Liberal Politics and Literary Education

R. V. Young

According to the German romantic poet and thinker Friedrich von Schiller, the condition of civilized man is quite as unsatisfactory as it is depicted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the latter is mistaken only in believing that humanity can somehow recover the innocent or "naïve" state of nature. Schiller proposes, instead, that it is the function of the literature of civilization, of "sentimental poetry," to alleviate the inevitable discontent of civilization by nurturing the idea of primordial innocence amid the "corruption of civilization":

> For the individual who is immersed in civilization, infinitely much therefore depends upon his receiving a tangible assurance of the realization of that idea in the world of sense, of the possible reality of that condition, and since actual experience, far from nourishing this belief, rather contradicts it constantly, here, as in so many cases, the faculty of poetic composition comes to the aid of reason in order to render that idea palpable to intuition and to realize it in individual cases.[1]

Here we see the displacement of the classical understanding of literature as the representation of reality by the romantic notion that literature is the projection of the poet's ideal fantasy—the lamp of self-expression thus supersedes the mirror of mimesis.

Because romanticism arises in an era of radical social change, it is hardly surprising that this theory of poetry as expressive fantasy anticipates and resembles much in progressive politics. Political movements are not epiphytes—air plants—they grow in the soil of culture. The effect of progressive politics on the reception of literature is, however, largely deleterious. As a result, the old-fashioned political liberal, who typically loves literature and sees himself as part of a cultural elite of more refined taste and sophisticated thought than the conservative "Babbitts" of the bourgeois business community, confronts a dilemma. Surely thoughtful liberals experience an uncomfortable sense of discord in the realization that as progressive political interests have increasingly assumed virtually exclusive control over the nation's cultural institutions, they have become—if you will forgive the pun—progressively more mercenary, self-seeking, and vulgar.

R. V. Young is editor of *Modern Age*.

It is not stodgy, uncultured Republicans who have all but banished classical music from public radio stations and substituted endless political chatter with interspersed "cultural features" generally involving interviews with rockers, rappers, and assorted "performance artists." The ambitious academic administrators and aggressive researchers who have turned universities into credentialing facilities for the benefit of high-tech, multinational corporations are vociferously liberal and vote overwhelmingly for political progressives. It is hardly traditional conservatives (arguably an endangered species in English departments) who have eliminated required courses on canonical authors and the historical development of literature in favor of a focus on various manifestations of popular culture.

I was struck with the poignancy of this situation for at least a few of the more thoughtful liberal academics when I stumbled upon a copy of Mark Edmundson's *Why Read?* in a used bookstore. The book is a defense of the moral and spiritual value of reading great books in the face of the blasé, knowing professionalism—not to say, cynicism—of the academic establishment that controls the study and teaching of literature in the contemporary university, as well as of the obliviousness and indifference of the general public.

"However much society at large despises imaginative writing," Edmundson asserts, "however much those supposedly committed to preserve and spread literary art may demean it, the fact remains that in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation."[2] Unlike many who have lamented the decline of reading and the diminishing attention afforded great books in recent years, Edmundson can by no means be dismissed as a nostalgic reactionary. While he is preoccupied with religion, he is skeptical of "conventional" religion: "Literature is, I believe, our best goad toward new beginnings, our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth," he writes in *Why Read?* (3); indeed, he accepts Matthew Arnold's notion that poetry will inevitably displace religion and Freud's characterization of belief in God as an illusion (136–38). An entire section is devoted to contrasting his own "faith" with Jerry Falwell's (21–25).

Edmundson's project in this short book is, then, to offer a thoroughly secular, progressive case for reading the traditional canon of great books. While his diagnosis is shrewd and sometimes moving, the cure he offers will not only exacerbate the problem; it *is* the problem. The current debasement of literature and liberal arts is not an anomaly, not a deviation from the liberal program that could be corrected; it is an inevitable result of the hegemony of the progressive ideology that is the corruption of the liberal spirit.

