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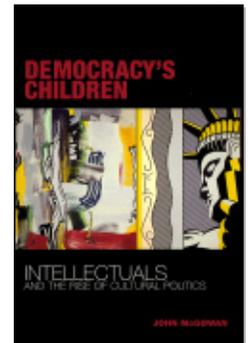
Democracy's Children

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CHAPTER 2

Teaching Literature: Where, How, and Why?

Teaching literature is fraught with so many perplexities that I have come to feel like Buridan's ass as I walk from my office to the classroom. I am of so many minds about what I am doing and about what possible impact it might have on students that I am not sure I am in fact doing anything at all. Surely sending this array of mixed signals to my students must result in everything canceling out, just noise. On the one hand, on the other nine fingers

Whenever I hear or read others on what they accomplish in the classroom, I am filled with envy and overcome with a sense of unreality. The second response, my incredulity, is no doubt a defense against the first, my sense of inadequacy. Still, no matter where on the political spectrum the speaker/writer locates himself, a simple-minded model of education's impact on students prevails. The conservative who wants to transmit traditional values, the liberal who wants to inculcate habits of disinterested inquiry into truth, and the radical who would foster oppositional views all assume that the classroom is distanced enough from everyday life for a different set of values and procedures to prevail for fifty minutes three times a week—and for those values to then “stick” when students leave the room. It makes me wonder if any of these supposed teachers have ever read a set of student papers. All the commentators display a touchingly naive sense that what gets overtly taught in a classroom is what students learn. Only a much more dialectical account of the university's relation to other cultural spheres, to the economic im-

peratives of finding a job, and to the political allocation of resources could hope to do justice to the complexities of the social field within which the teacher works.¹

So the first question is where. Where in our culture is the university located? Where within the university is the teaching of literature located? Amid what others—and in what relation to them—does the university make its pitch, its effort to shape the minds and hearts of the students who pass, so fleetingly, through its classrooms? No general answer to the questions can be completely satisfactory, because the “university” is not a singular entity. Not only is it divided among disciplines guided by very different canons of inquiry and knowledge, but those disciplines themselves are also the site of various conflicts over those canons. Furthermore, not all universities are created equal. Ivy League schools occupy a markedly different social niche from open admission, commuter-student state schools and community colleges. The gap between having a college degree and not having one is no wider than the gap between a degree from Oklahoma Panhandle University and Princeton. These gaps can be measured in the market value of the degrees and in the kinds of access (to graduate programs, to various cultural, political, and/or corporate circles) the degrees can provide. “Where” a university is can partly be specified by seeing where its students can go next after attending it. What social and cultural terrain is adjacent to this or that university?

We should also ask to what social and cultural arenas do university faculty and other functionaries have access? Some academics—although far less than a majority—are asked to bring their expertise to bear on issues confronting the government or industry. Scientific research is regularly underwritten by funds which come from outside the university. A “partnership” (the word usually used) between the university and other segments of society is formed, a division of labor in which the university supplies a certain product to an external consumer. To a lesser extent, social scientists are also involved in providing direct services to government agencies and private organizations which come asking (and paying) for advice. And, increasingly, corporations contract with the university for particular services, especially research in the health sciences. Locating the

1. Watkins (1989) and Guillory (1993) offer two important attempts to think about the work done by American university professors, especially teachers of English, in such nuanced ways. My general point derives from my reading of Bourdieu's (1993) work on the “social field” within which academic and artistic work takes place.

university involves, then, considering its affiliations, the movement of people, resources, and information into and out of this or that particular university.²

English departments are oddly situated. Like most of the humanities, English finds its product of little interest to anyone outside the university. English professors do not have clients who underwrite their research or pay them consultant fees. Beyond a few private foundations and the continually endangered NEH, both support for and consumption of the work done in English departments comes entirely from within universities. Although humanities professors often think that their work is of crucial moment to other segments of society, those other segments do not evidence a reciprocal conviction and, for the most part, pay scant attention to that work. Degrees in the humanities (classics, English, philosophy, history, and the foreign languages) have no market value apart from the school system itself, although they are not an absolute detriment to securing certain jobs or admission to certain professional schools. The humanities are, by and large, sealed within education itself, with very few avenues of access to other segments of society.

In a United States where the economic security of the middle class has been severely undermined over the past thirty years, the place of the humanities has also eroded. Those portions of the curriculum that teach skills primarily relevant to work within the university have steadily yielded ground to fields of study that provide (or purport to provide) skills more readily marketable outside the university. Bachelor degrees conferred in English topped out at 64,439 in 1970–71, hit a low (32,254) just ten years later (1980–81), started climbing again in the mid-eighties, and stood at 50,698 in 1995–6. This last figure, despite the reversal of the downward trend, still represents a fifteen percent decline in absolute numbers. The proportional decline is even greater, since 839,730 undergraduate degrees in all were conferred in 1970–71, compared to 1,164,792 in 1995–96 (Digest 266). Over roughly the same time period, BAs in business and management grew from 105,580 in 1969–70 to 227,102 in 1995–96.³

2. My use of the word "affiliation" follows that of Said (1983, 16–25). Generally, Said's work, along with that of Robbins (1993) and Gouldner (1979), has greatly influenced the thoughts I present here.

3. Statistics on degrees come from *Digest of Education Statistics* (1998, 292–93). The most MAs in English were awarded in 1970–71 (10,689), the most PhDs in 1975–76 (1,672). Master's degrees in English hit a low in 1983–84 (5,010) and had climbed back to 7,893 in 1995–96. PhDs in English hit a low (961) in 1986–87, but had returned to almost historic highs by 1995–96, when 1,535 PhDs were awarded.

English departments are unique among the humanities, however, in that their position within the general university curriculum has not suffered greatly over this same time period. While the trend has been to remove required courses in the humanities (history and foreign languages have suffered most in this regard), most universities still require two years of English of all students. In other words, English, while sharing in the general decline of the humanities as attractive majors for students, has managed to retain its time-honored status as the most required academic subject. For multiple and none-too-obvious reasons worth pondering, English remains the subject our culture deems most necessary for students from the first grade to the sophomore year of college to study.

