

The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2007: 36.1

SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

ETHICS, INTERPRETATION, AND PEDAGOGY:

MARTIN BUBER AND THE UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

[Spencer Dew](#)

“I am no philosopher, prophet, or theologian,” said Martin Buber, widely recognized as a philosopher and theologian, frequently lauded as a prophet, at a celebration of his 80th birthday. He identified himself, rather, as “but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen” (*Meetings* 8). Such a careful autobiographical act, that statement! It is a rhetorical masterstroke, providing at once a humbly aggrandizing self-conception of identity, a metaphoric analogue for the work itself in both content and form, and, ultimately, an image of pedagogy.

The last is of particular use for us, people who care deeply about reading—people who take the act of reading and texts themselves seriously, who locate in critical interpretive ability the necessary precondition of democratic citizenship as well as a basis for the sort of educated humanism of which we are representatives and guards. We care deeply about passing on this passion, this recognition of the importance of the act of reading, its pleasures and responsibilities. We spend our careers struggling, in this way, to *point* toward what we have seen and continue to see.

To offer, at the outset, my own brief autobiographical exposition: I was hired three years ago to adjunct several introduction to philosophy classes which I approached as introductions to interpretation, to thinking critically about the work of rhetoric in texts, the mechanics of persuasion. When I was hired to teach introduction to ethics, I structured the class not around a survey of the field but something I considered to be more “practical,” the issue of how the reading of texts informs our relations as human beings. Relation to the other, representation as a way of making things immediate or mediated, the issue of empathy: these I took to be

central to any consideration of ethics, and I pursued direct, serious engagement with literature as a worthy introduction to ethics, and, indeed, to any question of the human.

In these classes, I have made the work of Martin Buber a sort of theoretical frame through which to begin discussion. This work not only lays out explicit ideas on relations between humans but also a pragmatic literary criticism, an approach to how texts work, how we should approach them, how they affect us. Buber's project has been called "training for human listening," and this, surely, describes the ideal of undergraduate education. I want to sketch some thoughts here on the use of Buber in the classroom—first discussing Buber as reader/translator of the Bible and then the basics of his text *I and Thou* in terms of both content and technique—and, by way of these reflections, some thoughts about the intersection between literature and ethics.

I assume we share, as members of this society and readers of this journal, a belief in the usefulness of criticism, even a dual necessity of rigorous analytical reading—aware of political subtexts for instance—yet also a stance open to the wonder of the text, its effervescence, reading as an experience in itself. Moreover, I assume that we spend time standing in front of classes that are unfamiliar with literary criticism, its lineages or jargon. *Rhetoric* is a word I have to write on the dry erase board and define; *jouissance* is one, for perhaps lamentable but pragmatically defensible reasons, I avoid. Part of this assumption is that there are certain essential ideas about how language and texts work that need to be introduced and repeatedly reviewed. The risk of taking anything for granted is that our students will take it for granted, too.

As a religionist by training and located at a small Catholic school, my only reluctance about mentioning the Bible is that my students will respond in precisely the fashion Buber identified as part of the crisis of his day—a detachment from the text, such that it is approached as an object, artifact or idol, as if already well known, met thus with "a mix of uncomprehending respect and unthinking familiarity" or "shoulder-shrugging dismissal," read, if at all, as if in a bad translation (*Scripture* 73). This, for Buber (and we might see that it's true for our day as well) is both the areligious *and* religious approach, in the sense that Buber contrasted "religion" with risky direct engagement (Job's friends brought religion to the ash heap, for instance) (*On* 189). The crisis of modernity, the modern alienation, is thus recapitulated by, located in, a crisis of reading. People are not open to each other in precisely the same way they are not open to the text, the immediate directly addressing Voice of the book.

