

Faith and Pedagogy in the Literature Classroom: Points of Departure

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What concrete difference does our Christianity make in our pedagogical choices when teaching literature? This question is likely to cause some discomfort when taken seriously, since in all honesty in the classroom of a Christian literature teacher what actually takes place sometimes looks little different from what happens in any other classroom. Although in some ways it seems to many of us that the literature classroom offers a clearer opportunity to engage our Christian perspective than does the study of grammar, the actual pedagogy involved has received little examination. Much of the existing scholarship is written from a secular perspective or focuses on whether to study secular literature, on the ethos of the instructor, on a Christian response to the schools of literary theory, or on the teaching of literature in the student's native language. This scholarship generally does not take into consideration the linguistic and cultural barriers to understanding, interpretation, and response inherent in the study of literature in one's second or third language.

There are a number of books on Christian responses to literature and to literary theory. Stanley Wiersma and Merle Meeter in 1970 represented two prevalent Christian stances: while Meeter strongly preferred reading and teaching works by Christians, Wiersma considered non-Christian authors essential to self-discovery and advocated reading the works of both Christians and non-Christians in the light of sin and grace. This insight has been echoed more recently by Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin, for whom literature enables us to respond to the order, beauty, and grace of God and his world as well as to the disorder occasioned by sin. Literary texts clarify and dramatize social issues or moral questions, help discover through metaphor a new understanding of ourselves, of nature, or of God; and assist us in working toward shalom by cultivating the potential of God's world, enjoying a world of delight, and striv-

ing for justice. The volume edited by Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken on contemporary literary theory advocates the formulation of a theory of critical orthopraxis that takes into account Christian virtues as well as the acceptance of Christian doctrine and morality as the authoritative framework for dialogue with critical traditions and for the development of a Christian aesthetic. Ryken's earlier book on literature and Christian perspective, while not a treatise on pedagogy specifically, includes many examples of the type of discussion of religious dimensions that ought to take place in a Christian literature classroom. His analysis of specific works makes clear how he guides his students in addressing these works through the eyes of faith. A similar model can be found in Tennyson's and Ericson's volume of essays in theory and criticism. While a careful reading of these Christian responses allows one to infer some pedagogical principles for the attitude modeled in the classroom and for the tone and content of discussion, they do not delineate specific procedures. The *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* aims to build on this foundation by offering both analysis from a Christian standpoint and scholarship on pedagogy.

The process of reading is of fundamental importance in understanding how we discuss and teach reading in the literature classroom. Relevant work has been published by Alan Jacobs on the hermeneutics of love and by Mark Pike, who is applying Louise Rosenblatt's concept of aesthetic reading as he seeks to foster the development of spirituality in students who bring their own experience and inner lives to the literary text. While their work does not entertain the dynamics of intercultural exchange implicit in foreign literature, it offers helpful insights applicable to any literature classroom.

A 2002 volume edited by Arlin Migliazzo does include pedagogical pointers. It contains essays by Christian professors representing the social sciences, the natural sciences, the fine arts, and the humanities. Migliazzo finds that current literature on Christian teaching tends to fit into one of three categories: theoretical and philosophical inquiry about Christian approaches to learning, the history of church-related higher education, and the case study; he is unaware of any texts dedicated to practical pedagogy; and he notes the plurality of Christian views and strategies. He appears to refer strictly to college-level teaching, but even so Barbara Carvill's and David Smith's *The Gift of the Stranger*, while not limited to practical pedagogy, clearly addresses it, as does *The Bible and the Task of Teaching* by Smith and John Shortt. The essays in Migliazzo's collection, which contains nothing by foreign language professors, typically offer some philosophy or approach-related reflections

and also some concrete pedagogical suggestions, although the balance often swings toward the former.

In our search for scholarship on pedagogy in the literature classroom we have found the journals *Pedagogy*, *Hispania*, and the *ADFL Bulletin* to be good sources for articles, but most of those, while providing helpful practical ideas, do not focus on religion or spirituality. New journals such as the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* and the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* are encouraging scholarly efforts more specifically centered either on the Christian language classroom or on the spiritual and moral dimensions of teaching and learning, while in the United Kingdom the Stapleford Centre has been producing textbooks and other instructional materials designed to foster spiritual and moral development in students. Although these materials are aimed principally at language acquisition, they include spiritually oriented approaches to short literary selections.

