

Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education, by Mark Edmundson. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 222 pp., \$24.00 hardbound.

Disconformity

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One of the tests of an observing intelligence is how it characterizes an outside group. How often does a conservative read a description of conservatives by liberal academics and grimace? Not because of the rancor it may emit, or the contentiousness, or the flat denial of a conservative premise, or even because it soundly defeats a conservative argument, but rather because the version of conservatism it offers doesn't match the conservatism a conservative espouses and lives. Consider this example from the introduction to *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*,

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Mark Edmundson's new collection of essays:

Current schooling, from the primary grades through college, is about tooling people to do what society (as its least imaginative members conceive it) needs done....Conservative jeremiads against the university tend to declare that universities are not doing their socializing job comprehensively enough. They want higher education to feed the demands of the American economy overall and of private enterprise in particular. The authors of such tracts are inclined to feel that one idea subversive of the status quo is one too many. (p. xii)

Whom does Edmundson have in mind? A few Republican governors, perhaps, or some wealthy donors to business schools, or an angry libertarian fed up with progressivist orientations at a nearby campus. But if you compiled a list of leading conservative "Jeremiahs" and their works going back to the 1980s, not one of them would fit. William Bennett, Allan Bloom, Martin Anderson, Dinesh D'Souza, Lynne

Cheney, Roger Kimball, Steve Balch, Peter Collier, David Horowitz, Anne Neal, Peter Wood, Bruce Bawer, and Naomi Riley all more or less favor private enterprise, but would abhor the restriction of liberal education to workforce training and free market philosophy. They object to the very conformity Edmundson regrets a sentence later. There is a difference, to be sure—he locates the cause of conformity in youth consumerism, conservatives (usually) in political correctness—but to cast conservative critics as workplace-readiness drones means that he hasn't read the literature.

It's an odd misjudgment, given that Edmundson shares with traditionalist conservatives grave dismay over the decline of humanistic study and educational values. That's the main motif in these previously-published essays going back to the late-1990s, some in *Harper's*, some in the *New York Times*, some in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Edmundson earned his doctorate at Yale at the end of the High Theory years (1985), and his first books displayed an expert handling of Freud, Derrida, and other fathers of literary theory, but at the same time he penned essays for intellectual periodicals such as *Harper's*, *Raritan*, and *Lingua Franca* that managed to render

serious education issues to an outside readership. *Why Teach?* gathers thirteen of them and adds a few unpublished entries, the whole a loose collection that rambles through Edmundson's biography (mainly high school days), technology in classrooms, student mores, the English major, literary theory, William Blake, and other topics. Along the way, Edmundson draws conclusions about the value of sports for youths, teachers who refuse to make intellectual compromises, administrators who adopt the lingo of "leadership" and "excellence," the intense eye-opening a book can evoke (for Edmundson, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* did this), but most of all, the proper ends of liberal education and how they have been thwarted in recent decades.

According to Edmundson, higher education deteriorated when a particular demographic shift occurred, that is, when the baby boom cohort ended and a smaller applicant pool emerged. Suddenly, schools that had grown in the 1960s and 1970s because of swelling enrollments faced shrinking admissions and had to respond. They didn't downsize, though: "Universities expand easily enough, but with tenure locking faculty in

for lifetime jobs, and with the general reluctance of administrators to eliminate their own slots, it's not easy for a university to contract." Instead, they competed with one another for applications, which meant advertising their goods to eighteen-year-olds. College became a "buyer's market," and so schools enhanced their amenities, inflated grades, loosened requirements, expanded student choice in course-taking, and generally reinforced the "consumer ethos" that young people in America encounter every time they turn on a TV, drive to the mall, or open a laptop.

That consumerist, careerist outlook among students, along with the need to appeal to it, Edmundson claims, has led colleges to abandon their mission and become cynical, anti-intellectual, and market-oriented. The term "corporate university" encapsulates the result, in which university leaders think like business leaders, students act like consumers, professors meet productivity benchmarks, and education becomes a commodity.

Because the term "corporate" has been adopted by liberal and leftist critics of higher education, expressing an anticapitalist ideology, we might judge Edmundson's complaint as one more progressivist beef against free market economics. But

traditionalist conservatives (not libertarians) worry just as much about what capitalist values spell for a liberal arts curriculum, especially one founded on conservative values. To a conservative, a fundamental ingredient of liberal education is the disinterested pursuit of truth and beauty, the cultivation of knowledge as its own end, not a marketable product. This belief also contrasts with the progressivist axiom that all knowledge is "interested," all inquiry political.

Edmundson likewise cherishes that independence, and he presents it solemnly in vignettes from his own experience and urgent assertions of intellectual values aimed at the young. On the first day of one year in high school, he recalls, a new teacher stepped to the front of the classroom and wrote a phrase from Nietzsche on the board. Mr. Meyers was an inauspicious little man in a "moth-eaten suit," while Edmundson was a wayward football player who'd never even finished a grown-up book that wasn't about his sport. Customary avenues for graduates were a city street job or the Marines, perhaps a community college if he got ambitious. Medford High was a rote-learning, lockdown kind of place, "a shabby Gothic cathedral consecrated to Order," not

enlightenment, and this diminutive philosophy teacher didn't fit, Edmundson remembers. He "talked like a dictionary."

