On Teaching Books, "Restricting Speech," and the Promise of Education

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In a provocative essay entitled "Can the Taught Book Speak?"[1] delivered at the 2012 Philosophy of Education Society conference, Charles Bingham, Antew Dejene, Alma Krilic, and Emily Sadowski attempt to demonstrate that books that are taught cannot speak and that, therefore, educators should reconsider the ageless pedagogical method of choosing and then teaching books that they want their students to learn. In order to provide support for their assertion that the taught book cannot speak for itself, Bingham and his coauthors ("the authors") first draw on Plato's discussion of writing in the dialogue *Phaedrus*. They include the following comment by Socrates:

> Yes, because there's something odd about writing, Phaedrus, which makes it exactly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof silence. It's the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on forever giving the same single piece of information. Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs its father to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or helping itself.[2]

Clearly, Plato's point is *not*, as the authors suggest, that the *taught* book cannot speak for itself; his point is rather that once a text has been written, it is then up to the reader to interpret (or misinterpret) it since its author ("father") is not usually there to defend it. Unlike the authors, Plato was in favor of the author or teacher coming to the assistance of those readers who may struggle to understand the text. Taking this quote out of its intended context (the advantage of verbal dialectic over written texts), I suppose, led them to misconstrue Plato's meaning. Ironically, however, they invoke Plato in order to make an argument that the latter would never have agreed with and that Socrates's comment above plainly disputes: "The teacher 'parents' the book rather than staying away from a text that might otherwise circulate free from interference. He or she gives the written word voice as if it does not speak for itself."[3]

In order to further substantiate their claim that the taught book cannot speak, the authors draw on Jacques Derrida's deconstructive theory and his notion of teaching as a parasitical act. They write that

> 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 students 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.[4]

Although the authors do not define the notion of a parasitical act, I take it that what they mean by this notion is that teaching is an act that is *dependent* upon and

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mediated by the object of teaching. Without the object of teaching, without the need to explain a book, a problem in math, a historical event or a scientific theory, there would be no need for teachers. Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, what is important to realize is that, much like Derrida, the authors buy into a particular postmodern discourse of oppression and bondage, a discourse that shapes the way in which they make sense of teaching and education. They write that "a book speaks in and of itself. It speaks without the need of parasites, chains, or megaphones."[5] In their view, a book does not need a teacher or an expert to interpret it because such an act only serves to distort the book or restrain it from speaking for itself. Yet, the problem with the postmodern discourse to which the authors subscribe is that it is exceedingly reductionistic, one that associates the teaching of books solely with domination, hegemony, and parasitical acts. Following Abraham Maslow, who famously noted that "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail,"[6] I submit that such discourse is far too narrow and limiting. Moreover, as I will show in the final part of this essay, this particular postmodern discourse is not the only, or even the best, way to make sense of the act of teaching.

The only example that the authors provide to illustrate the notion that a book that is *not* taught can speak for itself is the one cited by Jacques Rancière in his essay "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," namely, the case of Joseph Jacotot. Jacotot was a teacher who "unexpectedly found himself in the 1820s, teaching Flemish students whose language he did not know and who did not know his, by using a fortuitous text, a bilingual edition of *Telemaque* being published in Brussels."[7] Rancière informs us that Jacotot assigned the book to his students while instructing them to read half of it with the aid of the translation, to try to memorize what they had learned, and to read the other half quickly and to write down in French what they thought about it. Surprisingly, he discovered that these students could express themselves quite effectively in French though he had not taught them anything. Based on this single example, the authors conclude that it is possible to utilize a book while simultaneously remaining ignorant about it so that rather than trying to explain it to the students they would have a chance to learn from the book for themselves.

I do not wish to dispute the historical accuracy of the case of Jacotot and his students; nor do I doubt that it is possible for students to learn from a book about which their teacher is ignorant, though I am not sure that we should be advocating for teachers assigning books they have not read. What is troubling, however, is that the authors utilize this incident to substantiate their assertion that, since the book that was *not* taught by Jacotot could speak, it automatically follows that books that *are* taught cannot. One example of students who learned some valuable insights from a book that was not taught is enough to convince them that, when educators assist their students to make sense of books, they may be hurting them or doing injustice to the book.

Ultimately, what is most troubling about the conclusion reached by the authors — that the taught book cannot speak — is that it leads to a *dead end*. Indeed, they, too, seem to recognize this problem when they note in the last paragraph of their

essay that the implication of their assertion that the taught book cannot speak is that we should not teach *any* books! But they quickly dismiss this alternative as unrealistic because they believe that the ubiquitous nature of books today will make it impossible for teachers not to use them. In the final analysis, their essay falls short not only because of the predetermined nature of the question on which they focus — can the taught book speak? It falls short primarily because it dodges a number of more fundamental issues such as, *what does it mean for a book to speak*?; *who is the speaker of the book*?; and, finally, *how can educators teach in ways that enable books to speak*? In the remainder of this essay, I briefly explore each of these questions.