To be sure, Edmundson deserves respect for taking an unflinching look at the intellectual and cultural wasteland produced by the exertions of his progressive confreres, especially in the universities. With admirable candor he recounts the classroom experience—a student evaluation—that made him aware that his success as a teacher depended in large measure on his students' perception that he was entertaining and "cool." In their inventive efforts to keep their students diverted, professors are responding (howbeit unconsciously in most cases) to the atmosphere created by the marketing strategies in the increasingly competitive higher education business:

> Before students arrive, universities ply them with luscious ads, guaranteeing them a cross between summer camp and lotusland. When they get to

> campus, flattery, entertainment, and preprofessional training are theirs, if that's what they want. The world we present them is not a world elsewhere, an ivory tower world, but one that's fully continuous with the American entertainment and consumer culture they've been living in. They hardly know that they have left home. Is it a surprise, then, that this generation of students—steeped in consumer culture before they go off to school; treated as potent customers by the university well before they arrive, then pandered to from day one—are inclined to see the books they read as a string of entertainments to be enjoyed without effort or languidly cast aside? (19–20)

Indignant observations such as these in 2004 are likely to provoke a melancholy sigh from conservatives: Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver were warning us about what was coming more than a half century ago, only to be scorned, if noticed at all, by the liberal establishment. Still, it is gratifying that an undoubted member of this establishment should acknowledge the decline of higher education, however belatedly.

Edmundson is also sensibly skeptical of the current obsession with "educational technology" and the impact of the computer on defining how literature is taught: "Professors don't ask students to try to write as Dickens would, experiment with thinking as he might, were he alive today. Rather, they research Dickens" (14). "Instead of spending class time wondering what the poem means," Edmundson continues, "and what application it has to present-day experience, students compile information about it" (15). The Internet handles works of literature the way a blender handles pieces of fruit:

> Everything that can be accessed online can seem equal to everything else, no datum more important or more profound than any other. Thus the possibility presents itself that there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. No thought is a challenge or an affront to what one currently believes. (15)

The result is an educational smoothie.

Edmundson is alert to the relationship between the direction of academic literary "scholarship" over the past forty years and the decline of reading and does not hesitate to spell it out. He quite acerbically accuses his colleagues of teaching theory rather than literature:

> If you set theory between readers and literature—if you make theory a prerequisite to discussing a piece of writing—you effectively deny the student a chance to encounter the first level of literary density, the level he's ready to negotiate. Theory is used, then, to banish aspiring readers from the literary experience that by rights belongs to them. (41)

This is an insightful pedagogical observation: even intelligent, willing students are not learning to read well, because they are being forced to fit each thing they read into a prefabricated conceptual category before they have actually grasped the work on its own terms or assimilated it to their own minds. "The source of knowledge is not in books," A. G. Sertillanges points out, "it is in reality, and in our thought. Books are signposts; the road is older and no one can make the journey to truth for us."[3] The modern literature classroom offers its students, instead, books about books: the signposts are ripped up from the

side of the road and consigned to various ideological warehouses. As Edmundson also says, "When you translate Dickens into Foucault, you lose what benefit Dickens might have had to deliver" (41).

At times, Edmundson brings Sertillanges's concern for reality to mind by invoking a parallel concept: "Works that matter . . . in history, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and literature, can do many things, but preeminent among them is their capacity to offer truth" (51). But it turns out that for Edmundson, "truth" and reality are not even neighbors, much less complementary facets of the necessary relationship between actual things and their conceptualization in the mind. Education is a search, finally, not for knowledge but for recurrent ignorance as each successive projection of subjective longings loses its luster and gives way to the next: "Again and again, the true student will return to this ignorance, for it's possible that no truth she learns in the humanities will be permanently true" (34). This remark is preceded by what Edmundson calls "a provisional thesis statement: the function of a liberal arts education is to use major works of art and intellect to influence one's Final Narrative, one's outermost circle of commitments" (31). No wonder the "truths" one finds in literature are provisional; literary interpretation is altogether utilitarian: "The test of an interpretation is not whether it is right or perfect, but whether it leads us to a worldview that is potentially better than what we currently hold. The gold standard is the standard of use" (55). Edmundson goes on to say, "We must ask the question of belief. Is this poem true? Can *you* use this poem?" (60). "You" is italicized in the original, and it indicates precisely where not only Mark Edmundson but also the entire project of liberal progressivism go wrong.

