Can the Taught Book Speak?

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At Columbia University in the year 1928, an English professor named William York Tindall employed an unusual technique to teach a novel. He was a great admirer of the novelist and poet James Joyce. At the time, however, the Random House edition of Joyce's most famous novel, *Ulysses*, was banned in the United States. It was banned because it was deemed pornography.[1] Tindall, who owned one bootleg copy of the novel, decided to teach it in spite of the ban. To do so, he chained the book to a desk in the college library. Students reserved one-hour blocks of time in order to read the book before class. One would imagine that the blocks of time were reserved far in advance. For, if you are familiar with *Ulysses*, you know that it is one of the more difficult books in the English language to read. It is certainly harder to read than an essay published in the *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, harder even than a difficult philosopher one might assign in a philosophy of education course. Harder than Jacques Derrida or Jacques Rancière, for example.

One might juxtapose this event with a recent event that happened when this essay was being written. Here is the account of one of this essay's authors: I wanted to acquire James Joyce's famous novel so that I would have it in front of me. I opened my Safari Internet browser. I typed in the words "James Joyce Ulysses pdf." I was happily greeted with ten choices as to how I might download Joyce's text. (Only ten choices appeared because I had chosen the default of ten choices per screen. Certainly, there could have been many more screens with many more choices.) I chose a website called planetbook.com, and was greeted with a choice as to whether I wanted a version of *Ulysses* that simulated the experience of reading a book, with two pages per screen, or a version that contained just one page per screen. Because I am farsighted, I chose the one-page-per-screen version, and was reading the first page of *Ulysses* almost instantly. From opening my browser to reading Joyce, there was a lapse of not more than twenty-two seconds. Of course, I am still not sure whether the version I had in front of me was a *legal* version or not. I am still not sure if my own reading of *Ulysses* might not have been as against the law as the reading of Tindall's students.

It is the stark juxtaposition between these two events that motivates this essay. Specifically, it is the difference between a book that has been banned and must be fettered by the teacher in order to be unbanned, and a book that is free of chains, practically begging to be read, that we would like to address. Embedded in this juxtaposition we see the following educational questions. First, what does the banning, and the unbanning of books have to do with teaching? Second, what is the nature of a book, and do we honor the nature of books when we teach them? And third, is it possible for educators to let books speak for themselves? With the help of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Rancière, these are the questions we will unpack in this essay.

Books that Can Speak and Books that Cannot

We begin by using a discussion about the merit of books that goes back at least to Plato, an argument proposing the dangers of writing and the benefits of speaking. We situate four acts squarely within this argument: (1) banning books, (2) banning books *in schools*, (3) teaching banned books, and (4) teaching books that are not banned. Plato's account of the dangers of writing in the *Phaedrus* is, of course, well known. It is illustrated in comments like this by Socrates:

> The fact is, Phaedrus, that writing involves a similar disadvantage to painting. The productions of painting look like living beings, but if you ask them a question they maintain a solemn silence. The same holds true of written words; you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again. Besides, once a thing is committed to writing it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; a writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers. And if it is ill-treated or unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its rescue; it is quite incapable of defending or helping itself.[2]

To ban a book in a general way, to make a book illegal to read, is certainly steeped in this Platonic fear of the written text — what Jacques Derrida calls the phono-logocentric tendency. One bans a book because one fears that the book will be misinterpreted, will not set a good example, or will incite its readers to act. A book is banned on the presumption that the written word will exert a certain force on its readers, that the written word can be dangerous. The written word is silent, so a book can be read without others knowing one is reading. The written word is mobile, so it can be read anywhere. The written word is a material object that can be passed from hand to hand, so it can be read by anyone in whose hands it ends up. The written word can be interpreted as its reader chooses. Or as Socrates puts it, the written word "needs its parent to come to the rescue; it is quite incapable of defending or helping itself." Books are banned for these phono-logocentric reasons, among others.

Interestingly, banning books *in schools* fits quite differently into this old argument. When a book is banned from being taught — rather than being banned from society at large — there is, all of a sudden, a dramatic reversal of the very logic of banning. There is a turn in the Platonic argument. A book is banned in school not to put the book out of circulation per se, but to put the book out of circulation in a particular place: the school. In such a place, the book is likely to be augmented by the human voice, authorized by a teacher. When books are banned from schools, the fear is not that the written word "needs its parent to come to the rescue." There is rather an opposite fear that the teacher will elevate the status of the book to the level of the spoken word. The following 1999 note to teachers in Zeela Public Schools in Michigan illustrates this fear. It appears in conjunction with the banning of *Harry Potter* from readings in grades five through eight. Mr. Feenstra, the Superintendent, writes:

> *[T]eachers please take note:* The instructional method of reading aloud to students offers one of the strongest reading influences available. Literature comes alive for many students when they hear a story read by the teacher. Such role modeling is outstanding for all of our youth, particularly when students are exposed to literature they otherwise might not have chosen to

> read.… Therefore, the literature selected should be of quality writing and not be controversial to any student in the classroom…[3]

Banning books in schools turns the Platonic concern away from the written, and toward the worrisome supplement of the teacher's presence.[4]

If banning a book at large re-iterates the Platonic worry, and banning a book in school reverses that concern, then teaching a banned book cuts a deal between the two. To teach a banned book, one not only brings the written text into availability. One also authorizes the written text with the voice. Professor Tindall not only brought a bootleg copy of *Ulysses* into the library so that the silent word might be read by students. He also taught the book. He authorized the novel with his presence. Importantly, however, the deal that is cut by teaching a banned book can never be the *same* as unbanning a book. If a book is banned because it is dangerous as a written text, then a book could only be *un*banned by letting loose the dangerous potential of such a written text. A book is only unbanned when it is let loose to be read by anyone, anywhere, any time. It is unbanned when it can be read in public *or* in private, aloud *or* in silence, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, without "a parent to protect" the book. When one teaches a banned book, one falls short of unbanning the book on a number of counts, but primarily on the last count. When one teaches a banned book, one does something different from unbanning the book. One parents the book. One stands against Plato's fear of writing to be sure, but one also sides *with* that same fear. One lets the book be read, but one makes sure there is a parent present at the reading.

The last of our four cases is the teaching of *any* book; or, teaching books that are not banned. If the former example of teaching banned books shows us something, it shows that the Platonic worry about the written word is alive and well when one teaches. Whether one teaches a banned book, or whether one teaches a book that is not banned, one "parents" the book. Thus, teaching just any book has structural similarities with teaching a banned book, but there are significant differences as well. Books that are not banned are not, at least in theory, completely unavailable to our students. Non-banned books do not need to be bootlegged and chained to desks. As a teacher, one does not *need* to bring one's curriculum into availability. It is already available. The errant book is already there. But the teacher does *choose* one among other errant books. Thus teaching any book has the same parenting tendency as does teaching banned books. Non-banned books may not *need* to be chosen among others. But we choose them anyway.

Indeed, we teach even free books *as if they are banned* even though they are not banned. We teach the book as if it needs help speaking. We choose books that do not need to be chosen. And when we choose these books we are hyper-Platonic. We parent books doubly, first by choosing them and then by making teachings out of them. When the teacher teaches a non-banned book, he or she echoes Plato's concern about the written text. The teacher "parents" the book rather than staying away from a text that might otherwise circulate free of interference. He or she gives the written word voice as if it does not speak for itself.

Deconstruction and the Book

We have so far looked at the status of the banned book and the taught book in the context of the Platonic concern with writing. We have indicated that educators are still deeply implicated in this Platonic concern. In some ways, teachers are more Platonic than Plato. We are doubly concerned with taming the written word. By choosing the book and then teaching the book we intervene doubly in order to ensure that the written word does *not* remain free-floating. We treat even non-banned books as if they need to be parented into freedom. We establish the double-parenthood of books. Indeed, we go out of our way to chain books at the same time that we claim to allow them to speak.

To further examine this predicament of the teacher and the book, it is helpful to use the deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida, as is well known, has spent some effort, especially in *Of Grammatology*, to problematize the philosophical habit of prioritizing the spoken word over the written.[5] He shows that those who are said to advocate the spoken can never escape the trace of the written. He clearly demonstrates that the written and the spoken can never be untangled. What is less well known, however, is that Derrida shows that the same interconnectedness between speaking and writing shows itself in the relation between the teacher and that which is taught. Derrida posits that the teacher is in a structural relation to what is taught, which parallels the relationship between the spoken word and the written word.[6]

Commenting on the act of teaching, Derrida notes that "Deconstruction — or at least what I have proposed under this name, which indeed is as good as another, but no better — has therefore in principle always concerned the apparatus and function of teaching in general…"[7] One way to understand this statement is in terms of the "supplement" that the teacher offers to the book that he or she assigns.[8] Derrida reminds us that the phenomenon of teaching is a practice wherein the teacher is called upon to erase him or herself in order to become a mouthpiece for whatever content is under consideration. Or rather, one might say that the teacher is *mistakenly* called upon to erase him or herself to become such a mouthpiece. Mistakenly, because the assumption that the teacher might be erased can be challenged, as Derrida has shown. Describing this assumed ability of the teacher to erase him or herself, he notes, "When I say I pose questions, I pretend to say nothing that would be a thesis. I pretend to pose or posit something that at bottom would not pose or posit itself.… This alleged neutrality, the non-thetic appearance of a question that is posed without even seeming to pose itself, is what constructs the teaching body."[9]