Books, Speech, and Meaning

What do we mean when we say that books are capable of *speaking* to their readers? We know that books can communicate information, tell stories, express moods and emotions, inspire us to learn more, provoke us to think about issues from multiple perspectives and much, much more. In his essay "The Place of Literature in an Increasingly Virtual World," Trevor Cairney writes,

> Words and the narratives of literature communicate or signify joy, amusement, fear, curiosity, love and sadness. For some fortunate children living protected and safe lives, books can also provide their first experience of hatred, death, disease, isolation, war, divorce and so on. These aspects of the human condition need to be understood even by children, but they do not necessarily need to be experienced firsthand. Books allow us to reflect on these and other experiences, and hence come to a greater understanding of our world and ourselves.[8]

The power of literature and stories in general is that they enable us to experience the joyful and uplifting as well as the sad and depressing aspects of human existence. Stories are powerful, according to Cairney, in that they help us build bridges between our lives and the lives of others. As the actor Anthony Hopkins, who plays the author and professor C. S. Lewis in the movie *Shadowlands*, remarks to one of his students, "we read books to know that we are not alone."[9]

In order to illustrate the power of stories to move their readers, Cairney discusses E. B. White's classic *Charlotte's Web*. Cairney emphasizes that *Charlotte's Web* is not just a narrative about a chance encounter between a pig and a spider that eventually changes the pig's life. Instead, he asserts that, when reading this book, one can be

> moved by the rich thematic exploration of friendship, devotion, love, sacrifice and redemption. You can be amused, saddened, frustrated and confused by the characters and their actions. And you can certainly gain scientific knowledge about spiders. But beyond the things to be learned, here is a narrative so poignant that it buffets the emotions and can change the way we see things in our own lives.[10]

Cairney's point is that good books and stories in general can stir us emotionally and educate us about the most important aspects of our existence, like love, friendship, betrayal, loss, and salvation. As such, stories greatly enrich our existence and help us make sense of the joyful as well as the painful moments in our lives.

Thus far, my discussion of the question of what it means to say that a book can speak has focused primarily on literature and telling stories. Still, how might our response to this question change when the discussion shifts to nonfiction books, that is, to educational, philosophical, psychological, sociological, political, economic,

or any scientific texts that we read and study? Clearly, such writings speak to us in the sense that they inform us about a particular aspect of human existence or our common world. Nonfiction texts may inspire our curiosity, generate concern, anger, or excitement; most of all they help us better understand some part of the world in which we live and work.

In his book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner refers to the mode of thought at the basis of nonfiction texts as the "paradigmatic mode" and argues that

> it deals in general causes, and in their establishment, and makes use of procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth. Its language is regulated by requirements of consistency and noncontradiction. Its domain is defined not only by observables to which its basic statements relate, but also by the set of possible worlds that can be logically generated and tested against observables — that is, it is driven by principled hypotheses.[11]

For Bruner, the paradigmatic mode of thought, unlike the narrative mode that is at the basis of literature and art in general, is aimed at uncovering various truths about the human condition or the natural world. These truths or facts can be verified through empirical investigations as is common in the natural sciences, through qualitative studies like the ones used in the social sciences, or they can be demonstrated in an abstract and deductive way as is done in philosophy, math, or theoretical physics. In each case, what is at stake in the paradigmatic mode of thought is an attempt to establish different factual truths that arise out of human beings' interaction with the world. In contrast, the narrative mode of thought generally focuses on describing the intricacies of people's intentions, actions, and struggles as they interact with others.

Following Bruner's insights, we can see that books can speak to us in at least two ways — paradigmatic and narrative. Bruner asserts that, on the one hand, literature and nonfiction books are alike in that both can be used to *convince* their readers. Yet, on the other, "what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical truth. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude."[12]

The point is that, while both literature and nonfiction books attempt to persuade, they differ in *what* they are trying to persuade their readers of. Nonfiction texts try to demonstrate the validity of an argument or the seriousness of a problem, or to show us various truths of which we were previously unaware. In contrast, literature strives to tell the reader a story that in some way *resembles* the struggles, passions, achievements, and failures of human beings.

Who is the Speaker?

