



IRONIC PEDAGOGY: Teaching Sacred Texts in an Academic Setting

Niels Herold

While serving last year as Chair of COI, my philosopher colleague, Fritz McDonald, and I had good occasion to discuss several new course proposals from Religious Studies at Oakland University. We were concerned that some of the ethical language used as a rationale for these courses was transgressing the boundaries of what ought to constitute, at a publicly assisted university, anyway, the intellectually disinterested and academic study of religion—its history, practice and belief. While these committee conversations were marked by spirited and rigorous debate—just the sort of constructive dialogue COI is charged with engendering—it occurred to me then that some of the issues being raised might benefit from further and more focused discussion in an informal essay for *The Oakland Journal*. If one of COI's charges is the supervision of academic borders between the academic units, it is surely a responsibility of any practitioner of the humanities to ensure that boundaries between disciplines are not only policed but dedicated as privileged sites of encounter and dialogue. In the spirit of just such a speculative exchange between Religious Studies and English Studies, one which may help extend and deepen the year-long series of debates here at OU on religion and society, I want to address here a few questions relating to the teaching of sacred texts in an academic setting.

My own teaching is centered on the literature of early modern England, much of whose “golden age” glory was religiously inspired and read as the work of spiritual exercise and devotion. This was the period from Henry VIII to the Jacobean succession which saw into print the first vernacular Bibles in English, alongside John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, a well-thumbed copy of which could be found in every Church re-commissioned across the English countryside for the new Protestant State Religion. Foxe’s great book, which grew exponentially through four editions, was also called the *Book of Martyrs*, and as such it comprised the first sustained literary effort to embody the “holy” voices of English men and women (and others from the ancient past, as well) that spoke heretical truth to power. While Foxe’s ubiquitous book allocated chapter space to Catholic martyrs executed when the Reformists were in power, the prevailing focus and tone of the *Martyrology* was Protestant and anti-papal; it was all about the humble plain-form style (the meek shall inherit) that stood up to the ritual absurdities and corrupted prelacy of the distant and demonic Church of Rome. In its relentless historiography of final moments, on the scaffold or in the tar pot, that marked the theatrical stage of God’s punishing judgment, the *Martyrology* narrated as a kind of holy joy the consummate spirituality of its persecuted subjects. In its time, there was no more sacred a text except the *Holy Bible*, whose reading by the laity was facilitated by some of the most stylistically powerful language the English Renaissance produced. Without the Geneva Bible in vernacular English there would be no Shakespeare, at least as we imagine him and know his works.

So my first observation is that the “literary texts” I’ve alluded to above have all been fashioned by human agency and not alone by any of the various hands of heaven. Secondly—and a bit more complexly—our study of sacred books like the Bible or the Torah involves our reading of historical texts *in the present*—not only as historical documents of a literary and cultural past but as poetic texts that operate upon our consciousness by virtue of poetic intentions and methods. Read-

ing sacred texts historically therefore requires of present-day readers a simultaneous (diachronic) imaginative reconstruction of those texts *as they were read or mentally “performed” in their own historical and cultural moment*. Literary texts of the past, in other words, are both historical documents and performance texts that ask to be re-engaged in the rhetorical and ideological terms in which they were first encountered. We might even say that the fullest sense of their historical significance becomes accessible *only* through performatively imagining what they sounded like to their sixteenth century audiences and readers.

A few of the larger questions I then want to raise are: By what canonical rules can historical texts be categorized as *sacred*? If *sacred* is expanded to include the religious or theological consciousness of the readers these historical texts invoke, how then do we teach the ability to read them in a public university setting, where the very meaning of “sacred” must not be experienced as belief but treated as an aesthetic resource for critical inquiry and historical understanding? Finally, what special problems does the teaching of these texts that qualify for the generic attribute of sacred differently incur for believers and non-believers respectively?