What Derrida thus reminds us is that the very act of teaching is always a parasitical act. When one teaches, one may *wish* to step out of the way in order to encourage the thinking of students. One may hope that teaching opens a door so that the student might have direct access to the book. To the contrary, however, the door that is supposedly opened to a book is always the door of this or that teacher, on this or that day, in this or that place. Even the simple act of asking a teacherly question is a parasitical act. One cannot ask a question from nowhere. To pose a question

about a book, for example, means that one has formulated some sort of thesis in order to be able launch the question in the first place.

Teachers and Books

These deconstructive insights, coupled with the Platonic discussion above, ultimately lead to a certain figure of the teacher vis-à-vis the book that she teaches, a figure informed by the teacher's parental role, and the teacher's parasitical role. This figure of the teacher vis-à-vis the book might be formulated as follows: A teacher teaches a book. However, the teacher is not fully a teacher unless the book is not fully a book. That is to say, a teacher needs a book, but she needs a particular kind of book: a book in chains, a banned book, a book that does not speak for itself. If a teacher were to teach a free book, a book unfettered by place, space, or human voice, then the teacher would not be a teacher. A teacher without a book to call her own —without a book to chain in some way, shape, or form — ceases to *be*, as a teacher.

To put this another way, as soon as a teacher teaches a book, then the book ceases to be a book. A book, after all, is meant to be *free*. A book is written. It is written to be read. A book is a book precisely because it is meant to be read, and to be read by anyone. It is meant to be read by anyone who chooses to read the book. If it were not to be read by anyone, then it would not be a book, but would rather be a private communiqué. This bookness of the book signifies something important for educators. Namely, it is not in the nature of a book to be taught. Why? Because a book is, itself, language. It is language that speaks. If the book was not language, if it did not speak, then it would not be a book. A book is not intended to be interpreted *into* speech. A book does not require that people come to consensus about what it says. A book is *itself* consensus. It already says something before any consensus. There is no book that requires or expects a teacher, just as there is no speaking person who requires or expects a teacher. A book speaks in and of itself. It speaks without the need of parasites, chains, or megaphones.

Of course, there are exceptions to the above description of the book. There are a few books that *are* meant to be taught. But even the special word that describes such books indicates the distorted nature of a meant-to-be-taught book. The meant-to-be-taught book has been given an especially redundant name. It is called a textbook. As the etymology of this word implies, a textbook is a "bookbook." It is a book that does not speak in and of itself. It speaks instead of other books. The textbook is the teacher of another book at the same time that it is a book itself. But even in the case of the textbook, a book that is written for the express purpose of being taught, the very teaching of a textbook is a remarkably redundant act. For even a textbook qualifies as a book by virtue of the fact that it is meant to be read by *anyone*. A textbook may be deliberately written for the venue of the classroom, true; it may be written expressly for the teacher to use. Nevertheless, it is still a book insofar as it is available to anyone in spite of its avowed purpose. Indeed, the uncanny feeling one gets when reading a textbook, the feeling that a textbook actually makes the teacher unnecessary — this uncanniness stems precisely from the fact that there are still remnants

of true book-ness even in this most teacherly of books. The textbook, or "bookbook," is a redundant reminder of the redundancy of the teacher who would teach books. In short, a teacher is a teacher precisely because she must teach the books she teaches, yet a book is a book precisely because it need not be taught. The teacher's job is thus the book's negation.

But What to Do with the Book?

At this point, one might be quite justified in objecting to all of this negation. One might ask: If teachers, once they start to teach books, are teaching books that are not really books — if teachers are teaching books as if books could not speak for themselves — then what are we to do differently? Is it at all possible to teach a book and have it remain a book? To attempt an answer to this question, we want to look at one historical example of a radical pedagogue who understood the challenge of teaching a book in all its bookness. The story of Joseph Jacotot, as recounted in Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, has now become commonplace enough that we will not recount Jacotot's teachings in detail. Suffice it to say that Jacotot attained great success by following a simple procedure. Jacotot taught subjects without knowing anything of the subjects he was teaching. Instead of teaching subjects of his expertise, he delinked the subject of knowledge from the teaching subject. As Rancière puts it, Jacotot "concluded that the act of the teacher who obliges another intelligence to exercise itself was independent of the possession of knowledge, that it was indeed possible that one who is ignorant might permit another who is ignorant to know something unknown to both."[10]