I'll consider some of these possible reasons when I get to "why." Still on "where," I want to worry a bit about the impact of requirements on the teaching of literature. (As I hope is obvious by now, this essay is about teaching literature to undergraduates and, a bit, to high school students. The dynamics and difficulties of graduate education in literature are very different.) For starters, the decline in numbers of majors (matched by a similar decline in the numbers of graduate degrees awarded) means that more university English teachers spend more of their time teaching required courses to non-majors. This change in the basic working conditions of most English professors—and its relation to the job market for PhDs—is rarely noted. Professors eager to avoid teaching lower level courses have countenanced the hiring of part-timers and the maintenance of large graduate programs (even when there are no jobs for the students). The growth of the creative writing MFA is also linked to the need for cheap labor in freshman and sophomore English. Put most bluntly, by the time most graduate students receive a PhD, they have been taught to despise the work many of them will be actually employed to do. Most English professors (i.e., those who do not teach at the thirty or so schools with the top graduate programs) now teach in conditions fairly similar to those facing any high school English teacher. The fact that English classes are compulsory, that they take place within an authoritative setting, establishes an adversarial relationship between teachers and students which fosters a wide range of policing tactics on the part of the former and resistant practices among the latter. The surveillance and record keeping of teaching—from grading to taking attendance to giving quizzes—are repugnant, but the alternative (students not doing the reading or other assigned work) is equally bad. Embrace either horn of the dilemma and the possibility of conveying to students the love of literature and the conviction of its crucial importance (which made me

become an English teacher in the first place) vanishes. "Trade mars everything it touches," wrote Thoreau, a sentiment often in my mind as I slog through a text I love in order to teach it, dreading what it will become tomorrow in my class of bored and often sullen sophomores. In twenty years of teaching, I haven't even come close to a solution I can endure to this dilemma, especially since my despair is complicated by a respect for my students' resistance to force feeding. Anyone with any gumption should resist this regime. The classroom comes to seem an utterly tainted locale.

If, ignoring the various complications I take up in chapters 5 and 6, we take literature as a form of culture, then the location of literature within the university classroom places it at a severe disadvantage, provided the goal is to win the allegiance of an audience of potential consumers (readers). Literature has so negligible a presence at cultural sites other than schools that the educational system is in the position of always trying to lay another culture alongside of or on top of or in place of (the metaphor one chooses is significant here) the various other cultures to which students already belong. Almost inevitably, students will experience the school culture as forced upon them or, at least, presented to them by authorities (in every sense of that word) whereas the other cultures (street culture, ethnic culture, popular culture, and—to a lesser extent—religious and family culture) will seem freely chosen in many cases, and acquired more simply and painlessly (more "naturally") in all cases. Other forms of culture are assumed in the course of living and are experienced as affirmations/creations of one's identity. School culture is experienced as the attempt of outside forces to mold one's identity, to force identity to take a new course, even to abandon some of its already formed allegiances.

Bruce Springsteen sings, "We learned more in a three-minute record than we ever learned in school," and that rings true to me. So I am always amazed at the hyperbolic claims made about the impact of schools on students and by the over-the-top responses of parents and newspaper columnists to curriculum proposals ranging from sex education to reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I think it more accurate to see such public battles as much more about the conflict between different social forces than about what is actually happening to the kids.⁴ I take it that

4. Gouldner (1979, 43–7) reads these conflicts as triangulated among the "new class" of intellectuals who staff the educational system at all its levels, the state which mandates and funds educational institutions, and other nonintellectual classes who must hand their children over to these institutions. What Gouldner highlights is that schooling is perceived by many parents and students as the intervention of a very different social group, with very

much of the impetus of “cultural studies” comes from a conviction that the most significant formation of values, attitudes, and beliefs in today’s world does not center in someone’s relation to *Oliver Twist* but in their relation to the culture available outside of school in the marketplace. Cultural studies aims to intervene at the sites of cultural production that have the most impact. On a theoretical level, cultural studies asks the kind of question I am asking here: what are the significant differences among various cultural sites as places where identities are formed? My point thus far is that schools—especially in their introduction of students to the cultural form of “literature”—will, under the sign of compulsion, establish a very different relationship between students and literary works than their relationship to most other cultural forms.

But let me not be too hasty to dismiss schools—and serious engagement by students with what goes on there—as irrelevant, even quaint. After all, school culture does become some people’s primary culture. It is exactly that for most teachers. The joy of the profession is to be promulgating something in which one utterly believes, even if the pain is to be promulgating it to nonbelievers under circumstances not exactly well-suited to winning converts. (If these metaphors make us out to be missionaries to the savages, blame the very terms within which we do our work, not me. Salesman metaphors could also work, but are hardly any more appealing.) There is nothing particularly shameful in striving to maintain and secure the continued existence of institutions that allow a cherished cultural activity to continue. The problem, of course, is that school doesn’t really pay its own way, and that its continuance depends on selling to the society at large the notion that doses of literature that it doesn’t really want are nonetheless salubrious. In this way, we true lovers of literature get to have our cultural institution at the not inconsiderable, but still very tolerable, price of peddling our wares to an unappreciative audience. I remember thinking it quite a scam when I realized (as an undergraduate) that someone might pay me to read books and talk about them. Nice work if you can get it. (I entered graduate school just as the market for English PhDs took what has since come to seem its permanent downward plunge.) Twenty years later it still seems a pretty cushy and privileged sinecure.

different values, into the processes of value and identity formation. See Rorty (1995) for a convincing argument that debates about the university and its curriculum are better understood as symptomatic of other social conflicts rather than about the feared ill effects of education.