These questions, and others like them that address the aesthetic power of art to represent or compel a particular religious ideology, have always taken on special urgency for me when the ideology (for instance of exclusion and persecution) is repugnant to the formal aspirations of a work, those that are seeking, for example, to transcend differences and unite audiences. The conflict between poetic forms and the ideologies they serve in these instances engenders a crisis of conscience that questions the very moral legitimacy of the power of artistic forms. I’m thinking here of the moral issues in this regard raised by George Steiner in his book, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, which contemplates the nearly unthinkable reverence of Nazi camp commandants for the symphonic music of Beethoven and Brahms. Or, I’m thinking of the sacred cantatas (religious operas) of Johann Sebastian Bach, which as a body of church

music comprise one of the pinnacle achievements of musical expression in the western tradition. Here in a seamless and ceaseless outpouring of musical ideas and tonalities of feeling, which range from the rendering of extreme alternating states of tenderness and alienation, Bach's musical genius filled his local church in Leipzig with three cycles of cantatas (a third of the cantata texts have been lost), music that explores the fullest range of human affects.

For me, no other composer comes closer to Shakespeare in terms of the multitudinous representational forms his art discovers and deploys. But Bach's genius for representing in musical forms the drama of human affects manifested itself in relation to the librettists he worked with, whose textual re-fashioning of scriptural moments and feelings is both aesthetically inferior to the composer's genius, and for me in places ideologically abhorrent. In Cantata No. 43, for instance, the vision of divine election the religious drama of the cantata enacts is at the expense of demonizing the Jews; the salvation of the chosen sacred community of Lutherans is anchored in the spiritual expulsion of those who historically refused to accept the new messiah. In other places, the words of Bach's librettist, Picander, paint an attitude toward the flesh and its carnal existence in the world that must have seemed to many ears disturbingly dissonant with the sublimely sensuous feelings evoked by Bach's musical rendering of these words. How then do we permit ourselves to be profoundly moved by an operatic text whose ideological commitments disfigure rather than foster our experience of the poetic sublime?

I've been talking about the double task for any literary pedagogy to teach texts both historically and performatively, the double means by which the historical becomes accessible, or, if you will, "presentised." No more instructive text exists for showing how this pedagogy works than Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, an epic poem fashioned on the cusp of England's religious Reformation when English and religious consciousness itself was in the violent throes of a cat-

aclysmic re-organization. Like Picander's Lutheranism, there is much in *The Fairie Queene* which reveals the militant Protestantism of Spenser's day as a violent politics of persecution and genocide, and, most amazing, all of this violence occurs through the poet's ingenious invention of his rhyme royal stanzas (over four thousand of them). As Spenser's poem likes to insist itself, teaching one how to read its poetry is clearly one of its own primary intentions, as any present-day strategy toward teaching *The Fairie Queene* is advised to discover, so that the pedagogical question becomes how do we teach students to allow themselves to be taught by the poem itself? Rendering our students sufficiently open to the poem's didactic purposes requires of them—whether they're Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Catholics, Muslims, or whatever—at the least an improvisatory adherence to a religious ideology (of the new Church of England) which held that no longer would English Christians need priests to access the sacred word of God; they could now experience (indeed, they were now compelled to) the Lord's word for themselves in vernacular language and print. A new sense of urgency and necessity changed forever the way they experienced the reading of poetic texts, sacred or otherwise.

With its intentionally antiqued diction and syntax (I use the analogy with my students of antiquing musical instruments), and its late medieval tropes and narrative techniques, *The Fairie Queene* has often been regarded (as it was in a famous book by C.L. Lewis called *The Allegory of Love*) as a deeply conservative text. But in fact it set in motion a revolution of sorts in the ways in which literary texts could be charged with and set up to deliver their meaning. For *The Fairie Queene* is nothing less than an instructor's manual for how to read itself: it confronts its readers as a post-lapsarian (spiritually fallen) audience, and it trains them to read the fallen world "aright" and for what it is, the devil's labyrinth and mighty pretended snare.

Take, for instance, the opening stanza to Canto i, Book I, of Spenser's 38, 000 line poem, the first line of which of which

every school boy and girl in “English Studies” once knew by heart:

A gentle knight was pricking on the plain,
Y-clad in mighty arms and silver shield,
Wherein old dents of deep wounds did remain,
The cruel marks of many a bloody field;
Yet arms till that time did he never wield.
His angry steed did chide his foaming bit,
As much disdainful to the curb to yield.
Fully jolly knight he seemed and fair did sit,
As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit.

