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NEH Seminar: Philosophers of Education

Review/ synthesis of *Excellent Sheep* by William Deresiewicz and *Why Teach? In Defense of A Real Education* by Mark Edmundson

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### Teaching Life: Humanizing the Humanities in an Age of Robotic Achievement

“We teach boys to be such men as we are. We do not teach them to aspire to be all they can. We do not give them a training as if we believed in their noble nature. We scarce educate their bodies. We do not train the eye and the hand. We exercise their understandings to the apprehension and: comparison of some facts, to a skill in numbers, in words; we aim to make accountants, attorneys, engineers; but not to make able, earnest, great-hearted men. The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

In a 2015 *Saturday Night Live* skit lampooning the millennial generation in the workplace, a young woman in a flannel shirt and a floppy hat asks her boss for a promotion after three days of employment. As she does so, she never looks up from her phone, hands busily texting as she talks. In the same office, a young man, presumably worn out by the demands of young adult life, throws his phone out a window, vowing to stay off social media, then leaps out after it while his young friends greet his demise with a flurry of texting and, of course, a commemorative selfie. Teachers of a certain vintage will recognize immediately the look of bewildered disdain shared by the two older characters in the scene, men who have had to “claw their way to the top” for years to earn their positions and who find their young charges’ phone addictions and emotional fragility completely alien.

For me, the most poignant moment in the scene is not the mock-suicide; it’s the moment during which Miley Cyrus’ character declares that she “needs to go to the South of France for some perspective.” When her boss, played by Kenan Thompson, calmly insists that she needs to be at work to do her job, she crumples with a cry of “stop yelling at me” while her friend chimes in with “Stop attacking her!” Cut to a hilarious close-up of Thompson, wide-eyed, unsure of how his basic expectation that employees work could be construed as an attack.

Much has written about this purportedly spoiled, entitled, easily offended generation, and though it is easy to satirize their odd new workplace ways, it is worth examining how young Americans have been trained, throughout college, to expect the world to accommodate their every

whim, while an uncertain economy and ever-increasing competition for economic stability places enormous pressure on them to succeed.

As teachers, we take some of the blame for doling out easy A's and a false promise of emotional safety in a world that confronts us daily with painful, seemingly intractable problems (xenophobia, terrorism, and gun violence leap to mind). Likewise, schools and colleges, promoting "college and career readiness" over the intrinsic value of knowledge have commodified learning and turned even the very best students into what William Deresiewicz calls "excellent sheep" – multi-taskers who strive breathlessly for accomplishments but take few real risks, students who are expert at "doing school" but anxious, sleep-deprived, depressed, and devoid of curiosity. They do not tolerate failure, and their success rests on uneasy ground because the criteria by which they succeed are imposed by authorities – parents, teachers, coaches, college admissions officers, and the like.

In *Excellent Sheep*, Deresiewicz places some of the blame for this phenomenon on "Tiger Moms" who control every moment of their children's lives and insist on near-constant resume building throughout their children's adolescent years. These helicopter parents, whose calling card is scrutiny and surveillance, are one face of a coin that is child-obsessed parenting. The other belongs to the indulgent parents, those people whose children are coddled and celebrated for their every move, the so-called "special snowflakes" much derided in the popular press today. But rather than making light of these children's closely guarded lives, Deresiewicz recalls Alice Miller's classic psychology text, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, noting that in both scenarios, the child is not given a chance to fail and succeed on his or her own terms, and instead becomes a vessel for the expression and realization of his or her parents' needs.

Such parents, Miller writes, cannot tolerate a child who is 'sad, needy, angry, furious'... the result is that affable, confident, adult-oriented personality that today's young achievers are so famous for. Rather than developing an inner self with its own goals and value, they become dependent on authority figures... and the tokens of approval they distribute. (55)

Just as the gifted child, in Miller's formulation, can never act freely for him or herself in the household, obsessive achievers go on to fulfill the needs of their superiors in college in automatic and uninvested ways. With eyes ever fixed on the prize that is approval, these students conform readily to

a college culture whose chief aim is not to create independent thinkers and thoughtful citizens, but to groom future wealthy donors.