There is a market for school culture, then, just not a market that makes its way only by selling to those who would voluntarily shell out for its goods. In other words, this a screwy and subsidized market. Where else within capitalism do people pay top dollar for something they don't want? Of course, they want the degree. But many of them don't particularly want to read *Oliver Twist*, yet still pay to have us try to force them to read it, all the time figuring out ways to evade that forcing. (I understand that I am overstating the case here. Much of our students' resistance is passive; they actually also "kind of believe" that reading novels is good for them—although they couldn't articulate why—and they enter our courses with good intentions of doing the assigned work; it's just that there is so much to do, much of it more appealing, and so they get around to doing only some portion of what is required. The percentage of that portion differs according to individual calculations of what can be squared with conscience, of what can be neglected, without drastic consequences to one's grade or self-esteem.) Add to this odd relation between seller (the university) and consumer (the student) the fact that some students (or, more usually, some parents) pay upwards of \$80,00 for the degree, and are subsequently expected to be so grateful for the privilege that they should (and in some cases will) voluntarily continue to send more money to the school for nothing in return every year for the rest of their lives, and it becomes clear that this is no ordinary market. Imagine the movies operating in such a fashion and the canyon between school culture and popular culture becomes apparent.

In sum, the teaching of literature takes place within a particular location in two cultural institutions: the high school and the university. The transfer of information, the purveying of culture, which takes place at these locations, is marked by its being compulsory. That educators themselves have come to adopt that originally compulsory culture as their own primary culture should not lead them to expect that school will influence all, or even the majority of, students as it did them. We need a much more nuanced view of authority if we are to assess how much a teacher's overt values influence students. Authority does possess some advantages in winning consent from underlings, but it carries distinct disadvantages as well. In other words, our students possess more autonomy in their responses to education than most accounts of education and its results admit.

At the same time, because American schools are far from "total institutions" (in Foucault's chilling sense), but are instead permeable to outside influences, teachers are far less autonomous than usually acknowledged.

The impact of the teacher's enthusiasms and values will be greatly influenced by the reinforcement or denigration of what happens in the classroom by parents, peers, and other cultural messengers. It won't do to paint teachers as completely active and students as completely passive when, in fact, both groups are some of each. The messages flow in all directions, as any halfway sensitive teacher knows. There are things a teacher cannot simply do—such as assigning *Moby-Dick* over a three-week time span—because the class as a whole will resist. I find myself feeling a class out for the first three to four weeks of a term, trying to discover just how far I can push them without losing 60 percent compliance. Then I ease back and work at a level where I sense that 70 percent are with me. I assume other teachers make similar pragmatic adjustments, not just in assignments but in the difficulty of the material they present during class meetings. But you would never know about these compromises by reading the claims about what people are doing and achieving in their classrooms. I also suspect that teachers continually mistake their own epiphanies (another great reward of teaching) for revelations successfully imparted to students.

Which brings me to “how.” Admittedly, one presumably has to know “why” the activity of teaching literature is being undertaken before considering “how” to do it. But my considerations of the “why” are going to be so convoluted that it seems best to say my brief piece on “how” first. Besides, like the young person who knows she wants to be a writer before she has a theme or a voice, I think that we English teachers adhere to a method—discussion classes—that comes with the job and is rarely explicitly justified. Of course, many literature teachers talk most of the fifty minutes of the class hour. But few literature teachers—as distinct from more than a few history, philosophy, or chemistry professors—walk into the classroom with prepared lecture notes, fully intending to talk the full time even if a discussion threatens to break out.

At a state university like mine, English is also (along with being the most required course of study) unique because its class sizes are so small, twenty for freshmen and sophomores, forty in upper-division undergraduate classes. Apart from their English classes, few students (outside the honors program) will take a class with fewer than fifty students their first two years. And unless they major in philosophy, classics, the foreign languages, or in certain “programs” (i.e., not traditional departmental disciplines), students are likely never to take a small class except freshmen and sophomore English.

How does English merit this special exemption from the teaching conditions that prevail throughout the university? Certainly one explanation is that English professors are expected to assign and to grade a substantial amount of student writing, a task that can only be done conscientiously when working with a limited number of students a term. (Just what that number is becomes a bone of contention when, in tight times, university administrators try to increase class sizes. Often the English department's best line of defense is to argue that undergraduates would barely be required to write at all—aside from essay exams—if there were not some small classes in the humanities.)

Apart from such practical considerations, there remains the dominant pedagogical bias toward discussion within English as a discipline—and the success English has had selling the university as an institution on this intimate connection between teaching literature and discussion. That connection is more than a little mysterious. Discussion as the primary classroom *modus operandi* only surfaces in the 1950s, just as the New Criticism was beginning its reign as the dominant critical methodology. It has often been remarked that the New Criticism was especially appropriate to American higher education as it tried, following the Second World and Korean Wars, to absorb the increase of students produced by the GI Bill.⁵ Since it requires no “cultural literacy,” no knowledge beyond or outside a familiarity with the text, New Criticism is well suited to classrooms in which the instructor cannot assume any shared information apart from that offered here and now. “Close reading,” with its attention to a text that every student can have open in front of him or her, would seem to lend itself to discussion. Yet as Gerald Graff (1987, 174–77) indicates in his account of the work of I. A. Richards, and as every teacher who has ever led a discussion of a difficult poem (by Donne or Stevens or Ashbery) knows, the suitability of discussion for reaching an understanding of the poem is far from self-evident. Viewed as a gesture toward the equal authority accorded to every participant in the conversation, discussion classes appear typically American. (Certainly, discussion is not the primary mode for the teaching of literature in France, Germany, or England.) Viewed positively, discussion looks democratic, egalitarian; viewed negatively, it looks like American know-nothingism, the blind leading the blind, a way of watering down education and pandering to students as mass education took

5. See Graff (1987, 173–79 and 226–32) for an excellent account of the institutional impact of New Criticism.

hold. In my own most suspicious moments, I link discussion to an American dis-ease with authority, which leads to managerial styles that dissimulate the realities of power. But my own disease on this score keeps me running my classes in discussion mode.