Spenser’s visual appeal here to an allegorical method in which everything the reader “sees” can mean not what it at first *seems* (*seems* is a code word in Spenser for such possible deception) shouldn’t prevent us from seeing how this verbal passage works rhetorically on its reader’s consciousness. It presents us first with a network of related paradoxes, whereby a knight is both warrior but gentle (civilized); we’re told that his mighty armor is a record of its use in battle, whereby deeply dented means deeply experienced on the “bloody field,” but we’re also told, paradoxically, that until this very moment the knight these arms “did he never wield.” We’re told that his steed is “angry” and hard to control, but that (again paradoxically) the knight was “fully jolly” and in spite of his steed’s curblessness, did fairly sit. Various elements of the stanza, in other words, don’t quite add up, or at least conspire incongruously, and thus from the very start the reader is deposited in a fallen landscape of verbal signs where nothing is what it seems and where the reader must learn to read correctly—or suffer a fate similar to the inexperienced knight called Red Cross, the allegorical hero of Book One, the book of “Holiness.”

If Spenser’s Protestant epic is crucially about the education of its reader believers, trying to teach students today how to “read aright,” as Spenser puts it, we have to show them how to read this poem, not what the poem *means*, but how its central meaning *is the reader reading it*. Nothing less than a Christian’s

salvation (in newly Protestant terms) depends upon it! We have to show students of the poem, in other words, how to read it as it might have been by English Protestant minds in 1594. Those minds may have been more precisely tuned to the nuance of misdirection signaled in the very first and famous line of the poem, in the participial modifying phrase “pricking on the plane” that promises location and direction but invokes aimless wandering. For it is precisely Red Crosse’s lack of direction and of experience that proves to be the greatest challenge in fulfilling his quest.

Twenty-first century students who come to the poem are no less importantly “quested” themselves with learning how to read its fallen language and landscape than early modern, religiously-reformed readers. For the Satanic—in the figure of the epic’s archetypal villain—is lurking everywhere. Our first sight of him is in a peculiarly inconspicuous stanza, in which the metrical lines are all one foot shorter, as if to participate in the decorum of humility that seems to attend the subject of their description, a monk of seeming holy contemplation:

At length they chanced to meet upon the way
An aged sire in long black weeds y-clad,
His feet all bare, his beard all hoary gray;
And by his belt his book he hanging had.
Sober he seemed and very sagely sad,
And to the ground his eyes were lowly bent,
Simple in show and void of malice bad.
And all the way he prayed as he went,
And often knocked his breast as one that did repent.

By now, early on in Canto 1 of the first book, after just 28 of these Spenserian rhyme royal stanzas, the reader of the poem has been educated to see certain crucial signals the book’s Knight of Holiness cannot see. We notice for instance the code word for deception in the repeated “seemed” and in the parallel locution, “as one that did repent.” These phrases alert us to a possible ensnaring deception, that this creature of holy contemplation is not what his artfully composed appearance

says he is, and so all of the carefully chosen details of his presentation become those of a willful misrepresentation: falsity masquerading as truth. In the last two rhyming lines, the merely additive “And” clinches the reader’s perception that holy contemplation is a repetitive theatrical performance, a false image, that is, of what Red Crosse’s soul should be doing at this important moment in the forward progress of the poem, having just escaped one catastrophe and now about to plunge into the next. The mere image of repentance is what the Reformed Church of England accused the Roman Catholics of—a whole series of merely repetitive rituals that had been emptied of their sacred meaning. As it turns out, the figure who makes his appearance in this stanza is none other than the arch villain of the whole epic, Archimage, maker of false images, an allegorical figure of the papal anti-Christ and the false church that has lost its way.

By imagining ourselves as Protestant readers of the poem, we see what Red Cross knight cannot. But what does it mean *to be* a Protestant reader, if a student reader’s religious beliefs and practices are pledged elsewhere? Or what does it mean to be the poem’s Protestant reader 400 plus years after its first publication in a newly emergent English nation, with its newly disseminated and authorized vernacular Bible, when a student reader is perhaps an American agnostic, with strong ties to the progressive Democratic party (the party that traditionally insists upon an absolute distinction between church and state)?

Here as elsewhere in this vast poem, fictional identities—those fashioned by the poet’s allegorical imagination—are brought to life through the demonizing of other identities, in a sort of exclusionary ritual that says “I am whole because you are a fragment; I am the truth because you are false; you are the Satanic dark matter of the universe, which legitimates my crusading righteousness.” We read the poem historically by half-believing these potent fictions, by imaginatively inhabiting an early modern English Protestant subjectivity that believed Rome was the veritable sink of iniquity. But we do so with a cultivated and disciplined irony, an ironic stance toward the

poem's marvelous language and historical circumstance that places us at the center of its high Renaissance art even as we stand apart or to the side, fully conscious of the doubleness of our involvement. In other words, we read *the reader* of the poem, the way Spenser's readers read in the poem's own time their Red Cross knight of holiness.