The Bible, for Buber, the oddly secular "theologian," is valorized as an example of something basic and human, a "pointed epic," in Franz Rosenzweig's phrase, an epic that is instructive. When they embarked, together, on translating the Hebrew Bible into German, Buber and Rosenzweig shared and articulated in essays and lectures their belief that the text was great not as written but as *read* and, particularly, as read aloud, brought into the immediate present, demanding a response. "This last surviving and yet continually abiding oral book" was, in the dialogical thought of these two translators, itself an invitation to dialogue. Buber's interest was never, for instance, in the prescriptive or proscriptive nature of the Law. Reading the Ten Commandments, Buber discarded the aspect of "tablet," the do's and don't's, focusing instead on the "Spoken Word," "uttered by an *I* and addressed to a *Thou*" (*Scripture* 140-1). Rather than "an impersonal codex governing an association of men" we as readers are given an exemplification of authentic relation, and, through the voice of the text, we are called into such relation. "Biblical humanism" as Buber expounded it "conceives language as an event, an event in mutuality," never form but always relation, "not mastery of the secret, but immediacy in facing it; not the thinker and master of the word, but its listener and executor, its worshipper and proclaimer" (216). The book demands a response, and one enters into reading a text the way one enters into a conversation—piecemeal, ready to engage. The prerequisite—for the Bible but also for any human-to-human interaction—is an openness to be changed, transformed. Buber spoke of "absolute attentiveness" required to engage the biblical text; one needed to approach it as something ever-new, prepared to be surprised by the fresh presentness of the text's direct address. We must "yield to it, withhold nothing." The ideal reader is unprejudiced as he reads the words aloud in front of him, becoming "a receiving vessel," listening to the text (*Scripture* 5, 7).

Such a conception, clearly, privileges the oral. For Buber, the "timelessness" of literature is its curse. Rosenzweig speaks of all *Schrift*, writing, being *Gift*, poison, until translated into the oral, the spoken (211). To accomplish this, the translation paid particular attention to the poetics of the Hebrew original: paronomasia of

Leitworte that allow for sound bridges between related words, colometry identifying breath as “fundamental punctuation,” “the natural segmenting of speech” (43).

Yet the book is not only an immediate call to dialogue and a poetic texture, it is also a human document, a *report of encounters* as Buber read it, rooted in the banal particulars of life—yearly cycles, daily meals—and always in the midst of human history—never is there a vacuum between the mystic and God. Buber's reading of the Passover event is of particular interest here (*Moses* 69). Moreover, the Bible's history is history *par excellence* in that, as Buber reads it beautifully in his essay “Biblical Leadership,” the text celebrates human fallibility, speaking in a “legitimate stammering” (think of the prophets, especially Ezekiel's reliance on simile, his inability to directly describe, only to say what a thing *was like*) and offering a “glorification of failure” (Moses is thankfully no Alexander the Great, nor even a good speaker; David, dancing to accompany the ark back to Jerusalem, is told by his wife that he was acting like a fool, and he was) (*Bible* 143). All of this, for Buber, brings a richness of the text. Fallibility, the cringe-inducing, the vulnerable, doubt: all these are admirable, because *human*, traits for a text to convey. “If this book transmits cries of doubt, it is the doubt that is the destiny of man, who after having tasted nearness must experience distance and learn from distance what it alone can teach” (1).

This dialogical thought and this meditation on distance echo throughout Buber's most popular book, a paradoxical text, at once infinitely difficult and easily accessible—*I and Thou*. The basic thought here, of “basic words” of relation, is well known. There are those moments we approach the other as an It, a thing, an object, a means to an end, an “experience” in Buber's sense. Then there are those other moments, always fleeting, but which we innately long for and know, *a priori*, wherein we say, with our whole being, *You* to the other. These are moments of authentic encounter, open and honest, risky, always unique and immediate and exclusive. One is the chrysalis and one is the butterfly, except that there is no direct progression; all *You's* fold back into *It's*. In his brief book of memoirs, *Meetings*, Buber describes being a child and having a true encounter with a horse; as soon as he recognized the stroking as “fun” everything changed, collapsed, became dishonest, no longer a genuine encounter but merely a means to an end, cheap pleasure (*Meetings* 32). This is not such a difficult concept to grasp, but it is ultimately impossible to present in words and, moreover, to grasp it in words, to conceive it, this theory, as a theory, an It, is to paradoxically disregard it.