Speculations about national identity (a dubious notion in itself) aside, discussion runs counter to the dignity of the discipline as a profession—and suggests not a link to, but a working at cross purposes with, the New Criticism. Discussion promotes not only the anti-professional theorem that any opinion is as good as any other (or, at least, the notion that knowledge is not possessed by the expert but can only emerge through a collective process), but also the conviction that there is no truth in the matter. Here we are probably dealing with the overdetermined and unintentional effects of a New Criticism that wanted to establish the objective, even scientific, character of literary interpretation. Such objectivity entailed that there was a truth in literary studies, that English classes have a substantial knowledge to convey, and that certain opinions are worth more than others. But since that knowledge is no longer facts of the sort that the old historicists had presented, but now the readings produced by the literary critic, the profession began to crank out readings, the very proliferation of which undermined the truth and knowledge claims that motivated their production. Thus, professional developments tended toward the same conclusion—there is no discernible or determinate truth in matters of literary interpretation—that discussion takes as a justification for its mode of operation. This still does not explain why discussion was adopted as the preferred teaching mode in the first place or why it went on to dominate the whole profession's approach to teaching, as it still does today. A Deweyean and hence American bias toward active learning could underlie this preference for discussion. But that would still leave open the question of why English departments adopted that Deweyean position which, while immensely influential in primary and secondary schools, had very little impact on the teaching practices of most university disciplines.

Nor does a loss of a notion of truth and knowledge explain how the field of English convinced universities that it needed small classes for the reason that it needed to run discussions. Certainly, at least until the seventies, discussion was countenanced in English for precisely the same reasons that it was forsworn in history and philosophy, not to mention chemistry and biology. The lecture courses imparted information, whereas if you learned something in English, it was because you learned something other than

facts. Just what students actually did learn in English was unclear. In those days, prior to worries about a fragmenting culture (“anomie” was not seen as resulting from a knowledge deficit), familiarity with the Western tradition was hardly ever offered as a justification for English studies, while teaching students how to read and write was too pedestrian a justification for a society not yet alarmed by a literacy problem. Probably most English professors who felt called upon to give the matter much thought would have fallen back on the Johnsonian notion that literature offered insights into “general” human nature or on the New Critical sense that English studied texts whose richness, ambiguity, and texture amply rewarded close attention. Given this vagueness of aims almost never articulated, and the fact that English departments had in their dominant professional and classroom practices mostly renounced the claim to be imparting knowledge, it is surprising that universities supported the discipline’s allegiance to discussion by allowing it to teach much smaller classes than everyone else.

How has this bias toward discussion worked in the classroom itself? The results have, I think, been mixed. Too often English teachers fish for answers/comments from students when it would be far more efficient (and honest) for the teacher simply to state his point. I think I am representative of most English professors when I recognize that I have mindlessly adopted the conviction that perhaps the major sign of a good class is how many students spoke. I also know that my devotion to discussion has made it a continuing problem over the years to get my classes beyond character analysis when reading novels. And now that the New Criticism is dead and “context” almost all, there is less support than ever for the pretense that all the voices in the classroom are equal. Given even a minimum of sensitivity to issues of authority and power, discussion seems disingenuous at best and downright manipulative at worst, much more suited to helping the teacher like himself than to aiding the students. It’s a way of making the students look like they are voluntarily subscribing to the compulsory, a pretense more likely to fool the teacher than the student, especially when backed up by the common practice of including “participation” as a factor in determining the final grade. However, I have no intention of abandoning discussion as my primary classroom method, even as I find myself hard pressed to justify it beyond the lame excuse that this old dog is uncomfortable, and hence even more than usually ineffective, when resorting to new tricks.

But let me offer my feeble efforts at more respectable justifications. I would like to think that discussion does make the average English teacher

far more aware than his colleagues around campus of just how capable our students are, just how much they are “getting” from their classroom education. (This also follows from the fact that we read far more student-produced work than most of our colleagues.) Because we hear student voices, we have a much better view of how overwhelmed by, how under-prepared for, college-level material many of those students are. Lectures and hundred-page reading assignments in difficult books may work fine for the top fifteen percent of our students (the group to which professors themselves belonged when they were students), but the other eighty-five percent spend much of their time being lost. More interactive, less passive modes of instruction are essential for reaching these students—and discussion is a step in that direction, albeit only a step and one that requires thoughtful supplementation.

It is no accident that most of the exciting new work on college teaching—work on collaborative learning, group discussions, holistic grading, the use of computers, of Web forums, and the like which have revolutionized teaching practices in many English departments—has come from those in our profession in the trenches, teaching freshmen and sophomore English. It will be a shame if this wonderful work remains ghettoized in the lower parts of the English department curriculum, or in English departments apart from the rest of the university, since these new methods are relevant to all the teaching work done at colleges.⁶ Armed with a bias toward discussion, English teachers experienced the inability of many college freshmen to process information presented to them solely through lectures and reading assignments and, in response, devised various classroom and study techniques that get students using information and developing academic skills in ways the traditional format does not encourage. In short, I am with Dewey when it comes to education, but think that simply relying on discussion will not do the trick. A carefully planned out mixture of classroom activities, each designed with a specific purpose, is

6. No grand synthetic overview of the “new pedagogy” is yet available. I hope that someone is writing that book even as I write this. In the meantime, Zelman and Daniels (1988) cover a lot of ground. Tate, Corbett, and Myers (1994) is also helpful and provides a sensible (i.e. not overwhelming) bibliography. That such pedagogical work, even when done in their own departments, is unknown to many teachers of literature is underlined by the absence of any consideration of the teaching of writing in Graff’s history of the profession. As for the university as a whole, the scandal of how biology, organic chemistry, and calculus are taught should be enough to convince anyone that the lecture course and a complete disregard of pedagogical strategies neither serve our students well nor promote the long-term health of the disciplines imparted in such a fashion.

needed; moreover, the intended purposes should be revealed to students as they undertake the activities, both to let them see what they (and you) are aiming to achieve and to keep to a minimum misunderstandings about the sources of direction, authority, and power in the classroom. Sugar-coating the pill of the compulsory does no good.

If I keep returning to that compulsory pill, it is because it lurks even more menacingly beneath the question "why." What is it I aim to accomplish in teaching literature? Why do this at all? Remembering that the study of literature is compulsory in this society decenters that "I" immediately. At stake is not what I want to accomplish but what society wants to accomplish so fervently that it makes every citizen submit to the attempt to impart the intended lesson. (Of course, university education is not compulsory in the way lower levels of education are. But, as I have argued, once within the university, the study of English is compulsory at most schools.) I am, to some extent, the means for an end not of my own devising. I am society's conduit. No wonder my students want to evade my charms, my cajolings, my blandishments, my jollity, my enthusiasm (all of which at times disgust me as forced or faked). I shouldn't take it personally. Very, very few of them do. It has little enough to do with either them or me.