Deresiewicz's focus is on academic and social elites, the students who attend Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford, and then go on, in increasingly large numbers, to pursue careers in investment banking and consulting after college. Given that these are the students who were best trained in childhood to jump through hoops, fill out applications, and earn a coveted spot in an Ivy League university, it follows that they gravitate toward competitive fields with a guaranteed high starting wage and a clear, linear path to achievement. And Howard Gardner would be quick to note that these graduates head straight for the fields that engage their "law school" skill set – if not law school itself, then some other career track that relies heavily upon logical, verbal, and quantitative skills. They avoid risk, follow the money, and steer clear of noble but perhaps less obvious roads to knowledge and prestige. Deresiewicz notes that the competitive culture of elite colleges in effect

... smothers [students] with expectations.... How can I become a teacher, or a minister, or a carpenter? Wouldn't that be a waste of my fancy education? But what would my parents think? What would my friends think? How would I face my classmates at our 20th reunion, when they're all rich doctors and important people in New York? And the question that exists behind them all: isn't it beneath me? So an entire world of possibilities shuts, and you miss your true calling. (25)

The narrow path to acceptable employment outlined above paints the elite college system as the host of a kind of soulless, cynical "salmon run" that leads, inevitably, to disappointment. In Deresiewicz's dire warnings about the loss of laid-back, exploratory learning we hear the ghost of Rousseau, who worried that traditional schools crush a child's spontaneity, and thus "the age of gaiety passes amidst tears, punishments, threats, and slavery." If Deresiewicz is to be believed, college is no longer fun; college, like our most high-achieving public high schools, is becoming a place where "success" reigns supreme, and students are too busy working to understand themselves or each other. That they end up choosing from a short list of lucrative careers instead of, say, revolutionizing the child welfare system is not surprising given the shortsightedness of their educations.

The stereotype that millennials need rewards, praise and "me time" at in the workplace may have its roots in how rigidly success-oriented their school lives have been since childhood. "We're not

teaching to the test; we're living to it," Deresiewicz writes, noting that affluent families begin shaping their children's college résumés as early as middle school, and that a cottage industry of application-ready "experiences" (such as spending *one* day with an artist) has sprung up to give young people more to write about on the all-important admissions essay. No wonder work feels like a let-down for these young people; their lives have been divided and subdivided into measured opportunities for advancement, and college has been a luxuriously appointed but dispiriting journey toward the uncertain goal of professional stability. When young people finally land a job in the real world, with its new, foreign, and sometimes opaque pathways to advancement, are we honestly surprised when they expect their superiors to be as solicitous and benignly controlling as their parents, teachers, deans, and administrators have been thus far?

Mark Edmundson's *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*, offers a softer and perhaps less damning version of college and "kids today," and this collection of funny, often very personally revealing essays about the beleaguered liberal arts has significant implications for secondary Humanities educators, particularly those who teach in high-performing schools. Edmundson teaches English at the University of Virginia, and laments the corporate consumerist culture that pervades his campus and leaves professors at the mercy of their students' reviews which celebrate characteristics like "enjoyable" above all other criteria for excellence. Suspicious of the modern university's impulse to "train and entertain," the author builds a convincing case for the kind of education that, through literature, offers a "number of possibly usable human visions of experience" (201).

The first section in the book, titled "The Shift," lays out one of Edmundson's chief complaints: somewhere in the last few decades, the humanities began to slip into decline, and that along with that decline (or perhaps because of it) went students who care and think passionately about "genius and high literary ideals." Who replaced them? Edmundson sees today's students as "kind and melancholy," "genially sleepwalking," and unwilling to show strong emotions, much less engage actively in learning or take an intellectual risk (18). After naming a few culprits including sheltering parents and an increasingly powerful consumer culture in collision with left-liberal politics, Edmundson takes dead aim at a world in which professors "have it as a cardinal point of doctrine never to piss the customer off" (21). And this shift has been costly indeed. Thomas Jefferson, whom Edmundson evokes

frequently, stated that the best preventative measure against tyranny was to “illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people.”

Though Edmundson does not put this fine a point on it, his 1997 essay “Liberal Arts and Entertainment” focuses on what could be called a lack of such illumination on his campus and others. Chief among his concerns about this particular generation of students is their “hypercool ethos” and universal skepticism; they don’t have heroes because they distrust the very idea of greatness. The notion of genius is met with a certain amount of scorn. How can one break through this facade of feigned detachment to illuminate these students’ minds? For starters, Edmundson suggests that professors become more willing to “defy student conviction and affront them occasionally – to be usefully offensive.” If students never hear “no,” are never challenged by uncomfortable questions, and live as though their campuses are “northern outposts of Club Med,” how are they prepared to defeat or even recognize tyranny (26)? An undercurrent of incredulous laughter throughout these essays would suggest that Jefferson’s ideals – all but the advice to exercise two hours a day – have gone the way of the horse and buggy at his beloved college in Virginia.

