Politics in Paradise: Teaching Literature and Jesuit Values

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On the straits of Mackinaw, poised between Lakes Huron and Michigan, there stands a statue carved from Italian marble of Father Jacques Marquette, S.J. His back is to the water and he faces a tiny white clapboard church, which was built many years after he died. The statue—which is strangely medieval in its stylized depiction of the priest—does not stand above his grave; that is in a simple courtyard to the side of the church. But the statue and gravesite are disappointments, largely because they present a Europeanized and static image of the good father. His presence is more accurately captured in the museum that bears his name in a woods to the south of the city of St. Ignace. Here we see life-sized models of Fr. Marquette and an Indian in a huge canoe floating over the ceiling of the museum. And in that visual depiction of the Jesuit priest and the Indian, paddling into infinity, we see a crystallization of the entire history of Western civilization, a confluence of the forces that Claude Levi-Strauss called the “raw” and the “cooked.” The “cooked” power of European civilization came into contact with the “raw” power of the American Indian, and the modern world as we know it came into being.

But as I walked through the museum the question that struck me with the most force was, what would have driven a highly educated and wealthy French priest into the wilds of untamed America? Obviously, Fr. Marquette says he was motivated by missionary zeal. But one senses in reading the journal he left behind something else, something more nebulous. The closest I came to defining it was to label it a certain excess of energy, the sort of energy
that people who have been given much have to spare. The sort of energy that emanates from spiritual and financial aristocracies, not from poverty of the spirit or the body; the sort of energy that the Jesuits have traditionally possessed, the "magis," usually translated as "the something more." Now Fr. Marquette's strength of character and commitment to the conversion of the Indians continues to be a ghostly presence throughout the Midwest, but perhaps it can most be felt in the university here in Milwaukee that bears his name. What does it mean to teach and learn in a university named for an explorer and a missionary to the Indians? This paper will suggest that the teaching of literature can and should be motivated by the same spirit of exploration and daring, the sheer excess of energy that the Jesuits have traditionally provided to Western civilization. But just as Fr. Marquette began a dialogue with the Indians that had far-reaching political consequences for them, so too do we need to realize the essentially political nature of our educational enterprise. All choices are "political" in the broadest sense of the word, but choices in education—curriculum, methodology, skills emphasized—are particularly political in the sense that a world view and a value system are being promulgated in every decision we make for our students' educations.

But before we can understand the role that literature has played in the traditional Jesuit curriculum, it is necessary to appreciate one of the central tenets of Jesuit education. Jesuit universities were founded, or rather they evolved, in an attempt to shape the thoughts and actions of the populace that became what we now think of as professionals. By seeking to nurture and create a haven for intellectual, moral, ethical, and creative energies, Jesuit universities have functioned throughout their history as sanctuaries, bastions where the best that has been thought and written can be explored in safety and comfort. As such, Jesuits have committed themselves to the spiritual dimension of education, while in America Jesuits have particularly devoted their energies to higher education as a way of shaping and influencing the direction and values of the populace. It is no exaggeration to say that Jesuit universities have attempted to actualize the kingdom of God on earth; they have tried to create in their universities a "paradise" where faculty, students, and staff can come together
to explore and further understand the mysteries of this world and the next. But all paradises have their costs, and Jesuit universities have only recently begun to understand the toll that the contemporary debate about "political correctness" has taken on our traditional mission and values.

First of all, one has to begin any discussion of teaching by admitting that education is not a value-neutral exchange of information; instead it can more accurately be described as a method whereby instructors aim to form character and habitual perspectives. The Jesuits as a religious order may have begun as activists committed to spearheading the forces of the Counter-Reformation, but very quickly they realized that the most effective Catholic population was a highly educated one. And so they determined to build schools that would train the elite, the future leaders of European society, thus ensuring that their values and beliefs would continue to be the ones held by the dominant and ruling classes in Europe. We cannot underestimate their accomplishments as educators, nor can we fail now to understand why their continuing mission lies primarily in education. The excess of energy that allowed them to travel throughout the world as missionaries, spreading their influence, exists today in the universities that they founded and continue to serve. But there are very real questions for us today, and this essay will focus on the three I consider most relevant. First of all, what does it mean to teach in the spirit of the Jesuits? Secondly, what does instruction in literature provide a student trained in the Jesuit tradition? And finally, what might an ideal curriculum in literature include in a Jesuit university in the late twentieth century?