What we find helpful as we approach both overtly Christian and more general scholarship on the pedagogy of literature is the model described by David Smith, based on work by Edward Anthony, further developed by Richards and Rodgers. According to this model, our Christian **approach** contains conscious and unconscious principles and assumptions, derived from our experience and worldview, and shapes the design of our pedagogy. This **design** attempts to translate our approach into a constellation of detailed **procedures** for the classroom, the outcome of which can in turn modify our design or even our approach. What we can infer from the doctrine of common grace is affirmed here by Smith's notion that procedures or even design elements from other approaches may in fact coincide with our own. This allows Christian teachers to gratefully appropriate insights and techniques from secular scholarship as long as they are true to our overarching principles. Much of the Christian scholarship thus far, such as the works cited earlier in this essay, has remained at the level of approach and design, leaving the individual instructor to flesh out the procedures. On the level of design, NACFLA proceedings have included some careful thought by Patricia Jessen, Kathleen Marshall Pederson, Thea Van Til Rusthoven, and David Smith among others on the questions and themes we should be addressing in our study of literature, such as confession, forgiveness, tolerance, discernment of worldview or of sin, and the search for justice, and on the discipling role of the Christian professor. Most of these include some reference to procedures as well, especially Van Til Rusthoven's and Smith's.

If our *approach* to foreign language literature is to teach love for the

other, obeying Christ's command to love the stranger, how will this affect the *design* of our courses and the *procedures* we use to teach them?

Text selection. More and more we have become convinced that we try to do far too much in our courses and that students are not being well served. Alan Jacobs in *A Theology of Reading: the Hermeneutics of Love* speaks of books and authors as our neighbors and emphasizes that "we owe a debt of loving and constant attentiveness (of faithfulness) to all the books we read" (67). This debt cannot be paid if we instead concentrate on simply "covering the material". This may be a contentious issue since it goes against longtime practices; however, as Christians we are called to be different, sometimes radically so. A pedagogy grounded in faith could result in a course design that looks very different from a course more conventionally taught.

Advance organizers. Our courses ought to be designed so that the student and the text/stranger do not meet in a void. As instructors we give students the tools they need to understand and interpret the new foreign text they are about to meet. At the procedural level this means presenting the historical and social context in which a work was created or awakening the students' pre-existing knowledge so that connections can be made among literature, art, and music. In a Christian classroom the instructor may introduce Bible passages that relate to the theme of the work to be studied, passages which might affirm the text's message or possibly refute it.

Orientation or first impressions. Although we prepare students for their encounters with a foreign work, the first meeting between reader and text is always unique and individual. The design of our course must allow the reader to react individually and uniquely to a new text, before the mediation of the instructor and others in the class. This can take the form of written initial responses later shared, perhaps anonymously, with the instructor and the class. During the formation stage, the professor should model and encourage attentive and humble listening. Students may ask other students for clarifications or examples but should be urged to demonstrate a generous and loving spirit in class discussions.

Disorientation or decentering and expanding. As with human strangers, a first impression may not always be the most accurate one. Our courses must be structured so that students move beyond that first impression to a fuller knowledge and understanding of a text. Students' initial impressions will be tested and challenged, both by the professor and by other students. This must be done carefully, encouraging students to move outside of themselves, to experience the text from a position that is unexpected and perhaps uncom-

fortable. The model for this is the way Jesus taught. The disciples were often surprised and even dismayed at the answers Jesus gave them and at the challenges he presented them.

By having our students put themselves in the role of a secondary character in a work or simply by requiring them to read critical articles, we endeavor to show that “all these interpretations, when carefully and responsibly done, illuminate something in [the] work and further the conversation toward its goal of ever fuller understanding” (Jacobs 99).

Reorientation and closure. While it may be the professor’s job to make students reexamine and even question their long-held assumptions, a Christian professor will not want a student to remain disoriented or confused. As Susan Felch so eloquently puts it: “My goal in the classroom is to nurture their faith so that they will know enough, and hope enough, and be loved enough to doubt wisely, but not to abandon the Truth” (24). While always acknowledging the open-ended nature of literature and literary study, our responsibility to our students requires that we complete the process with reorientation and closure.

As Christians, when we look for models of good teaching, we look to the Master Teacher and see that he did not advocate one process, one design, but rather employed varied teaching methods according to the student and according to the circumstance. Jesus used story telling, concrete illustrations, question and answer periods, “internships” as he taught his disciples. We can “go and do likewise,” giving thanks for Christian and non-Christian colleagues and for the rich diversity of teaching styles within our Christian fellowship.

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