If “Liberal Arts and Entertainment” paints a timid, TV-addled picture of college students in 1997, “Dwelling in Possibilities” (2008) portrays college students in the post-911 era as “speedsters” forever chasing another internet-borne high, trying to “be everywhere now” instead of focusing on any one thing. Those teachers who have adapted to the times create classrooms that mirror students’ tech-infused lives, with special remote controls, media, and other bells and whistles standing in for what used to be rich discussion. But professors are not, Edmundson writes, “here to help our students make their minds resemble their laptops, fast and feverish” (47).<sup>1</sup> What he advocates instead is to actualize Thoreau’s edict to “live deliberately” in the classroom, and to make it a place where students have encounters with “brilliant antagonists” as necessary stops on the journey to becoming an independent thinker (57).

Though Edmundson’s breezy, associative style can be redundant at times (these essays were originally published separately in the *New York Times* and elsewhere), a thesis begins to emerge, something like the great geniuses of the western canon have a lot to tell us about our lives, if only we

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<sup>1</sup> It would seem that the secondary school educator should likewise be skeptical of the near-religious zeal with which educational technology is touted for its classroom uses. Do tech-crazy high school classrooms create potential college students who resist all forms of sustained attention?

would listen. Citing Freud, Malcolm X, Blake, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Whitman as representative geniuses whose work should be studied for its “soul-making” potential, the author believes that the happiness of the people and the future of democracy are at stake when we study great literature; “A democracy needs to constantly develop, and to do so it requires the most powerful visionary minds to interpret the present and propose possible shapes for the future” (24). How do educators create “powerful visionary minds”? Edmundson does not quite tell us, opting instead to share excerpts from his favorite authors and snapshots of the Socratic method at work, “the animated, sometimes impolite give-and-take between student and teacher” (16) he learned from a beloved teacher he celebrates in an autobiographical chapter titled “My First Intellectual.” Like Deresiewicz, whose sustained mockery of Harvard’s “yes culture” borders on vitriol, Edmundson supports teaching that “incites friction” and offers more questions than answers. The teacher, in this case is a destabilizing, rather than a comforting or affirming influence.

Departing in content, if not tone, from the rest of the book, the essay “Do Sports Build Character?” supports William James’ belief in “a noble and generous kind of rivalry,” (James 27) exploring the value of his own high school football experience, determining that high school sports do prepare one for life in the sense that they “mimic the martial world” and offer a taste of “the condition of war” (75).<sup>2</sup> How are such warlike attributes useful in the formation of character? Comparing young athletes to Hector and Achilles in *The Iliad*, Edmundson offers two visions of what athletes are expected to be, each with its own pitfalls. On the one hand, Hector is the noble athlete, “the Green Beret who would never kill a prisoner” while Achilles represents something more primitive, an undisciplined “wild beast” who knows no fear and cannot quell his passionate rage, even off the battlefield. Edmundson praises the former while admitting that the truly renowned athletes, at least in some sports, are the ones who, like Achilles, lack the “flexible internal structure” that enables their “best parts [to rule] over the most dangerous” (79).

A question Edmundson does not answer is how that killer instinct plays out in modern schools and colleges, particularly when students are encouraged to pursue a career path with near-maniacal fixation. But by acknowledging that the “agnostic world” of sport predates the spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> Edmundson’s 2002 memoir *Teacher* literalizes this connection, observing that the painful grass drills in football practice were, for many of his teammates, preparation for actual war; “... somewhere on the far side of the Hormel Stadium practice fields, the [Viet] Cong and the NVA are waiting” (47).

teachers Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius – each of whom taught compassion and loving kindness above all else – the author suggests that no quest for personal glory (athletic or otherwise) is worth a complete renunciation of gentleness, and that intelligent thought is a corrective to the one’s all-engulfing drive to compete.

In a chapter called “The Globalists” echoing E.D. Hirsch’s demand for factual knowledge, Edmundson bemoans his students’ apparent lack of a sense of “the biography of the globe” even as they make friends as easily as they acquire tchotchkes at various tourist ports throughout the world on a Semester at Sea course. But though Edmundson cringes at his students’ gregarious ease with unfamiliar locals, he also admires it, suggesting that Americans should strive not to suppress that trademark friendliness abroad but temper it with knowledge of global history and culture.

In some respects, this book could have been called *Why Learn?* or *Why Go to College?* Delineating between “corporate cities” and “scholarly enclaves,” one chapter expresses suspicion of any institution of higher learning that touts “excellence” and “leadership” as its primary values.