II

Over the past several years the Jesuits as an order have involved a number of faculty in many committees and study groups to attempt to define with them what it is we mean when we talk about "Jesuit values" or the "Ignatian spirit." Those terms are somewhat amorphous, largely because the Jesuits have been historically adaptable and "political" as an order. Now some of their critics have called this particular characteristic "casuistry," but I prefer to call it "flexibility" or "pragmatism." The Jesuits have survived and prospered as
a religious order because of this very ability to adapt to the particular conditions they encountered in vastly different environments. When we say we are instructing students in the Jesuit tradition, however, we should translate this value into a central tenet of Jesuit thinking: the radical goodness of the world, a world-affirming posture. Unlike other religious orders that sought a retreat or escape from what they considered a fallen and evil world, the Jesuits have proclaimed a reverence for creation and for human culture. The vivid art works and baroque splendors that fill Jesuit churches stand as emblems of affirmation to the powers of human creativity and artistic genius. Human beings imitate God’s power when they too create works of beauty and goodness. And so the study of literature—the poetry and prose created to depict microcosms of the larger macrocosm—stands as a value, a good in its own right. The capacity to create and appreciate literature, like the missionary impulse, is that “magis,” that “more” in the human spirit, that excess of creativity and energy that God gives to those who are blessed with the capacity to receive it. We, like the earliest Jesuits, are affirming the world when we learn to adapt flexibly to and to accept with love the real and potential conditions we find in our environments. This does not mean that we accept social injustice or corruption; it means that we see beyond the evil to the potential good that is always possible in every human situation. Our students need to be encouraged to develop just such a perspective.

Another central Jesuit value is their belief that they and their educational institutions are creating “men and women for others.” The talents of our students need to be directed not simply towards their own careers and self-aggrandizement, but towards the needs of their communities. By presenting novelistic accounts of entire communities, by representing in fiction the interconnections between all human beings, the study of literature actually aids students in seeing how crucial every person is in the “divine plan.” And connected to this value is the Jesuit commitment to social justice, to creating a faith that actively seeks justice for all. One could mention several literary texts that develop the theme of social justice, but the most succinct and most powerful one I have taught recently is Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas,” a short story that depicts a society whose happiness is based on keeping one child...
locked up and starving. The child-scapegoat functions in his role only as long as others are prepared to allow him to serve in this capacity. But one day a group of people walk away from this utopia; they reject the inhumanity done to an innocent and they repudiate the false happiness based on the sufferings and exploitation of another. Students react powerfully to this story, particularly when as a class they draw out the analogous implications to their own world. If the majority of our students come from privileged backgrounds, they also as a group are remarkably sensitive to their obligations to serve the less fortunate. Literature presents them with social and economic parables about the need to give and share with others. It is truly inspirational to see their own powers of empathy for others awakened while reading and discussing literature that explores issues of social justice. To make the connection even more explicit I frequently ask students to locate and present to the class newspaper stories that make concrete the social justice and moral issues that we have studied in the fiction. The plight of the homeless, the scourge of violence and drug activity, the absence of nurturing religious and parental traditions—these topics are daily fare in every newspaper in the country. By discussing these topics in an academic context students begin to see that the abstractions they have been discussing in the literary texts are based on concrete realities in their own very real external world. Jesuit education at its best is predicated on the belief that education provides the student with the intellectual tools for social change; it demands actions, involvement, and solutions from its students.

If Jesuits seek to promote social awareness and community, they also foster individual development and care, known in their tradition as "cura personalis," or concern for the growth of each person. Each of us has a particular mission in life, and Jesuit institutions seek to assist every student with discovering and then pursuing that vocation. Literature can help students in this area also by presenting them with fictional models of other sensibilities. Adolescents have been accused of being notoriously myopic, seeing events only from their own vantage points. Literature presents reality from multiple points of view, and it allows students access to the minds and motivations of several different and conflicting consciousnesses at once. Experiment-
ing with writing assignments that allows students to see a particular incident from several perspectives is effective in acquainting students with the reality of people other than themselves. For instance, the works of the contemporary Catholic novelist Jon Hassler, author of *Staggerford*, *The Green Journey*, *North of Hope*, and four other novels set in Northern Minnesota, present us with a number of dramatic incidents that students could reenact from several different perspectives. Hassler's heroes and heroines are priests and teachers, people who have committed themselves to serving the best interests—the spiritual and intellectual growth—of other people. Using a device called "persona writing." I frequently have my students assume the character of someone in the novel and write a letter to another character in the text explaining his or her point of view. Students tell me this is the single most effective device they have experienced for understanding the reality of someone else's situation. Persona writing is a useful pedagogy for the classroom, but I intend it to translate into their interactions with others, their concern and empathy for others in their daily lives.