Except, of course, insofar as it has everything to do with us, everything to do with how we are positioned in this highly differentiated society with its highly stratified allocation of rewards, prestige, and work (or lack of it). Maybe politics has become so hard because we so consistently dissociate personal interactions (in the classroom, at the workplace, in the marketplace) from what seem the impersonal (unreachable) social mechanisms that grind us each into place. That smiling English teacher who loved Yeats and urged me to do the same and my current unemployment seem utterly disconnected, the one absurd and harmless, the other implacable and death-dealing. How could they be connected? How would we ever begin the work of connecting them?

Along with many of my generation, my haunting by the compulsory, my asking of questions like those above, comes from the innocence lost when I read Foucault, Bourdieu, and other theorists of social power. It is to these writers that I now feel answerable when I ask myself why I do what I do and what effects I imagine that it has. Yet, inevitably perhaps, I cannot accept a total social determination and so try to smuggle the "I" back in, identifying at least some small room for it, for me, to maneuver. Here again, I find myself of (at least) two minds, suspecting such smug-

gling as just an attempt to evade the harsh truth, yet convicting the theorists of reductively missing the rarely unidirectional effects of the astonishingly multiple forms that human action takes. In the name of that multiplicity, I want to put some flesh on the bones of what has thus far been a very general discussion, and will use autobiography as the source for those details. Since I, problematically I admit, take my life as not unsimilar to others of my generation who went on to teach English, I enter now some nebulous middle place—the place of emblematic or representative detail. But since almost all of the arguments I have advanced thus far rely, it seems to me, on my reader's feeling that my account of what it means and feels like to teach fits with his or her own sense of that activity, the rhetorical leap is not that great.

At first, like the girl in the Lou Reed song, my "life was saved by rock-roll." Sequestered in my room under the eaves, rock promised me that there existed other worlds beyond this suburban desert I was desperate to escape. From Dylan and the Byrds to Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, and Camus was a short step. I prepared myself for the escape to college by imbibing a strange brew of aestheticist disdain for mundane suburban life and existentialist heroism, which entailed casting a cold eye on this essentially tragic life and death. (I taught *The Myth of Sisyphus* to a group of bright undergraduates a few years ago. Not only did they not get it, but I also found myself unable to explain to them or to myself what about the book made it my Bible when I was a sophomore in high school.) An anti-war, pro-civil rights politics that put me at odds with my parents came along with my immersion in the giants of early modernism, but mostly politics bored me. I walked the slums of Baltimore for McGovern, but secretly found him insipid and had no faith in political solutions. America's problem was not bad government, but bad style: the wrong desires generated by the softness that comes from endlessly lying to oneself along Pollyanna-like lines. The self-love and self-approval of those Pharisees whose reaction to the poor missed Phil Ochs's Biblical point that "there but for fortune go you or I" disgusted me, but the religion of high art that I pursued got little further than disgust. (Bourdieu [1984, 485–91] offers a wonderful account of "disgust" as a repudiation of the "vulgar" on aesthetic grounds.) Politics, like most other activities, was finally guilty of diverting attention from the deep and eternal, which the great artists opposed to the transient and shallow. With Dostoyevsky, Conrad, and Lawrence I would gaze into the primal heart of darkness that "civilization" tries to paper over; with Joyce, I would exile myself from the stul-

tifying life of my pious and patriotic parents. Handed Sartre and Nietzsche by my college professors, I became in all things existentialist.

Looking back, I can see that my resolute aestheticism—the insistence that art cannot be compromised by ties to anything else, that art be true to and owe allegiance to only itself—and my belief that art offered the only avenue of insight into the deepest truths were bound to come into conflict sooner or later. Mine was not the playful aestheticism of Wilde, delighting in art's uselessness, but an aestheticism determined to protect the utterly separate world of art from any sully contact with non-art. Just how this escapist aestheticism yielded finally to a view of art as totally immersed in and incapable of transcending the social worlds in which it is produced and consumed is my story and the story of many of my generation—a story that leads through French theory and feminism to the various social constructivist positions that seem most convincing to us today. I think that an interesting story, but one far too complicated to relate here. One key turning point for me was the recognition that arguments against the immunity of art extended to my immersion in it. After reading Bourdieu, how could I deny that my adherence to the religion of art had been the means for moving myself from one social/cultural level to another?—a point driven home most forcefully by my parents' utter incomprehension of what I do, an ignorance somewhat willed, since partly fueled by resentment of my being paid so much to do so little. I was not just moving from one place (the suburbs) to another (an urban university, the republic of letters), but from one social stratum (the middle middle class) to another (the professional middle class).

If one narrative about the movement away from aestheticism invokes the encounter with theory, another narrative must needs consider the institutional setting of studying literature. "Teaching literature" is, to some extent, a misnomer. What is taught are ways of talking about, of explaining, of interpreting, the literary text. In a wonderful essay, that last aestheticist William Gass (1985, 277) describes what he calls the "six regularly scheduled trains out of the text." They are historical/biographical background, the world as referent (truths about life), reader response, literary tradition/influences, the construction of the text (formalism), and "hermeneutical heaven: replacement of the text with its interpretation." Whether there are only six trains or actually sixty-six, Gass's point is well taken: each way of talking about the text carries us away from it and toward either a paraphrase (in close reading or impressionist criticism) or toward explanatory, extrinsic materials (social context, psychological sub-

text, traditional and generic conventions, intertextual influences, etc.). My high school immersion in the early modernists was almost entirely extracurricular; I threw myself into the experience of these novels with all the infatuation of those model novel readers, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary. I was Paul Morel and Stephen Dedalus for months at a time, and my aspiration was, of course, to write novels myself. I talked of these things to no one and wrote of them only in a journal meant for no one's eyes but my own.