I am not the first to notice that Edmundson's notion of reading is in some ways hardly distinguishable from the consumerism that he so scornfully rejects. In an early review, Jonathan Yardley notes that Edmundson offers a theory of literary education that is not only utilitarian but also self-centered to the point of solipsism.[4] Yardley seems unaware, however, or at least does not acknowledge, that the liberal vision and the liberal agenda, as understood in the modern political context, lead inevitably to a focus on self. If there is no external standard by which good and evil, right and wrong, true and false can be distinguished—and the refusal to prefer any particular set of "values" over any other is the sine qua non of the procedural regime of the secular liberal state—then what motive is there besides the heart's deepest desire?

If there are no objective norms of truth, of excellence, of goodness, then it is difficult to see an alternative to Edmundson's plaintive insistence that the truth for which one reads must be a truth that satisfies the individual: "For many people, the truth—the circle, the vision of experience—that they've encountered through socialization is inadequate. It doesn't put them into a satisfying relation to experience. That truth does not give them what they want" (52). It is difficult to see how Edmundson can reconcile these assertions with what he has said only a few pages before: "We need to learn not simply to read books, but to allow ourselves to be read by them" (46). Readers who are seeking a "truth" that *does* "give them what they want" are hardly in a receptive frame of mind to be judged by a book, which can be little more than Echo to the student Narcissus.

Edmundson is proposing more than reading great literature as a variety of self-improvement or therapy; it is also a

recipe for social reform, if not revolution. Unsatisfactory truth does not help his ideal readers "make a contribution to their society. It does not, to advance another step, even allow for a clear sense of the tensions between themselves and the existing social norms, the prevailing doxa." The examples of discarded verities are instructive:

> The gay boy can't accept the idea that his every third thought is a sin. The visionary-in-the-making isn't at home with her practical, earth-bound, and ambitious parents. Such people, and I believe most people who go to literature and the liberal arts out of more than curiosity are in this group, demand other, better ways to apprehend the world—that is, ways that are better *for them*. (52)

Those for whom the only measure of the good is what is "better *for them*" are likely to make a wholly self-interested "contribution to their society" without even intending it. In other words, they will be liberals. Like Edmundson, they will maintain what he calls the "latent hypothesis of literature" since the advent of romanticism: "that there are simply too many sorts of human beings, too many idiosyncratic constitutions, for any one map of human nature, or any single guide to the good life, to be adaptable for us all" (112–13).

What appears to be libertarian anarchy, however, turns ineluctably into an ideological prescription for the agenda of liberal education: "The teacher begins the secular dialogue with faith by offering the hypothesis that there is no one human truth about the good life, but that there are many human truths, many viable paths" (113). The dogma that there are no dogmas is the most insidious of all, precisely because it denies its own dogmatic status. Edmundson's secular faith is, by his own account, "what Blake knew: that all deities ultimately reside in the individual human breast" (89). This view leads to idolatry of the self, and Edmundson is quite correct in specifying it as the visionary basis of modern political liberalism.

His book is, at least to some extent, a response to the diminishing esteem afforded literary scholarship and academic criticism, which offers no prospect of a cure for cancer or a steady supply of renewable, nonpolluting energy. More important to the contemporary university, it gathers no patents or six-figure grants from federal agencies or multinational corporations. Nevertheless, Edmundson provides evidence of the modest but genuine importance of the academic study of literature, but, regrettably, he does so by producing as inept an example of criticism as an intelligent, experienced interpreter could muster.