On the surface, one might think that the question of who the speaker is in a book is rather obvious, assuming naively that the author, narrator, or main character is the speaker (though those are by no means the same person in many books). However, in the past several decades, literary scholars from various disciplines and ideological positions have come to recognize that this question is much more complex than had been previously believed. Traditionally, literary scholars assumed that texts exist separately from their readers and that if readers wished to make sense of texts they

needed to read them carefully and with fidelity to the authors' (speakers') real meaning or intention. Stanley Fish captures the difference between the traditional notion of literary criticism and a poststructuralist approach when he writes,

> If meaning is embedded in the text, the reader's responsibility is limited to getting it out; but if meaning develops, and if it develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions, these activities (the things the reader *does*) are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential, and the act of description must both begin and end with them.[13]

Fortunately, based on the insights gained from poststructuralists like Fish, reader-response theorists, and critical literary theorists among others, we now know that that the question of the speaker cannot be addressed by simply investigating the author or the narrator of a book and her intentions. Louise Rosenblatt, for instance, notes that "the reading event is a unique coming together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time and place under particular circumstances."[14] All of these factors and their unique interaction, not just the author's intent or the reader's personality, are essential to understanding the reading experience. Patrick Dias echoes Rosenblatt's sentiments when he writes that "each reading of a literary work is a unique event; it is not an entity existing apart from a reader and the particular occasion of its reading. The event is imbued with the circumstances of its reading, the reader's personal associations, and recalled events from other readings."[15]

More recently, critical literary theorists and postmodern thinkers have demonstrated that the interaction of readers and texts cannot be considered in isolation from the broader social, cultural, and political context that shapes these interactions. As Theresa Rogers notes, "literacy and literacy practices, as social and cultural practices, cannot be separated from cultural and social issues in and beyond the classroom — particularly issues of power, race, class, and gender — that influence how both children and adults read and interact with books in school and non-school settings."[16] From this perspective, authors construct meanings that simultaneously reflect and produce the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which they are operating. In order to fully appreciate these meanings, readers need to have an understanding of the broader social context in which books are written such as the background for the plot or the major political and economic issues that were at stake in a given historical period.

We should also keep in mind that the field of literary theory and criticism has itself undergone tremendous changes in the past few decades. It is not so much that the answers provided by contemporary researchers are different from those of their predecessors, but that the questions themselves have changed. Fish explains this point noting that literary theory "is *constituted* by questions we are able to ask because the entities that populate it come into being as the presuppositions — they are discourse-specific entities — of those questions."[17] Like Fish, John Clifford and John Schilb emphasize the changes to the field of literary inquiry in their book *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. They note that although reader-response theory still thrives in the fields of composition and literary studies, "the surging influence of feminism, neo-Marxism, minority perspectives, postcolonial thought and the work of

Michel Foucault"[18] have moved reader-response theorists in the direction of ideological critique. Thus, literary theory and criticism is an area of research that is not only constantly changing but has also been a rather diverse and contested field of inquiry.

Based on the insights of the literary scholars mentioned above, it is clear that the assertion made by the authors that a "book speaks in and of itself" cannot be supported. Such an assertion mistakenly assumes not only the divorce of the book from its reader or interpreter but also its separation from the social, cultural, and political context in which it was produced. My analysis suggests, on the contrary, that the question of the identity of the speaker of a text cannot be separated from the identity of the reader or from the various circumstances that shaped the text's creation. On this view, books do not exist in a vacuum just waiting for us to enter, read, and interpret; they exist as part of a culture, society, and political structure. Moreover, books and texts in general are not just embedded in a broader context, but they speak to us in and of that context. My contention is, therefore, that the question of the identity of speaker of the book is complex, one that needs to be considered with attention to a host of factors, including author, narrator, main characters, reader, and the broader social-cultural context, as well as the interaction among these factors. And my contention is that good teaching, as I will argue in the final part of this essay, can help students construct interpretations of a text that honor the text's ability to speak.

Teaching in Ways That Enable Books to Speak

Like most people, I have had a combination of good and poor teachers in my schooling career, teachers that inspired me and turned me on to great authors, together with ones who were dull and self-absorbed in their pedagogy. Two particular professors I had in the course of my higher education come to mind as examples that can shed light on the issue of educating in a way that enables books to speak. The first professor taught a course entitled "Shakespeare's Comedies," which focused on the study of a dozen comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. The professor, who looked and dressed like the historical William Shakespeare, would assign a different play for us to read each week with no advance instructions on what we were supposed to be looking for when we read it. The lessons consisted primarily of guided discussions of different themes that the professor would choose to highlight for each comedy, themes that were both relevant to us and essential to making sense of the play. In one notable lesson, I remember spending almost an entire hour deconstructing the opening dialogue in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in order to determine Theseus's motivations regarding Hippolyta. The professor encouraged us to offer our own interpretations of this passage but insisted that we back up our views with evidence from the text. Although I felt a little dismayed at the end of the lesson when I discovered that Theseus was looking for sex, I learned in this class about the importance of digging deeper, considering a passage from different perspectives, and being patient when reading a complex text.