It was not novels I was asked to write in college. And my experience of reading those novels so dear to me proved highly resistant to being put into words or being offered up in classroom discussions. The language of criticism, of explanation and explication, worked along very different lines—and I was slowly converted to this new language. I was good at it, which helped, but it was also what was required of me, and like the dyer's hand, my nature was subdued. I don't want to be overly nostalgic or wistful about this; I don't really think my "nature" was subdued, since I think my talents clearly weighed more heavily on the side of criticism than of artistic creation. (I wrote fiction for another four or five years after getting my PhD; most of it was bad, some of it decent, none excellent.) And certainly I more than gave my intellectual assent to the kinds of explanations that criticism has to offer; I came to believe that achieving such explanations was vital as well as interesting work. Still, there remains a tension between the experience of reading literature and the paths followed in studying it, a tension that critic/scholars/teachers all too often fail to see (one wonders if they ever read for pleasure any more or love some books that they could never imagine teaching) and which makes the hostility of poets and novelists (even those who teach in university English departments) to academic purveyors of literature not only understandable but also to some extent justified. To give one's allegiance to the academic forms through which literature is discussed and taught is to withdraw (at least partly) allegiance to literature itself. One language displaces another. We can, of course, be bilingual. But we cannot speak two languages at once.

I know that to phrase the tension in this way, especially to use the phrase "literature itself," is to grant to the aestheticists precisely what is being contested. And it is precisely the sign that I locate myself on the academic side of the ledger that I want to delineate this contest as a struggle for mastery, a struggle both within the university as an institution and within the culture at various sites. Once this move is made—the inscription of

any defended conviction within the dynamics of a larger social conflict—any category (like “literature itself”) that claims autonomy will be discredited. When Roland Barthes defines literature as what gets taught; when Michel Foucault describes the school as an exemplary institution within a disciplinary society; when Pierre Bourdieu identifies one’s tastes, one’s choices of what to read, as moves to secure social distinction and cultural capital, the very possibility of “literature itself” is shattered. Once having accepted the legitimacy, even the truth, of these locations of literature as one player within a larger social game, as institutionally supported and enforced by its particular interested partisans, the teacher of literature cannot teach literature itself, cannot present the heroic modernists or even the ironic postmodernists on their own terms. Irony is endless and uncontrollable, linked as Kenneth Burke (1969, 51–17) discusses, to the “humility” of recognizing that no text or self can ever fully account for itself, but can always be placed in another context that makes it speak quite differently. The decentering of the “I” of the teacher which accompanies thinking about the compulsory goes hand-in-hand with the decentering of the “I” of the author when thinking about how the literary work is produced from a certain social site and is articulated within a certain set of social relations. In other words, the language of “literature itself” is as much a social language as criticism is, and has no claim to be more authentic or primal. But it is a different language and we might mourn its being totally displaced by other languages.

Why, then, teach literature? To shatter the innocence of immediate experience (and love), replacing that first encounter with a more adequate understanding of the various forces that impinge upon the reader as the pages get turned?⁷ Pondering such issues leads to various plausible answers to why society requires the teaching of literature. The discipline of learning to read, including the forms of reason modeled by the organization of texts and the need to pay attention to detail, reinforces other micro-disciplines, which produce docile, disciplined bodies (Foucault [1979]). The infinite grades of distinction established among students on the basis of their ability to stomach Twain or Wordsworth or Flaubert inculcates the notion of a natural elite marked by their refined taste and superior intellect (Bourdieu [1984]). The presentation of a glorified national identity through the masterpieces of its culture works to negate the cul-

7. Feminism, more than literary or pedagogical theory, has agonized over the status of “experience,” since it often both wants to honor the experience of various women and to avoid being naïve about experience’s apparent transparency. See Scott (1992).

ture of others and to justify subordination of the foreigner without and the barbarian within (Viswanathan [1989]).

Even armed with these answers, and often highly suspicious of these social goals, we teachers still forward them in spite of ourselves. Everything in our training leads us to reward attention to detail and logical, orderly presentation when we grade papers. Our own profession continually reinforces patterns of distinction in which working on various authors or various issues brings greater respect—not to mention the greater acclaim granted accomplishments on paper as contrasted to accomplishments in the classroom. And our discipline continues to organize courses and academic specialties mostly along national lines and still searches for the cultural characteristics that texts grouped along these lines share. In other words, if one reason to teach literature is to gain a greater self-consciousness about why society requires students to learn about and read literature, such self-consciousness does not automatically bring with it practices that disrupt what society sets out to accomplish.

It is far from clear how one could teach literature in such a way as to disrupt the normalizing and socializing aims of the institution that supplies the resources, the site, and the students who enable the would-be oppositional teacher the opportunity to do anything at all. The dilemmas proliferate to the point of making me dizzy, of throwing up my hands in despair. It all seems such a muddle, starting with the odd status of these things—novels, poems, plays—which we are called upon or actually desire to teach. At least since 1800, most literary writers have stood in some form of opposition to the dominant economic, cultural, and social tendencies of their time.⁸ This opposition is as true of conservatives (who hate modern democracy, mass society, mass media, the modern metropolis, the “new” woman, and large bureaucracies) as it is of writers on the left. All sides are equally convinced that something is radically wrong with modern society. As Lionel Trilling (1965) pointed out years ago, these writers’ very rage against the way things are makes the institutionalization of their work within the curriculum unexpected (almost inexplicable), while the overall effect seems to be the taming of the literature, not the radicalization of the academy. On the other hand, for those suckers who actually buy into the values of the texts they read rather than simply dutifully going through the paces (in other words, those most likely

8. See Williams (1981, 72–75) for a succinct account of the multiple factors which converge to place most artists since 1800 at odds with modernity.

to go on to become teachers of literature) oppositional stances are like mother's milk to them.

Thus it comes as a shock of seismic proportions when theorists like Foucault and Bourdieu suggest that literature is one of the cornerstones of the dominant social order and that in teaching literature we serve that order. To maintain our own oppositional credentials, we have either to recuperate the literary works by explaining how they were bent out of shape to become the bulwarks of orthodoxy or we have to devote our teaching and scholarly activity to exposing the literary work's complicity with the dominant order. Needless to say, both strategies have been pursued over the past fifteen years. Since it has proved pretty difficult to brand particular authors, or even particular works, as purely orthodox or purely oppositional, the results have, quite literally, been mixed.

