a book, at least once during its classroom treatment, on its own stated terms. If we read and discussed works only from the outside (maintaining “critical distance”), as if we were not being addressed by the author, if only undergrads or “general” readers were simple enough to have their minds or souls enchanted and transformed by a book, then graduate and professorial literary study was reduced to an exercise in competitive cleverness. So it looked to me then, as I sat bemused in a classroom at UCLA, and so it looks to me now. Glancing through any graduate catalog or Modern Language Association conference program sends me right back to *Walden*, in search of reassurance and bracing good sense. First, an excerpt from a course description in a recent graduate catalog:

There will be a seminar in the “Whitman Traditions of American Poetry,” which is to say, the Emerson Traditions, which is to say, no tradition at all.... The emphasis is on poetics, which, after all, is all that one can study, and thus on “theory” (recall that Northrup Frye said we never study literature but only ways of studying literature).

And so it continues, smugly refining itself out of existence. Now, by way of commentary upon such *impersonal* reading, from *Walden*:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love

wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically but practically. The success of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier-like success, not kingly, not manly. (9)

Thoreau is commenting upon his own times, but his observations remain uncannily applicable which is why *Walden* is a classic. That day in the seminar I longed for a “practical” rather than a “theoretical” reading of *Walden*, but I never got an answer to my awkward question, “Is he right? Has he changed you?” After a few moments the professor joked that with the glut of Ph.D.s on the market all of us aspiring academics would soon be living lives of involuntary Thoreauvian poverty. Then we turned to Hawthorne.

I feel sheepish still, for pressing my question now. I realize my presumptions sound, if anything, more naïve nowadays. I believe that literature gives meaning by magic, even though our discipline these days seems not to believe in meaning, magic, or literature at all. Furthermore, I believe that since great literature is often didactic, written to impart moral or spiritual lessons, we must read it for the sake of our *lives*, instead of our *vitae* or our theory. This most ancient and enduring ideal largely accounted for literature’s traditional place in a liberal arts or humanistic education — a place, we once believed, literature deserved.

Our present-day professional detachment from literature’s personal, moral claim upon the reader raises questions which I would like to urge upon our attention, to realize their seriousness. Certainly it is better to question ourselves and our profession than to leave the interrogation entirely to our critics. William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and Dinesh D’Souza, for instance, have already persuaded many people that English departments are corrupting students, not enlightening them. We ought to examine our own lives as teachers and scholars.

Should we read and teach literature as if it were never spiritually, personally applicable? At least in my own specialty, Renaissance literature, to do so means willfully ignoring the intent or motive of many masterpieces. Spenser, for example, in a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh “expounding his whole intention” in *The Fairie Queene*, says “the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (Spenser 15). Although Spenser is the most enameled and decorative of Renaissance poets, he is not writing art for art’s sake, but for the sake of moral illustration and application. If after reading *The Fairie Queene* we leave without more *gnosis* concerning noble, temperate, faithful living, and without some impulse towards *praxis* of those virtues, Spenser’s poem has failed on its own stated terms, or we have failed as readers. If that principle of reading sounds harshly reductive and absolute, it reveals our culture’s aban-

donment of a central tenet of Biblical, Classical, Medieval, Renaissance and Neo-Classical literature. The first great work of English literary theory, Sir Philip Sidney's "The Defense of Poesy" (1595), is grounded upon the conviction that the poet's true role is as teacher of virtue and knowledge:

It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet, no more than a long gown maketh an advocate, who though he pleaded in armor would be an advocate and no soldier. But it is that feigning notable images of virtue, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by. (Sidney 21)

We no longer think of poets this way, but we must think of them this way if we are going to read Spenser, Dante, or Milton well.

Sidney's assertion of literature's humanistic didactic purpose drew upon a commonplace of classical thought. In Horace's "Ars Poetica," we are told poetry should be "sweet and useful" ("*utile dulci*"), "charming the reader and warning him equally well" (Horace 478). We can patronize this idea by saying Horace and Sidney would have poets merely sugarcoat the bitter pill of moral or ethical instruction. [Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* in fact says that he has "tried to administer [doctrine] to you in the dulcet strains of poesy, coated with the sweet honey of the muses" (Lucretius 68).] But we cannot patronize those works written according to the "delightfully didactic" precept — not only Horace's or Lucretius' poetry, but *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Walden*. These great works, and so many others, demand of the true reader an openness to *metanoia*: the possibility of spiritual conversion accomplished by the means of verbal beauty. "The end of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity," says Dante of his *Divine Comedy* in his letter to Can Grande della Scala.