The cultivation of this sense of irony—of what I'm calling an *ironic pedagogy*—is all the care and mastery of what we do in preserving a cultural past, a past when Spenser became the first poet laureate of his nation and his poem its first great epic work of poetry. As I want to argue, the same attention we seek to develop in our students toward experiencing and understanding Spenser's poetics is the ironic encounter we can have with all sacred texts, musical, poetic, visual, that immerse themselves in a religious ideology which is not our own (and if it is, should be thought of as not quite our own.) That is not to say that spiritually committed Christians should not allow themselves to teach the poetry of Emily Dickinson or that of George Herbert, with all the fervor of their inward conviction; an ironic pedagogy assumes, rather, that the challenges of teaching such poetry in a public university are met not as a religious calling (of whatever particular persuasion) but as a profound curiosity toward the historical consciousness of our ancestral past. We discipline ourselves imaginatively to inhabit these earlier forms of mentality for a variety of reasons that can be, each on their own terms, debated, approved or indeed defrauded. But we do so (if I can be permitted to borrow the Shakespearean metaphor) as actors inhabit their roles, as the metamorphosis of the way things are (were) that can transform when the show is over back to the way things were (are). I would argue that the encounter with this otherness of ourselves leaves an significant residue, and that we are changed by the experience, even ever so slightly, so that our reading the past changes our present tense, tenses it, as it were, with a fullness and richness, and, at the least, puts us in a craving for other such experiences—a virtual continuing education that is a life-long love of the literary past and present. Whenever we

read again one of the lyric glories of English Renaissance poetry, George Herbert's "Love," we transpose ourselves through a trick of imaginative irony into Herbert's Anglican voice, which re-fashions the outlawed religiously excreted Eucharist (Christ's transubstantiated body and blood having been by the Protestants compelled to morph into the reformed realm of the merely symbolic) into the poetic terms of a metaphoric ingesting, where the words are eaten by the mind in the act of re-making the poem in the image of the reader's own here-and-now:

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

To allow one's self to become the poem as it dialogically recaptures the intimacy of religious feeling between host and believer—an erotic intimacy endangered and distanced by the de-ritualizing doctrines of the Reformation—we ironically make the poem's moves as if we were its speaking subject. We are also "re-minded" of the historical fact that parallel texts in early 17th century England to Herbert's "private ejaculations" were those that called for the extreme eradication of any religious otherness, and that for nearly a hundred years English Catholics had been burning English Protestants, and English Protestants had been subjecting English Catholics to the spectacle execution of drawing and quartering, castrating and disemboweling—in front of a roaring crowd of thousands.

An important scholarly obligation in our teaching the literature of the past is to show our students the insanity with which English men and women clung to their religious cards of identity, as surely as those who go to their self-slaughtering martyrdom on today's tortured landscape of devotion. In our publicly assisted university classes at Oakland the divide of religious otherness one meets in the poetry of Spenser or Herbert has importantly multiplied, in a characteristically Ameri-

can and capitalist way, so that we have Muslims in our classes who are encountering the historical demonizing of their otherness wherever in Spenser's great epic lawlessness (in the allegorical figure of Sansloy), infidel-ness (in the figure of Sansfoy), or life-joylessness (in the figure of Sansjoy) are identified as "the Saracen" forces of an enemy so hostile one can barely begin to imagine the depth of its evil. In teaching the poetics of Spenser's epic, in all of its allegorical richness, our pedagogy must incorporate this slice of the historical past as well: some of our students are being shown how ironically to inhabit the consciousness of a poetic subjectivity that constructed itself exactly through the violent exclusion of an otherness which is their own heritage.

It is always through an ironic act of close-reading that we are able simultaneously to experience such things diachronically. That is, readers experience both the early modern consciousness evoked by the poem and their own twenty-first century cherished beliefs (or lack of beliefs). Therefore, readers not only acknowledge the right of others to be possessed of different beliefs (or none), but their ontological reality in being fashioned accordingly. Only through an ironic emotional engagement with the sublime musical representationality of Bach in his sacred cantatas can I access the glory of this music without believing in the compulsory ideology of its words, words that spell destruction for those who don't celebrate, in this case, at the Lutheran table of divine and predestinate election.