Not surprisingly, there has recently come to be a reaction against this kind of score-keeping—here Blake is radical, here he is not—but without any clear indication of where we are to go next. The profession seems to be suffering a kind of identity crisis. No longer satisfied with indicating where works resist prevailing identities, we have become interested in how works contribute positively to the formation of identities; yet we retain a deep mistrust of all identities as imposed and as repressing some kind of primal heterogeneity.⁹ Once you start calling identity formation “subjectification,” the deck is stacked. Few will embrace the job description: “subjectifier.” Only the negative work of undoing identities becomes acceptable. At present we seem left with a wishy-washy conclusion that all texts, like all selves, are variegated mixtures. But unless we decide to celebrate any and all mixtures for diversity's sake, we still are left with the work of deciding which elements of the mixture seem helpful in empowering us to achieve our goals and which unhelpful.

I will return, all too briefly and inadequately, to what seem to me the essentially ethical issues just raised. Right now, I want to suggest that attention to the mixed nature of texts and selves leaves us with an unexamined and poorly understood problem: how do texts shape or influence the values, attitudes, and actions of the selves who read them? It is hardly obvious that, if I desire to create oppositional attitudes in my students, the indirect road of reading literature is to be preferred to the direct road of proselytizing. (Of course, critics of “tenured radicals” believe teachers

9. Butler (1990) remains the most powerful and influential rendering of the current suspicion of identity.

like me have already given up the first for the second.) When I consider my own experience, I guess I would conclude that I was softened up by my earlier immersion in literature (which was, after all, premised on a hostility to the life my immediate world seemed to offer), but that the hardening of my political attitudes, the replacement of various vague sympathies with substantive positions and arguments, came from my experience of the job market and of work, and from reading theory, that is, academic discourses about literature and other social forms/institutions. In short, it was in learning to ask "what cultural and social work does the literary text do?" and "what work am I being required to do in order to get a job as a professor and then keep it?" that I came to articulate the criticisms of the contemporary world which literary texts had suggested and thus (paradoxically) to question the separateness of the literary texts from the world I had originally hoped to escape by reading those texts.

Does the reader recognize that we are back to where this essay began, to the question of what effect do we have on our students, either through the indirection of what we require them to read or the direction of what we say to them in the classroom (or elicit from them in discussion)? What my education of the past twenty-five years seems to have taught me is that it is all tremendously complicated, that my input as a teacher or *Frankenstein's* input as a reading experience interact with the individual student in mostly unpredictable ways.¹⁰ This should not surprise us. Raise two children as strict Catholics and one might become a priest, one an atheist. The unintended happens again and again—and that thought is consoling when I think of the more sinister social goals my work as a teacher abets. Thank goodness this process of indoctrination is so inefficient, so regularly circumvented.

But if the unintended happens again and again, so does the intended. And we have no feasible alternative to continuing to act with intention; we all contribute our mite toward trying to push the world in one direction or another; we all find it disturbing to think that our intentions may be subsumed within larger social forms that use our actions to further quite different intentions. The very gap between personal intentions and social intentions that I have been worrying for much of this essay leads

10. The tension between theory's attempt to generalize (here an account of the text's impact on readers) and the differences introduced by particulars, differences which theory can never fully encompass, has become a commonplace in postmodern considerations of intellectual work. Sedgwick (1990, 22–27) on theory's responsibility to the individual seems exemplary.

some to try to steal a march on consequences by devising strategies, methods, and techniques deemed more surely effective than just contributing one's mite. Institutional analyses or psychological models both suggest that conscious and individual intention is only a minor player in the game. Psychological models, for example, whether focusing on dynamics of transference/identification/ambivalence or on accounts of how best to package material for cognitive comprehension and retention, rely on uncovering hidden dynamics and parameters, an understanding of which will grant us greater influence over those we teach, a more sure imparting of information and (presumably) values.

I find that I have a deep-seated (and no doubt liberal humanist) distrust of anything smacking of manipulation, a distrust tied obviously to some desire to respect my students' autonomy even as the theories most convincing to me deny the very possibility of autonomy. What delights me most in students is when they are aglow with things they have figured out or discovered for themselves. Unhappy the generation that does not have its own novels, ones never taught in any classroom anywhere. And, along with my residual liberal humanism, I retain a deep-rooted suspicion (adopted from the early high modernists) of all talk of values. I hate all this claptrap about how our schools should be teaching values, in part no doubt because forming one's values for oneself should be a key hallmark of the autonomy which I try to respect (and, if it is not oxymoronic to say so, foster) in my students.

But lately this whole take has come to seem untenable to me. I don't see how education can be anything other than value-laden. To teach literature represents a choice, a choice that is staged for my students every time I walk into the classroom. I am saying that this pursuit—reading books and talking about them—is so valuable that I have chosen to devote my life to it, and what I model in the classroom is what it looks like to live that choice. Like any true believer, I am racked by doubts, and I model those as well. But there is no way to duck the fact that I (alone among those in my classroom of twenty year olds) have made a choice based on what I deemed was worthy of my time and energy, and that my students, who will soon have to make choices of their own, look to their teachers to gauge the consequences, the possibilities afforded, by this choice or that. Just like the novels I read, by turning their backs on a certain mundane existence, were value-laden despite their claims to be beyond good and evil, so my pursuit of this activity—teaching literature—conveys a judgment even if I strain for even-handedness on every topic raised in class.

All of which is to say that, even after the shocks administered by Foucault and Bourdieu, teaching literature is haunted not only by the compulsory but also by Matthew Arnold. For it is Arnold who insists that the connection of culture to identity formation necessarily raises the question of the "best self." What Arnold dramatizes is that once you accept that culture shapes selves, then it becomes a matter of crucial importance just what bits of culture get to do that shaping. No one is ever (or ever could possibly be) brought into contact with or under the sway of an entire culture (all its accumulated knowledge, traditions, texts, superstitions, practices, rituals, self-understandings, and self-delusions). So those who undertake the task of education will always be choosing what they deem the crucial bits to present to those under their charge. And what could possibly serve as the principle of selection except the goal of creating the best selves? Just what will constitute that "best self" will be a matter of contention. Best for what purposes? Classic debates ensue. Is education in a democratic society aimed primarily at preparing students for the labor market or at preparing them to be fully competent citizens? Can education achieve both of these goals (and others) at the same time? Details aside, however, what Arnold makes clear is that the formation of selves becomes an ethical matter the moment one begins to intervene purposively in that process.