"Discussing James's *Portrait of a Lady*," he writes, "I begin with a simple question. Does James love Isabel Archer?" Edmundson assures us that almost all of his students do love Isabel:

> They find her vital, benevolent, charming, a full embodiment of what is best about America. They're drawn to her verve and her courage, particularly at the start of the book when she is young and on her own and, with an American insouciance, refusing offers of marriage from one Old World potentate after the next. They love Isabel, often, because in her they see their own best selves. They identify with all that is freshest and most promising in her. (63)

The professor then unveils his interpretation of the novelist's actual view of his heroine: "It's clear that he detests what he

takes to be her shallowness, her glib self-confidence, her habit of thinking far too highly of herself." Further, Edmundson suggests that Henry James contrives Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond because "a purgative marriage—a punishment—is what Isabel needs, so the master of realistic fiction bends plausibility and brings it to pass" (64).

It is difficult to know where to begin: such an approach to teaching this novel—any novel, really—is a pedagogical disaster based on a perverse misapprehension of Henry James and a still more destructive misunderstanding of the nature of fiction, of poetry in the broadest sense of the term. Reading literature and, still more, the academic study of literature ought to provide *education* in its most fundamental meaning. At the risk of being regarded as an etymological bore, I recall once again that the Latin root of "education" is *educere*, "to lead out of." What students are most in need of escaping is the narrow confines of their own egocentric self-regard.[5] Edmundson's classroom approach invites them to make their unreflective emotional reaction the criterion of judgment, and they respond accordingly: "Most of the students were outraged that . . . James's sentiments about the young Isabel were, to put it kindly, critical. What made this perception particularly difficult is that those harsh Jamesian sentiments had now to be seen as in some measure about them, about their own possible naïveté, about their own unthinking self-love—that is, about aspects of themselves that they had discovered in Isabel" (65).

To be sure, some of the students responded positively to the perception that James was administering "harsh discipline" to his principal character and acknowledged their own similar failings. "I was temporarily saddened," Edmundson comments, "that people so young could be drawn to puritanical self-dislike," although he soon dismisses this ruefulness with the satisfaction of having "done my job" by getting the students to identify with the character and know themselves better (66). This is didacticism of the most extreme sort. While almost everyone who takes literature seriously agrees that it has moral content and a moral effect upon its readers, more sophisticated commentators see this as something more than "teaching a lesson"—a detachable "moral" to be swallowed in a sugarcoated pill. The only difference in Edmundson's scheme is that the reader decides whether to accept the lesson based on an emotional response. Edmundson himself, like most of his students, "prefers Emerson to James, indeed . . . prefers the young Isabel to James, as a temperament" (66).

There are two points to notice here: First, if *Portrait of a Lady* were as factitious as Edmundson says it is, if mature, experienced readers were to find Isabel's marriage implausible, contrived by the author merely to make a moral point by "teaching a lesson" to the heroine, then it would be a quite inferior novel and hardly worth teaching in a literature class. This is not the place to construct an account of Henry James's virtues as novelist, and he can doubtless get along without my defense in any case. Let me simply observe that anyone who finds it incredible that a "vital, benevolent, charming" young woman marked by "verve" and "courage" and "American insouciance" (Edmundson's words, 63) would marry a man like Gilbert Osmond simply has not been paying attention.

Second, while it is important for readers, especially students, to recognize the relevance of literary representations to their own lives, an essential aspect of literary appreciation is disinterestedness: we can learn from literature precisely because

we are detached, because we do not have a stake in the events on the page or the stage.[6] A student who begins a paper by complaining, "Henry James must be one of the cruelest authors ever to write" (65), has altogether missed the point of reading and failed to grasp the nature of literary art. Edmundson, to his credit, treats the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century with far more respect than most contemporary academics, but he fails to grasp that their preoccupation with irony in literature is not intended to cultivate "the ability to maintain an ironic detachment from life"; the point of the New Criticism was to distinguish literary works from lived experience, either of the author or of the reader.[7]

Literature can provide us knowledge and wisdom *about* life, because it is *not* life, but rather analogous to it. A representation can enlighten us about its object only by not being identical to the object; a portrait is not simply a substitute for the *presence* of a person but also a means of seeing the person differently as *re-presented*. It is simply not good criticism or even good sense to take sides about whether Henry James or the reader "loves" Isabel Archer. Jane Austen treated this very inclination among readers with the appropriate wry irony in remarking that Emma Woodhouse is "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."[8] In fact, readers do like Emma (much more than Mrs. Elton, for instance) as much as her creator did—and as Henry James undoubtedly liked his creation, Isabel Archer. The two heroines are, in fact, very similar insofar as Isabel, like Emma, is beautiful, intelligent, engaging, and accomplished but suffers the same vices as those ascribed to Emma: "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself."[9]