The presence on campus of religious studies concentrations and majors is an academic development that parallels the scholarly inculcation of other "area studies," as they used to be called—Russian Studies, Irish Studies, Near Eastern Studies, indeed, American Studies, or even—and why not?—English Studies. What characterizes all of these programs is their curricular focus on the historical, political, and cultural life of a people defined geographically. Judaic Studies and the Islamic Studies, for different reasons, have removed the geography from the defining logic of what constitutes their scholarly purpose, but they do not advertise or fund-raise without appeals to

an identity politics and self-engrossing purposes. Jews will enroll in Judaic Studies, Irish in Irish Studies, etc. out of the gravitational pull and pressure of individual and complicated heritage. Christian Studies operates from no different a set of commitments.

Where area studies were once interdisciplinary programs cobbled together by departments in history, economics, languages and literature, etc., religious studies, in spite of a nod toward liberal ecumenism, have been constituted and driven by an identity politics of personal (as well as scholarly) commitment and adherence. Jews are not flocking, after all, to enroll in Islamic Studies; Catholics are not offering themselves as rabbinical scholars of the Torah, though perhaps they should be! Shouldn't the academic study of "world religions," (i.e., the multiplicity and authenticity of religious otherness which some monotheistic religious orthodoxy cannot doctrinally accept) entail the *ironic imagining* of what religious otherness thinks and feels, just as my English students addressing themselves to the poetic glories of the Renaissance are asked to read Spenser *as if* they were four hundred year-old Protestants, proud of an epic poem for, by, and about the English? Students on our campus are rather drawn to particular programs because the programs themselves have been programmed to answer to and strengthen already established commitments toward inherited (or converted to) subjectivity. If these programs were constituted as the area studies of the past, they would be administered by political scientists, economists, cultural theorists, and historians. Students would be able to interrogate, for example, as scholarly pursuit rather than acts of religious or political persuasion, particular moments in their historical past when Christians destroyed other Christians and Muslims other Muslims, as important acts of their faith.

Merely because there is political representation (of the three monotheisms on campus) does not excuse each of these programs from approaching the intellectual content of their course offerings as anything other than academic and disinterested. By the same token, in the sort of ironic pedagogy I

have been advocating, one is careful in teaching Spenser, Milton, or even Shakespeare to avoid association with any hagiographic impulse toward “converting the unconverted.” Bardolatry (the worship of Shakespeare) has become a necessary idea to many people not because there are Early Modern scholars who show a failure of heart in their appreciation of great poetry, but because there are teachers who generate a (mostly self-serving) charismatic relation to poetic greatness (as if it were a religious experience) thus preventing exactly the sort of intimate contact with the past which the study of literary texts uniquely promise. There have been scholarly books of a grand and enduring magnitude, like Ernest Robert Curtius’ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, that address the study of the sacred literature of the past from a disinterested academic perspective, a perspective that acknowledges the necessity to read not only historically but “ironic-imaginatively.” And as I have been arguing, that is the only way through which the particular performative dimension of the historical poetic text can reveal itself.

The poetic texts discussed in this essay are gathered together under the rubric of “sacred,” terminology that is (or ought to be) open to lively controversy and debate. To those for whom “sacred” and “text” are indissolubly joined at the sacramental hip, there is only *one* book, one text among all others that is sacred: the true word, indeed, of God, of Allah, or of the *ipse-dixit* Son of God. For the academic purposes of a university setting, however, in which *The Holy Bible* is taught alongside *The Fairie Queen*, or in the company of Thomas Mann’s profoundly ironic reworking of prophetic old testamentary narrative in *Joseph and his Brothers*, or for that matter, alongside Homer’s *Odyssey* and Vergil’s *Aeneid*, or beside the racy delectations of Ariosto’s extravagant Italian Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso* (not to mention in the company of such other epical bed-fellows as Alan Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*)—we can observe the very definition of the sacred undergoing a startling but necessary and liberating canonical expansion. For those scholars and teachers who practice an

ironic pedagogy in order to access as fully as possible the affective and intellectual life of the past, what comes to constitute the sacred—or *the human in the sacred*—embraces all poetic discourse that is the subject of our privileged inquiry and historical understanding.

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