Which, itself, is not difficult to grasp, that spiral, nor is it difficult to see why Buber opts to write as he does, accepting language as a problem, arbitrary and unmatched to lived experience. Buber speaks of *Erlebnis*, that category of the ineffable—inner, affective experience, “temporally and logically prior to all sensate experience and rational reflection”—and he seeks a language which can somehow bear witness to and convey this rather than describe and betray it (Mendes-Flohr, 16). Buber thus turns to poetic technique in order to evoke something of what he must, as a philosopher, in argument form, also speak.

Yet another assumption: our students are savvy, or we must treat them as if they were; they have every potential to be. The complex interweaving of mechanics and content, message and form—this is known, without jargon, intuited even, in the same way that students are well aware language can bring us closer or keep us at a distance, even both at the same time to different audiences, as with Joan Didion's reflections on her response to her husband's death, another text covered in this ethics class. When we read Tim O'Brien, my students understand that there is a certain truth behind fiction, a truth perhaps only fiction can reach. When they encounter Mary Gordon's dichotomy between “masterpieces” and “pornography” (anything that tries in any way to “convince” a reader), they see right through the mask of moralizing to the self-aggrandizing nonsense that this is. Society's obsession with Anna Nicole Smith is at once a creepy voyeurism, irresponsible on several levels, yet also an example of the power of the individual human story. All of which is to say, much teaching is a matter of showing, a matter of pointing out what is there, picking the right window through which to frame the view.

The actual hours of our time with students are quite few, the pages they will or can be persuaded to read, fewer. We must choose our texts carefully, and we must choose what books we order, what books we ask our students to buy and—another assumption—ask them to keep, to carry with them, with extreme consideration. I have attempted to show, very briefly, some pedagogical function for Buber's work, a way to think about texts and their workings, the abilities and limits of language, a way to relate this thinking to the issue of ethics, of human

relations itself. There are many other ways, though this is certainly one of use. We need not follow the phrasing of the metaphysics—that, for instance “word is not only a concept; it is an invocation of a primal reality that pulsates at the threshold of speech”—though we might (Mendes-Flohr 23). Buber says that the book “asks us for a reverent intimacy with its meaning and its sensory concreteness” we recognize, surely, that this is true of many books and that such books have a certain worth, a value. We recognize that certain writing focuses on the humanness of humans, rendering a truth of our shared lives (*Scripture* 73). And that certain texts, certain stories, necessitate and elicit a response, visceral and intellectual, that one engages, participates, feels as one reads and one is left haunted by the images, content, the voices and ideas. Texts say this: pay attention, you. And we must, ourselves, always remember to be ready to be surprised by them, and pass on that above all else, this recognition and wonder at how texts make us and sustain us and change us, as humans.

Works Cited

Buber, Martin. *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments*. London: Routledge, 2002.

---. *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958.

---. *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. Introduction by Harold Bloom. Syracuse: Syracuse U P, 2000.

Buber, Martin and Franz Rosenzweig. *Scripture and Translation*. Trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1994.

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2005.

Fishbane, Michael. *Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1989.

Gordon, Mary. “Moral Fiction,” *The Atlantic Monthly Fiction Issue 2005*.

Mendes-Flohr, Paul. “Buber's Rhetoric.” *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective: Proceedings of an International Conference Held at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*. Ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr. Syracuse and Jerusalem: Syracuse U P and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2002. 1-24.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.

Spencer Dew (spencerdew@gmail.com) is a PhD candidate in Religion and Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School, writing on politics, ethics, and pedagogy in Kathy Acker's late novels. He is an adjunct instructor in the philosophy department at Saint Xavier University, Chicago, and has a collection of short stories, *Songs of Insurgency*, forthcoming in 2008 from Vagabond Press.

Return to [Table of Contents](#)