Both Austen and James were wise enough to create characters who mirror a melancholy reality of human experience: individuals who are agreeable, well-intentioned, and altogether charming are quite capable of self-centered irresponsibility leading to actions that result in grave consequences both for themselves and for those whom they cherish. The happy ending of *Emma* comes about not because Austen "likes" her but because Emma lives in a provincial world at the beginning of the nineteenth century where social standards and the men and women who embody them still command sufficient authority to provide constraints upon the misadventures of spirited young women, if they are not wholly abandoned or hopelessly willful, and to pull them back from the brink. Isabel Archer is, alas, a creature of the end of that turbulent century, when the fabric of social life has frayed badly, and the self-confident young are less likely to heed the admonitions of cultural and moral authorities. Her grim fate is caused not by "James's disdain for his heroine" (64) but by his shrewd, unflinching appraisal of the perils to which a young woman of her characteristics in her situation was vulnerable.

The political consequences of bad reading are all around us. Consider how often abortion is justified on the grounds that Ms. X, who is a really nice person and loves children (or at least cats), had an abortion, so it cannot be bad. Similarly, since Mr. Y is smart and accomplished and also "gay," then being "gay" must be all right, so it's not fair that he cannot marry like everyone else. Anyone who is skeptical about the prudence and propriety of certain public assistance programs surely hates the poor and is "mean-spirited." In these and numerous other instances, reflective disinterest is conflated with mere indifference or outright hostility.

It is no wonder that the liberal progressives who control the universities nowadays have effectively banished the thoughtful study of serious literature: careful reading of genuine literature cultivates precisely a sense of detachment, an awareness of the paradoxes of human existence, of the ironic structure of the mortal condition—and this is not irony in the shallow sense of knowing, pseudo-sophisticated cynicism but rather a recognition of the incongruity of fallen human nature. It provides a defense against the emotional sophistry of political campaigns.

Mark Edmundson's title *Why Read?* asks a question to which he provides an inadequate answer. "Democracy, and the democratic humanism that can make it unfold—these are my religion," he concludes. "These are the sources of my faith and hope." He asks us to "imagine a nation, or world, where people have fuller self-knowledge, full self-determination, where self-making is a primary objective not just in the material sphere but in the circles of the mind and heart . . . a world of rich, interanimating individuality, in tandem with flourishing community" (142–43). But since there are no criteria and no moral resources outside the myriad of selves, there is really no principle of unity and no norm of excellence. Hence he offers faith without content, hope without an object, and love without sacrifice. Mark Edmundson has adopted Schiller's view that the purpose of literature is to fashion fantasies of worlds we might desire rather than to help us see the world we actually inhabit. Why read indeed? If students are seeking confirmation of their own peculiar "truths," "truths" that give them "what they want," then they are going to find far more immediate gratification in a Lady Gaga video than in *Portrait of a Lady*. And with increasing frequency, few of Edmundson's professorial colleagues will do much to persuade them otherwise.

1 Friedrich von Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry and On the Sublime*, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1966), 147–48.

2 Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 3. Further references to this book are provided parenthetically in the text.

3 *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Condition, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (1948; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1980), 169–70.

4 Jonathan Yardley, "*Why Read?*" *Washington Post Book World*, August 29, 2004, 2–4.

5 Most recently I have made the point in "Liberal Learning Confronts the Composition Despots," *Intercollegiate Review* 46, no. 1 (2011): 3.

6 This is an element of Matthew Arnold's account of criticism that Edmundson seems to ignore. See "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays Literary and Critical*, intro. G. K. Chesterton (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), 12, 23.

7 The classic statements are in William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," available in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Louisville, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3–39. See also R. V. Young, *At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 28–29.

8 Quoted by Mark Schorer, "The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 98.

9 Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; rev. ed. 1966), 5.