Jacotot and his followers were highly successful, so the story goes. But as time went on, there were efforts to make a method out of Jacotot's teaching. In the end, it was precisely the effort to create a method of Jacotot's teaching that killed his teaching. There is, however, an aspect of Jacotot's teaching that has not often been remarked upon. The centrality of the book in his pedagogical logic is not commonly noted. For Jacotot and his pedagogy, it is not only that the teacher must remain "ignorant" of the knowledge that she is to teach. Together with this ignorance comes a set of presumptions about the nature of the book. The teacher who remains ignorant of the book she teaches remains confident that the book itself has something to say on its own. Rancière has this to say about the books that Jacotot teaches: "There is nothing behind the written page, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an *other* intelligence, that of the explicator; no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text."[11]

What Rancière and the historical figure of Jacotot are able to show is that a radically different form of pedagogy depends upon a radically different understanding of the book. In Jacotot's case, in order for one to be an ignorant schoolmaster one must accept the true nature of the written text. One must accept that a book *can and does* speak for itself in the absence of an explicator. Thus, while the common reading of Jacotot's adventures underscores the impossibility of sustaining an educational system wherein teachers need no knowledge of that which they teach, this common reading does not suffice. There is an additional interpretation, an interpretation of the

bookness of the book, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, that is of equal importance. Jacotot's pedagogy is destined to fail not only because society cannot accept the reign of ignorant schoolmasters. It is destined to fail because society cannot accept the reign of the book that speaks for itself. Jacotot's pedagogy cannot be turned into a method not so much because ignorance cannot be turned into a method. It cannot be turned into a method because there is no educational method for teaching books that teach themselves. When a book "has no false bottom," as Rancière puts it, then there is no pedagogical strategy for helping the book. The book helps itself simply by being a book. It needs no method, and it needs no chains.

Holding the Book Differently

To conclude, we would like to return to the juxtaposition with which we began this essay. On the one hand, we have a banned book. It is chained to a desk in order to be taught. On the other, we have our contemporary age where books, almost all books, are available within seconds. Yet at the same time that texts are available within seconds, educators treat texts — we "parent" texts — as if they somehow do not speak for themselves. We treat texts as if they need to be brought into the light of day, as if they need help, need a parent, in order to be read. Thus, educators today not only help students to read books. At the same time, we instruct students in the art of understanding what a book is. As a teacher who teaches a book, one sends a message as to what the book needs or does not need. Unfortunately, one usually sends the message that the book one teaches needs help speaking. Teachers who teach books do more than teach books. They teach the lesson that books do not speak for themselves.

We live in a time when books are ubiquitous. They are easy to obtain. It is not like the days of old when books were so often banned, or, even if not banned, were mostly in short supply. Thus, the question we find pressing today is this one: How can we begin to teach books in a way that is not anachronistic? How can we begin to teach books in a way that admits to the availability of books, and that honors the freedom each book should have if it is to be a book? Some will be quick to say that the answer rests in different a kind of pedagogy. It will be said that if one is "critical" enough, or if one is "progressive" enough, then the book will be freed. But one should not agree with such quick answers. It will be said, for example, by critical educators, that the way to free a book is to reveal its ideology to the student. Or, it will be said by progressive educators that if one encourages the agency of the student, then the book will be free. In both of these instances, however, there is a confusion between a book that is freely *read*, and a book that is free. It is true that one can create the circumstances for a book to be freely read. One can set up classrooms in such a way that students read books in a free way. But here, one must make a distinction between a freely read book — which is a subjective statement about the student's orientation toward the book — and the book itself, which continues to be treated as if it does not speak for itself. A book can still be treated as if it does not speak *while* being freely read.

The problem of teaching a book that inevitably becomes a non-book is vexing. Derrida has good reason to suggest that teaching is a deconstructive occupation.

Teaching is deconstructive because teachers are, by virtue of their role as teachers, parasitical to texts. There is also good reason that Joseph Jacotot's teachings could not be replicated in any methodical way, because books that are free do not submit to a method. In both of these cases, one comes to the realization that once a teacher meets the book, she inevitably treats the book it as if it needs some sort of rescue. To conclude, perhaps now a solution to this problem is a bit closer — at least insofar as this essay has identified the problem, and insofar as it is usually easier to solve a problem once one knows what the problem is. Simply stated, the problem is this: the taught book cannot speak. Indeed, the solution to this problem would seem simple now that the problem has been identified. The problem would be solved if teachers were to leave books alone. Since the taught book cannot speak, let's not teach any books. But the solution to this problem is becoming more and more difficult to attain in actuality, even if it might seem simple in theory. While it is indeed possible to imagine teachers who leave books alone, the fact remains that books are all around us. They are available in seconds. They are close to the teacher's hand. With books all around us, who will not succumb to grabbing a chain from time to time?

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11. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 9–10.

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