When students learn to read effectively they are learning to look inside the minds of people who are intrinsically different from them. One can teach *Beowulf* the way our culture has taught us to read—from the hero's point of view. But if we also teach it with John Gardner's postmodern novel *Grendel*—the same events told from the perspective of the dispossessed—we have a fuller experience of what it means to be human. The same is true if we teach *Jane Eyre* side by side with Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The literary examples abound, but the point is that literature stands as a testament to the fact that all human beings tell their own narratives from the vantage point of their own sensibilities. And every story deserves to be heard.

III

What should our students gain, then, from instruction in literature at a Jesuit institution? As I have already suggested, they should acquire an appreciation for the sheer power and beauty of artistic creation. They should develop a sensitivity to the power of language, metaphor, symbol, nuance, and structure to convey meaning. And they should encounter in literary worlds the reality of community
and interdependence. They should seek to understand that each person’s uniqueness and perspective shapes his or her vision of reality. Obviously, also, students need to have sustained practice in reading and writing skills, with constructive feedback from their instructors. Also crucial in the study of literary texts is what we now call “critical thinking skills,” the abilities to infer, analyze, synthesize, deduct, and induct.

In the final analysis, however, students should be presented in the study of literature with moral issues. Now this is a highly contested terrain and I tread here with more than a little trepidation. But there can be no denying the fact that students need to develop a moral and ethical view out of which they can make consistent and life-affirming choices. Literature presents them over and over again with characters who make choices and then have to live with the consequences of those decisions. This is not to say that I advocate that we teach literature as if we were teaching Sunday School lessons. But I am conscious of the fact that all literature presents our students with moral values and ethical standards—some are self-destructive and some are life-affirming. At a Jesuit institution it seems to me that we should choose the latter rather than the former.

Let me cite here a few examples. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* the heroine deserts her children, commits adultery, and then when she realizes that she cannot live the sort of life she wants, she kills herself. The novel is a sort of Americanized *Madame Bovary*, and was recognized as such at the time of its publication. Over the years that I have taught both these novels the students have raised serious questions about the moral issues involved: adultery, child desertion, and suicide are not recognized by our culture as positive moral and life-affirming acts. When students read these novels in my class, particularly female students, they are not presented with a celebration of either of these heroines. I work instead to help the students see both women as victims of their own self-created and self-deluded notions of romantic love and “personal freedom.” One could mention in contrast Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, which deals with much the same material, but then presents a heroine who affirms her moral responsibilities to her child and herself. College-age students are exploring issues related to their own incipient adulthood and the consequences
of their choices. It seems imperative that as instructors we work to help them affirm standards of personal moral responsibility, and literature certainly can assist them in examining a fictional presentation of the full implications of a decision and an act.

As the two examples given above stress female development, I might mention texts that explore aspects of the fictional male experience. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, presents the consequences wrought by the evils of "masculine" hubris, irresponsible scientific experimentation, and selfishness. The community and family pay the toll for Victor's mad quest, as do the shipmates of Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*. Both novels present the dangers of excessive "masculine" values—rationality, individualism, and pride. All literature, whether we want to recognize it or not, is presenting morality dramas to our students, and it is our responsibility to choose carefully and then direct the class discussion to the ethical imperatives involved in all literary texts.