Where should a young person now go to college? It depends. Does she want more of the good American high school with its hustle and bustle and striving for excellence at fixation on leadership, its partnering and incentivizing, and getting proactive, and succeeding, succeeding, succeeding? Or does she want something else? (111)

That “something else” is at the heart of this entire collection of essays. Both Deresiewicz and Edmundson make sharp distinctions between the kind of student who gallops through requirements and uses her education to further her professional goals and the one who learns for the sake of learning. Yet it’s hard not to detect in these books something like academic chauvinism, as time and again the mindless careerists being indicted for their shallowness are economics majors and future Silicon Valley-types. Edmundson’s chapter-length paeon to the English major, though it warms my heart as a like-minded reader and lover of language, decides finally that to major in English “is to major, quite simply, in becoming a person” (118). I question a little whether all English majors can make such a claim, and Edmundson’s passion notwithstanding, it seems dubious to dismiss all other academic fields as somehow not being about the business of becoming a person on some non-literary, but no less valid, terms. And to the skeptic who questions the value of an English degree, I daresay he will not find a satisfying answer here. But perhaps that’s Edmundson’s point. The state required to

learn from literature is one of “openness and a quest for truth or truths,” (118) and as I see in the secondary English classroom all the time, questions with multiple correct answers – especially big, searching life questions – are a boondoggle for all but a select handful of students who are brave enough to venture into unfamiliar territory. Such tolerance for uncertainty is parcelled out unequally at birth, and while I, too, lament the decline in English majors in our nation’s colleges, I also wonder how there were ever very many in the first place.

The most illuminating essays in this book directly answer the book’s title question, *Why Teach?* Invoking Matthew Arnold’s definition of literature, “the best of what has been known and thought,” Edmundson strongly criticizes the modern impulse to deconstruct everything we read through various critical lenses in the essay “Against Readings.” Teaching literature, for Edmundson, should have transformation as its aim; it’s about leading students to recognize in a text, as Emerson put it, “their own rejected thoughts” reflected back “with a certain alienated majesty.” A feminist or a Marxist or a Derridean reading of a novel does not draw the reader into the text and enable identification so much as keep reader and text at a cool distance from one another, in effect “closing off the dialogue before it’s had a chance to begin” (170). The skeptical, deconstructivist impulse is alive and well in high school English classrooms as well. Many of my students are so offended by Holden Caulfield’s whiny self-negation and the fact that he doesn’t do his homework that they ignore the terms of his predicament and write him (and Salinger) off. So what can be done? Edmundson’s advice is deceptively simple. Allow students to “befriend the text,” or, put differently, to take it on its own terms, at least initially. (Edmundson calls this offering a “Dickensian reading of Dickens”). By befriending a text, we allow a book or author to tell us what it thinks about life, and in turn, to ask ourselves, “Is the work true?... Does the work contain live options? Does it offer paths [I] might wish to take, modes of seeing and saying and doing that [I] can put into action in the world?” (195) In approaching texts this way, Edmundson adds, we offer students a kind of future-minded therapy, a pointed and sometimes fraught but ultimately worthwhile conversation about not just who they are but also what they might want to be and do.

Is cultivating more English majors the cure for this generation’s alleged culture of blind achievement, narcissism, and addictions to praise and rewards? Will an uptick in Humanities majors restore intellectualism to campus life and bring back those long nights of “bull sessions” and spirited

personal discovery? The answer is not clear. Both Deresiewicz and Edmundson end their books with similar claims about how the kind of open, expansive thinking required of a Humanities major paves the way for a rich inner life, a “self-created” life. And only when citizens have been given the tools to create their own lives can democracy flourish.

What are the implications of these books for the secondary Humanities classroom?

Edmundson and Deresiewicz would both encourage the teachers of adolescents to be more present and more courageous in the classroom; if we want students to believe that their souls and democracy itself are at stake, we need to model a convincing degree of investment in the material and not apologize for teaching authors and texts that might not have obvious practical value. We need to be vulnerable as teachers of the Humanities, and conduct ourselves not as detached critics but as participants “in the arena,” as sociologist Brene Brown puts it in her bestselling book *Daring Greatly*, observing that

Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection. (15)

Rather than giving students and parents what they want, or think they want – low-risk, predictable tasks, high grades, and very little real learning – Humanities teachers can cultivate vulnerability in themselves and their students. Edmundson expresses this idea another, more masculine way, evoking the “uncoolness” of good teachers and claiming that uncoolness is a state into which we can bring our students. When we and our students can “cast off the breast plates and iron masks and open up,” the real learning can begin (184). For the secondary educator, being uncool or vulnerable might also mean resisting a school-wide “customer service mentality,” standing up for a difficult text or topic in the face of a parent complaint, or challenging the sanctity of the latest instructional technology fad. The Humanities teacher must be brave because, in Parker Palmer’s words, her classroom always has the potential to generate “a live encounter... in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear” (37). If a teacher can convince her students that they are more than an accumulation of points, credits, skills, and predestined outcomes, her classroom becomes a place where the live encounter is not feared but embraced.

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