The second professor taught a seminar that focused on an in-depth reading investigation of Plato's *Republic*. This professor, a rather awkward-looking man who stuttered, asked us to focus on maybe two to three paragraphs in the book during the

hour and a half lesson. We read the W. H. D. Rouse translation of the *Republic* while he sat there, in front of us, with this version as well as the original Greek text next to it, his eyes hovering over both books as we read the text in English. While someone read the text out loud, the professor would stop us every so often and ask us about the meaning of this word or that phrase. We willingly offered our interpretations of the text, which he would question, probe further, and occasionally even compare to his own reading of the original passage in the Greek. When a number of students were all too eager to challenge some of Plato's ideas, the professor was quick to remind us that a sound critique can only come after interpretation and understanding have occurred. Yet, following the advice of Paul Lauter, he encouraged us to read Plato not "as a cultural icon whose abstractions one might reproduce on exams, but as a living force with whom one might argue, agree, and disagree, embrace and reject."[19] Although this professor didn't instruct us in advance about how we should approach Plato's *Republic*, he taught us the value of doing a close reading of difficult texts, one that opens up fresh avenues for interpretation. Above all, both professors taught me to *listen* to the sound, tone, texture, and meaning of words.

In sharing these two examples, my intention is certainly not to heap praise on my two former professors. Neither is it to suggest that there is only one way of teaching that enables books to speak — a simplistic view that artificially reduces the complexity and diversity of the act of teaching. My point is merely to use these examples to make a case that it *is possible* to teach in ways that enable books to speak to their readers. The evidence for this claim comes from a variety of educators I studied with over many years of schooling who, like the professors who introduced me to Shakespeare's comedies and Plato's *Republic*, yet, in their own unique way, taught me to honor the power of words and a text's ability to speak. The professors that I have in mind were varied in their beliefs about teaching, methods of instruction, and manners of interacting with students. But they all had something — what Parker Palmer calls "a capacity for connectedness"[20] — that enabled them to get students in their classes to connect with the texts that we were reading in such a way that they spoke to us.

Thus, although the authors may be correct in their claim that the issue of how to teach books in ways that enables them to speak is not a matter of finding a "different kind of pedagogy,"[21] they overlook Palmer's point that good teaching is not primarily about techniques and methods. Palmer writes that good teachers "are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves."[22] On this view, good teaching empowers students to make intellectual, emotional, and spiritual connections with books that they read, connections that may be difficult for them to make on their own. The point that good teaching can enable books to speak (rather than constrain them from doing so) was understood long ago by some of our ancestors who coined the word "*educere,*" from which our word "educate" was derived. The Latin term "*educere*" refers to the act of "leading people forth" and helping them to realize or understand something that they were unable to grasp on their own. My analysis suggests that good teaching can lead students forth in the process of exploring a complex book and, thereby, enable that book to speak.

1. Charles Bingham, Antew Dejene, Alma Krilic, and Emily Sadowski, "Can the Taught Book Speak?," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2012*, ed. Claudia W. Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 199–206.

2. Plato, *Phaedrus,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 275e.

3. Bingham et al., "Can the Taught Book Speak?," 201.

4. Ibid., 202.

5. Ibid., 203.

6. Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 15.

7. Jacques Rancière, "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," in *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation,* ed. Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 1.

8. Trevor Cairney, "The Place of Literature in an Increasingly Virtual World," *Publishers Research Quarterly* 27 (2011): 114.

9. *Shadowlands*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1993, New York: Home Box Office Home Video, 1999), Film.

10. Cairney, "The Place of Literature in an Increasingly Virtual World," 121–122.

11. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 13.

12. Ibid., 11.

13. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2–3.

14. Louise Rosenblatt, "Viewpoints: Transaction versus Interaction: A Terminology Rescue Operation," *Research in the Teaching of English* 19 (1985): 104.

15. Patrick Dias, "Using Literature in Middle School and Secondary Classrooms," in *Curriculum Planning in the Language Arts K-12: An Holistic Perspective,* eds. M. C. Courtland and T. J. Gambell (North York: Captus, 1994), 184.

16. Theresa Rogers, "Literary Theory and Children's Literature: Interpreting Ourselves and Our Worlds," *Theory into Practice* 38, no. 3 (1999): 141.

17. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 1.

18. John Clifford and John Schilb, *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*: *Research and Scholarship in Composition* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1994), 3.

19. Paul Lauter, "Whose Culture? Whose Literacy?," in *Canons and Contexts* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1991), 268–269.

20. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: John Wiley, 2007), 11.

21. Bingham et al., "Can the Taught Book Speak?," 205.

22. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 11.