St. Augustine, in the fifth century, wrote that literature should foster active love in our souls, and hence in our lives. Tolstoy thought the same way a millennium and a half later. Despite these daunting proponents of literature's moral seriousness, we no longer seem to believe in literature's personal spiritual power (although the best new feminist and multicultural criticism seems to be insisting, once more, upon the personal and moral ramifications of literature — a welcome trend). Literature teachers now pride themselves for not "imposing their own values" upon students, but those students are assigned to read great authors who were unable to conceive of education or literature as an amoral endeavor. Sidney intended literature to form part of an education whose end is spiritual growth:

This purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it

come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of. (22)

But to believe in the soul, as Sidney did, or to believe that poetry above all is the informing language of the soul, is to exile yourself from the pages of *PMLA*, or from the halls of any fashionable English department.

So spiritual a literary and educational ideal no longer informs our culture, perhaps because we have lost faith in the transcendent. By “transcendent” I mean two related things. Relativism — our culture’s prevailing attitude — has influenced the academy to argue that no value can be absolute and no truth universal. Instead the meaning and morality a literary work asserts are seen as entirely circumstantial or contingent: merely reflective of the era, race, gender, or class which produced it. The work can only testify to its entirely determining social and political conditions; the author’s art or wisdom cannot transcend those forces to apprehend and convey truths which all people at all times must come to know. This relativism, however, results from a more fundamental collapse of faith — faith in the Transcendent. Capitalizing the word allows it to stand for Plato’s Ideas, Virgil’s gods, Dante’s Holy Trinity, Emerson’s Oversoul, in short for an ultimate unearthly source of existence and meaning. Literary study now is all but officially secular and materialistic. Poets throughout the ages have invoked inspiration from a Transcendent power, but the academy now treats this conviction only as a literary convention or an obsolete belief. No conference-hopping literary theorist would dream of suggesting in all seriousness that a classic poem’s power and truth derive from the workings of the divine, or would assert, as Blake did, that poetry, music and painting are “three powers in man of conversing with Paradise” (Blake 609). But when we reject the existence of an ultimate Transcendental ground of meaning — be it pagan, Christian, pantheist or otherwise — we bar ourselves from real, transformative participation with much great literature; we bar ourselves from life itself, as humanity down the ages has conceived and lived it.

In our studies, libraries, and classrooms we readers and teachers need to revive ourselves to the imperative of beauty and spirit in great literature. We should not just “work on” Milton — we should let Milton work on us. This imperative may be overtly didactic, as it is in the Christian poem *The Divine Comedy* or *The Fairie Queene*. But great literature, finally, is moral whenever through its mediation and magic we commune with the sublime, divine and ineffable. *Walden* did not only provide me with well-phrased wisdom; its verbal sorcery elevated my soul, as true education should. Style became a vehicle for spiritual ascent. “Morality,” though an accurate term, doesn’t do justice to the effects of inspiration upon us, inspira-

tion which poets rightly invoke from heaven. When the divine is at work in an immortal poem, and we are reading well, our soul responds through the art to its true though perhaps incomprehensible source, and becomes, at least partially and temporarily, transcendent. Great art magically intimates the sublime to us, and is in this sense always religious: Michelangelo's sculpture of Lorenzo de Medici, or a poem by Blake. ("What the hammer? what the chain? / In what furnace was thy brain?" with its fearsome suggestiveness always evokes in my soul a most disturbing awareness of the implacable Almighty. We all have our own mystical quotations which ignite our souls; *carmina*, "songs" in Latin, is also the source of our word "charm," as in an incantation.) Great art, if we are open to it, will always have the effect upon us described in the last line of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Such is the incandescent power of the sculpture, says Rilke, that, once viewed, it amounts to a command: "Du must dein Leben ändern." "You must change your life." The imperative which Apollo, god of art, issues I stated as a question that day in my graduate seminar: "Did this book change your life?" I lacked the conviction then to follow up my question as I should have: "Has this work somehow acquainted you with your soul, your deepest self, or the transcendent? How has it done this? Will you live differently, or at least see life differently, in consequence?"

Despite my irresolute conviction then, I see now that my second classroom encounter with *Walden* had its salutary moral and instructional effect upon me, just as the first had. It did change my life — again — for now I try always to ask my students, and myself, the questions which most matter. The books were written to prompt such questions. We may not be able to answer them, but the trying is all-important. If we do not ask, we fail these classics, we fail our students, we fail to be real teachers. Current academic fashion, entirely earthbound, professionalized and merely intellectual, would have us ask other questions, questions of theory, "marginalization" and politics — all of which are legitimate, valid, but secondary questions. In the meantime, Thoreau recalls me to our timeless vocation:

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the custom of the day esteems. (68) ✽

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