Where Arnold gets scary, of course, is in taking it for granted that "the best" is easy to discern (at least for those who read their Homer correctly) and that the power of the State should guarantee that the best prevail. The State, he claims, can be "the organ of our collective best self, of our natural right reason" (Arnold, 1965a, 136). We at the end of the twentieth century can hardly share Arnold's sanguine vision of the state. But we should not think that we can push the state off the stage just because it's an embarrassment or worse. If Arnold is right to see that education inevitably involves the ethical, he is also right to see that, from his time on, education also inevitably involves the state. (As a school inspector, Arnold was a functionary of the growing state involvement in education in England; meanwhile, he argued ceaselessly and vehemently in his essays for the establishment of schools run directly by the state.¹¹)

Connecting *Culture and Anarchy* to the mid-nineteenth-century origins of compulsory public education suggests that the compulsory and the ethical in this case entail one another. So long as culture is encountered hap-

11. See Arnold (1965b) for one instance of his advocacy of public education.

hazardly or through the self's personal interactions with family and other intimates, the process of acculturation appears "natural," unshaped by deliberate human planning. But once education becomes compulsory and its course, its curriculum, is planned (and, most likely, standardized so that many students follow the same course), then the question of what kinds of selves the educator is aiming to create must arise. (To claim that I as teacher will merely undo identities already formed elsewhere seems to me to let us too easily off the hook.) Because this education is going to be required of students, a justification is also required. Why teach this rather than that? I think that these justifications will always, in the final analysis, come down to moral claims about this line of study producing the best self for this good purpose. To be in education is to be in the business of shaping selves and thus, no matter how uneasy the talk of "best selves" makes us, to become involved in trying to shape one kind of self as opposed to another kind.

Now it is possible, I suppose, to be a cynical or ironic teacher, one who walks into the classroom and dissociates oneself from the purposes that the powers that be are aiming to achieve there. The difficulty of such a stance is that, although various details about what goes on in my classroom are out of my control (and the impact my class might have on students depends heavily on what else they are experiencing in other classrooms and the culture as a whole), no one held a gun to my head and made me become a teacher. The ironic teacher, the one who indicates by his behavior that a socialization over which he has no control and which he personally disavows is using him as a conduit against his personal will, is most likely going to strike his students as a whiner. Of course, power is omnipresent in our society, but I must say that, especially at the level of university teaching (but even lower down in the school system as well), the choice to become a teacher is, I think, rather unconstrained. Power, in fact, seems to be working just the opposite way: to prevent people from being able to actualize that choice. More people want this job than can get it. It will not only strain most students' sense of things to convince them that you, a functionary of the compulsory in their eyes, are actually a victim of the same power that compels their presence in the classroom, but also violate their sense that teaching is a pretty cushy job.

These difficulties do not render ironical teaching impossible. But I believe that its opposite is much more frequent, which adds another sense to Arnold's talk of the "best self." When I walk into the classroom and model the choice I have made to be a teacher of literature, I am also get-

ting a chance to be the self that, in many ways, I am most proud of. I am acting upon a fiction that is more mine than the students' in my modeling. The classroom becomes a utopian space of purity where I live my choices and convictions utterly, where shorn of the messy complexities and contradictions of my ordinary self, I actually get to have (for fifty minutes) an identity, a oneness that very few other activities (playing basketball, some precious moments with my wife, children, and dear friends) afford me. (Interestingly enough, the other intense experiences of my existence—writing and reading—do not provide that unity. Writing instead generates multiplicity as I, like Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield*, try to keep my thoughts from running to King Charles's head. Reading allows my self to fall away utterly.) I think that the tendency of teachers to enthuse over what they are accomplishing in their classrooms often comes from mistaking their own delight at the self they get to be in this pure devotion to the intellect with whatever it is that students might be getting.

For, as I keep trying to emphasize, if the classroom is a utopian space for us as teachers, there is no reason to think many students experience it as such. (True, I found the classroom a delightful space during much of college and graduate school; but I was also heartily sick of being a student by the end of three years in grad school, by that point uninterested in entering another classroom unless I was the teacher.) The striving for purity in this utopian space manifests itself in the profession as a whole, it seems to me, in the search for the truly oppositional. This striving I would characterize as the modernist moment in our teaching and writing, the moment in which we attempt to create an "other" to the messy and often despicable world and selves we inhabit. Literature offers a privileged vehicle for such a pursuit, since it is itself so often animated by a similar purpose. But this modernist moment is dogged by our postmodernist lives, by the impurity and multiplicities of our convictions and cravings. The classroom is no utopian space, once we think of the lines of power that traverse it, or even the fraudulence of our staged best self. So some of us strive to deconstruct that self almost as soon as we present it—only to realize that this act of deconstruction reinstates a best self, now understood as a self alert to the temptation (to be resisted) to posit unity, autonomy, and integrity/purity.

I do not see any way of wriggling out from under this modeling of a self. We as teachers are performers and the rush comes not just from the audience's appreciation, but also when the momentum of the performance carries us to new selves that feel, despite their novelty, so utterly,

so perfectly, what we have always wished to be. In awakening and sometimes fulfilling these wishes about identity, teaching literature does a cultural work that remains mysterious yet powerful—the joining of desire to ideals, of identities with public, cultural forms—and, as we maneuver within this terrain, that work is done on ourselves as well as on our students. Why do that work? Because this is who we want to be. I, as a teacher, want to be involved in the cultural shaping of selves, acting and acted upon as the process unfolds, never completely dictating its outcomes, but trying my damndest to negotiate its surprises in ways that produce what I deem the best outcome. Doing that work, I have found myself located, fleetingly but more than rarely, at spots of time where a convergence of all the factors has produced a self in relation to its world and to others that I can utterly endorse. I only hope that participating in such moments offers my students some comparable serendipity or, at least, some inkling of its possibility. And I hope that I can continue to insist that we hold the world up to the standard of that possibility.