

What Is It to Teach a Book?

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“Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.”

Not the opening lines of my text, alas, but those of the novel with reference to which “Can the Taught Book Speak?” first speaks to us.¹ And these are riveting lines. Enigmatic lines. “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan” — just the first four words of this massive novel, and already we find so much: an Irish name, “Mulligan,” which gives us a start as to where all this is set, and — working backwards — a nickname, “Buck,” which will tell us something of this character’s character, and, qualifying this, an adjective, “plump,” whose funny-sensuous sound seems itself to speak a corporeal, earthy fatness, a fatness that, in “plump, Buck Mulligan,” reverberates through the repeated letter U. But is there already a tension with “Stately,” capitalized, the opening of this text? Can this humorous figure be stately? What state is it he or we are in? These young men are shaving, starting their day, at 8.00 a.m. on 16 June, in 1904 in Dublin. This is the state they are in early in the morning. And this is the state, or non-state, of Ireland.

Let us read on. “A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled,” you will recall, “was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.” “Sustained gently” — a dressing gown? Ungirdled, undone. Sustained, so stained...?

He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

—*Introibo ad altare Dei.*

Halted, he peered down the dark winding stairs and called up coarsely:

—Come up, Kinch. Come up, you fearful jesuit.

Solemnly he came forward and mounted the round gunrest. He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding country and the awaking mountains. Then, catching sight of Stephen Dedalus, he bent towards him and made rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his head.

A gunrest? Improbably enough, we are in a Martello tower — a round, fat, squat fortification, erected by the British during the Napoleonic wars. And Stephen, it turns out, upon his return from Paris (where, you may recall, we left him at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), has rented this tower from the Ministry of Defence. He returned because his mother was dying. Buck Mulligan intones the Latin mass (*Introibo ad altare Dei*), with rapid “crosses in the air,” in order to taunt Stephen, calling him ironically “a fearful Jesuit” — for Stephen has rejected religion by refusing his mother’s request to pray at her death-bed. Shaving-soap and a mirror are somehow “crossed”: a ritual daily cleansing, a daily self-examination. And, further, there is the circumcisional threat of the razor. “Kinch,” Stephen’s nickname, is another word for “knife.” Within a page Buck Mulligan will make fun also of Stephen’s real name, “Dedalus” — absurdly Greek but suggestive of course of

aspirations that fly too close to the sun. And when we find that this is a son who is searching for a father (not, it turns out, his natural father) and who is haunted by the ghost of a dead parent (not, in this case, his natural father but his mother), it will not be surprising to find him, Hamlet-like, referring to this strange tower as his Elsinore: Hamlet on the ramparts in the early morning, the ramparts where the ghost appears. And there is a problem in the story over who has, or where is, the key to the tower, suggesting questions of dispossession and usurpation, and possibilities of repossession. Now, as if these connections were not already enough, we can hardly leave the matter without remembering that this tragi-comic Irish scene is after all *Ulysses*, whose chapter-names will follow the sixteen chapters of Homer's work: "Telemachus," "Nestor," "Proteus" . . .

But, I wonder, with so much complexity, am I beginning to teach? Joyce himself had some fun with this: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality."²

It was in 1925 that William York Tindall bought the copy of *Ulysses* that was to change his life — in Paris, by coincidence on 16 June, the date now celebrated as "Bloomsday." Later he would write *A Reader's Guide To James Joyce*. Surely we need guides. When visiting an art gallery, I sometimes freeload by standing close to one of those groups that are being shown around, with the result that I see things I would otherwise simply have missed. If I am beginning to teach, this is the product not exactly of erudition but of piecing together connections that, thanks to new technology, are there to guide me.

All this is making me less clear not only about what counts as teaching but also about what it is that "Can the Taught Book Teach?" is teaching me. Can books speak for themselves? What, in any case, is a book?

Now, there is a real problem where the teacher assumes a kind of mastery, succumbing to Siren calls of simplification and steering toward rigid rocks of explication. First, it reinforces the idea that a text carries a unified meaning that it is the reader's task to decipher. Second, it intercepts the reader's gathering response, displacing this with phony notions of literary appreciation as the reiteration of received points of view; it miseducates by inculcating bad ideas about what teaching and learning themselves can be. This I strongly endorse.

The way that the criticism is raised, however, implies an equation of teaching with explication. Teaching need not be like this. A formative moment in my own training was an experiment in teaching literature. There was nothing very fancy about this. Individual teachers worked with smallish groups of students, and in each group a short poem was read — perhaps William Carlos Williams' one about taking, or stealing, plums from the refrigerator. The crucial thing was this: once the poem was read, the teachers said nothing, did not even say that they were saying nothing. That at least was the idea. For some colleagues, this was just too much, and quickly they yielded to fill the silence that followed. Others were more disciplined, and then gradually, out of embarrassed initial silence, responses began to come. This was not

a rigid technique to be applied, and certainly, as the comments picked up speed, there was scope for the teacher to enter into response too, prompting attention to a detail here, making connections between comments there. Though never a technique I pursued systematically, this is something I have carried with me. It is one of the multiple ways in which timing is critical for good teaching, in a manner the masters of time-management will never understand. It is not the “inspirational” teacher that is needed here: it is restraint and humility that sets this apart.

Writing is dangerous, Socrates insists, and as our authors remind us: dangerous because it lacks the directness of speech. I would emphasize more the reasons Socrates is wrong. Directness of speech is an illusion: it too depends upon a certain materiality of the sign, a sign never saturated with meaning, necessarily open to interpretation; these are general characteristics of language that writing displays, writ large. Phonocentricity contributes, the authors imply, to bad conceptions of teaching and learning. But how does this mesh with the idea of the book they present? The troubling quasi-animism of books that speak is eased, if not overcome, by the Heideggerian thought that it is not humans who speak language but language that speaks them. Being human depends upon being brought up in a language community, which provides the words that enable the thoughts: in a real sense we come from our words; in a real sense in the beginning was the word. But to speak of the book that speaks, proscribing explication, would suggest that books are sufficient unto themselves. Can this really be so? *Ulysses* is a novel whose “day” contains everything: it is epic in scale, for all the humdrum events it records. Unable to be self-contained, it flaunts its intertextuality, as Joyce’s mischievous remark implies. It is not that meaning lies behind or below the text: concatenations of meaning provoke the teacher to explore the connections, extending chains of thought. This is the way reading is; this is the way we are. Just as signs cannot function without interpretation, so reading cannot be a simple, unitary matching of mark with concept. What after all is a concept without this dynamism of the sign? Good teachers dispel expectations of mastery, teaching sensitivity to precisely these conditions. So why not apply this not just to those pristine great books but also to commentaries on books, to interactions between books, or to learning across the curriculum? Surely in the end this is always textual.

Joyce leads us through “Eumaeus,” “Ithaca” to the unraveling “Penelope,” with a return that can only mean readiness for departure. Reading well departs for new thought. Proscriptions of the teacher-guide may be denials of a text’s life. And so, when you teach, resist the Siren voices, commit to the text’s course, and end by saying with Molly Bloom: “yes I will Yes.”³

1. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics, 2000), 1.

2. Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 521.

3. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1040.