The students snickered and ignored him, but as weeks passed the atmosphere changed. Some started reading, talking, and thinking. Meyers tossed the Durants' *Story of Philosophy* and assigned Camus, Freud, Kesey, and Hesse, having students take turns reading aloud in class. A few days into *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Meyers made a "chance remark" about how "prisons, hospitals, and schools were on a continuum, controlling institutions with many of the same protocols and objectives," and it struck the seventeen-year-old Edmundson as a "revelation." The insight had a local, adolescent appeal, of course, but a lasting impact as well: it converted Edmundson to a life of the mind, guiding him to "a new sort of self" (a phrase from the next essay in the book).

It's a compelling portrait, especially in light of the trait Edmundson singles out as the source of the teacher's authority. Meyers didn't address the students' working futures and he disregarded youth culture entirely, either of which would have allowed him to demonstrate how much he cared about the kids. None of the

"relevance" tactics for him, and no sentimental attachment to the literature or to the students' personal lives, either. Instead, it was his attitude toward himself and the students. "[H]e thought highly of himself," Edmundson notes. "And not much at all, it wasn't difficult to see, of us." Meyers had a paper clip in his lapel and wore clumsy shoes and spoke in a "queer" accent, but "[h]e mocked us, and not always so genially, for never doing the reading, never knowing the answer, never having a thought in our heads. We were minor-league fools, his tone implied."

The approach was altogether contrary to today's pedagogy of relevant content and child-centered activities, of course, but it worked. Meyers got his "considerable lode of self-esteem" from the right ground—his learning—and it imparted the value of learning better than the current meet-the-students-halfway tactic, Edmundson maintains. His example stands against the compromises teachers have made in the corporate university, outlined in a later essay, "A Word to the New Humanities Professor," which offers sarcastic advice, including: (1) keep readings short, (2) insert pop culture references into presentations, (3) create a relaxed atmosphere, (4) don't rank the classics more highly than TV shows, (5) give high grades, and (6) embrace

technology. Too many teachers comply, and too few Meyers survive to transform youths the way Edmundson was transformed forty years ago.

These and other tales and rebukes in *Why Teach?* embolden teachers who still believe in greatness and honor the classics. When Edmundson asserts that “the people who were kids when the Western canon went on trial and received summary justice are working the levers of culture,” and that they have utterly capitulated to entertainment values and cheap taste (he thinks they don’t know any better because their nineties-era teachers didn’t teach them well), we applaud. Many such utterances in these essays are worth preserving as touchstones of liberal education, particularly those critical of literary studies—“Every work, alas, is rewritten in the terms of Foucault, of feminism, of Marx, and that is the end of the story.”

And yet, one must, reluctantly, recognize in Edmundson’s thinking a steady conception that limits the ideal of study and teaching he prizes, and even slides into the sentimentality his influences eschew. It is the anti-conformity theme that he cites repeatedly, an Emersonian resistance to excess socialization, routine interpretation, workforce training, and pop/youth culture. He hails students who enter the corporate

university but “are not playing the game,” memorializes Mario Savio’s 1964 protest speech against the Establishment at Berkeley in 1964, invokes Whitman as the colossal poet who heeded Emerson’s call, and praises Meyers for teaching that “anything that’s been successfully institutionalized, however rebellious it may seem or however virtuous, is stifling.” “From Emerson,” Edmundson declares, “I learned to trust my own thoughts.”

This adversarial mindset certainly has an educational value, and it fits neatly into a critique of the corporate university, but only so far as an opposite pole remains in place, namely, the receptive or traditional mindset. Emerson extolled self-reliance and scorned conformity, but did so in a culture in which conformity reigned (as he saw it in 1840). Among college students today, we have instead a curious bifurcation, a superficial culture of rebelliousness overlaying utter conformity in behavior. They imitate one another all the time, yet worship fake rebels in sports, movies, and music. For Edmundson to urge more independence and iconoclasm is to echo the values they already and shallowly hold. To thwart conventionality, one would better advise students, “Turn off your *selves* for one hour, *conform* your

mind to the words of Milton, and memorize the first 100 lines of *Paradise Lost!*”

To overemphasize anti-conformity is also to steer education in a constrained direction. When Edmundson identifies certain students who resist corporate university processes, the characteristic he finds common to them all is surprisingly conventional:

They are at school seeking knowledge so as to make the lives of other human beings better....They want to be teachers and scientists and soldiers and doctors and legal advocates for the poor.....

...[T]he people I'm talking about often put others first. They have a love for humanity in them, and it is this love that chiefly motivates what they do. (p. 108)

Their humanitarianism sounds all-too-familiar, but it does carry an adversarial aim in that it rejects greed, pride, and selfishness, vices that align so well with corporate manners and mores. Very well, but there are other motives for reading Freud, Austen, Dante, Hemingway, and Douglass, or for studying chemistry or otherwise acting intellectually. Some youths read *Jane Eyre* to resolve emotional issues, some find in mathematics a talent they didn't suspect, some pursue sculpture to express themselves, not help someone else. Indeed, I can imagine Emerson himself rejecting the formulation “put others first” and others like it, especially given how often one hears it on elite campuses. It summons a different statement by the Concord Sage: “The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines.”