**IV**

Finally, I would like to consider what an ideal literary curriculum might look like in a Jesuit institution. The traditional model of Jesuit education stresses a curriculum that examines the canonical British and American classics. Certainly our students need to be grounded in a knowledge of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, and the "great tradition" of the last three centuries in England and America. But just as the Jesuits continually pushed boundaries, just as they habitually explored every major continent of their known world, so would I suggest that our students must have instruction in the literary classics of other cultures—Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. They also should have course work in the multicultural literary traditions of our own country—African-, Asian-, Latino-, and Native-American. Women's literature, ghettoized in most curriculums, should be mainstreamed throughout the English curriculum so that an inclusive dialogue of men's and women's voices can be heard. None of these suggestions seem to me to be revolutionary, yet I know that such a curriculum does not exist at Marquette, nor does it seem likely to evolve in the near future.
What is also alarming in the literary curriculum, however, is the sheer absence of Catholic writers and themes. I would claim that a Jesuit university has an obligation to present its students with course work that acquaints them with the heritage and traditions of Catholic culture. A course or seminar in Major Catholic Writers should be standard fare in any Jesuit institution, and yet we have not offered such a course in decades. The reading list could include some of the most prominent and well-known British writers of the past two centuries: John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, James Joyce, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Seamus Heaney, and David Lodge, as well as a number of equally well-known American writers such as Orestes Brownson, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Katherine Ann Porter, J. F. Powers, and Allen Tate. Most of these writers are studied at some point in our curriculum, but placing them within their religious context sheds new light on the traditions within which they worked.

The most recent trend in Catholic scholarship is to analyze artists who do not produce Catholic works per se, but whose works reveal the residual traces and presences of a Catholic sensibility. Thus the films of Catholic-raised directors like Martin Scorsese, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robert Altman all can be analyzed as documents that rework the dominant religious themes of guilt and salvation, ritual and burlesque. The fact is that our students are tremendously interested in understanding the Catholic tradition and the power it has had in shaping their own values and vision of life. Demonstrating how the tradition has been transmitted and transmuted in artistic works is an effective method for analyzing its continued power and presence.

I am well aware of the objections that might be raised to adding courses on World Literature in Translation or American Multicultural Literature or Catholic Literature to our curriculum. One could legitimately be concerned about inundating the students with courses: “We cannot teach them everything in four years.” But surely we can offer our students a broader and more inclusive selection of courses, whether we require them or not. And surely offering
our students “more” is in our tradition. If we shy away from offering the courses because we as instructors do not have the “formal training,” then we have failed to challenge ourselves as teachers and scholars. Surely we must make the commitment to live up to the challenge to grow continually, to reach into ever-new fields of knowledge, to train ourselves. Intellectual imperialism? I choose to see such a posture as characterized by flexibility and adaptability, congruent with the best of our Jesuit heritage.

V

In a 1935 essay entitled “Religion and Literature,” T. S. Eliot claimed that he wanted to discover a new definition of the relationship between religion and canonical literature: “I am not concerned here with religious literature, but with the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature.” He went on in The Idea of a Christian Society (1939) to describe a “community of Christians” who instinctively and spontaneously acted on their allegiance to a system of religious belief. Teaching can produce that “community” in the classroom, just as we can train students who are steeped in Catholicism’s history, literature, and traditions. But we can also train students to understand how their religious beliefs influence everything they study, see, and experience, and all texts, religious or not. It is this world-affirming outlook that we need to instill in our students. St. Ignatius knew that perception controlled reality, and in the final analysis he knew that perception was shaped by education.

Make no mistake about it, however, it is a political decision to act on the heritage of the Jesuits. By radically reclaiming the spirit of exploration and discovery of uncharted lands we open ourselves up to the challenge of the new. By altering our curriculum so that we teach new literatures from cultures we have not traditionally embraced, we are following in the footsteps of all those Jesuits who travelled to Africa, India, the Orient and, indeed, to Milwaukee. And by reasserting our traditions as Catholics we shall once again be able to listen to the very Catholic novelists and poets that we shut out of our curriculum years ago (in what was a shortsighted attempt to look more like secular universities). These are political acts, correct or incorrect. But if it is political to affirm the study of multicultural and
Catholic literatures, it is also political not to study them. In paradise we will still be presented with choices.

It was with such thoughts that I looked once again at the statue of Fr. Jacques Marquette on the shores of Lake Michigan. I knew then that the problem with the statue was that it was a statue, a static icon, a Europeanized and stylized depiction of a man whose spirit was most alive because it was always in motion, even today. That activity, that energy is best represented in a university that is constantly growing and challenging itself and reaching out to new ideas and new peoples. If we seek only to build statues we grow static and stale and we will never fulfill the spirit of Fr. Marquette or St. Ignatius. We will never seize the "magis" if we fail to believe in the best that is to be, jump into the canoe, and sail into the unknown—the uncharted regions of the mind and the spirit.

Further Reading

The following is a selective listing of sources that explore the issue of teaching literature within a Jesuit context:


