

## The Art of Teaching

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*The Art of Teaching* by Jay Parini (Oxford University Press 2005) ISBN-10: 0-19-516969-0 (hardback). Pp. 160 + xiv.

I have made a habit of enthusiasm, says Professor Jay Parini in this elegantly produced pocket-sized mix of memoir and manual. Parini, 56-year old Axinn Professor of English at Middlebury College in Vermont (founded 1800), is also a novelist and poet. He has taught at St Andrews and Oxford as well as in America, and has much that is useful to say about what he thinks of as an art (as well as a technique, a chore, and much else besides).

The first need is to be lucky. Parini felt he was lucky to land at Middlebury having failed to win tenure at Dartmouth. Here he 'unconsciously' engineered his downfall by undue concentration on his own writing. While still hoping for tenure he wrote, and got published, a lurid novel based on Dartmouth life and people. He calls it fast paced, sexy and brainless. The faculty were not impressed.

Today's test-orientated teaching strikes Parini as anti-educational. The real aim of teaching is to awaken the student's potential. The present system of rigid testing seems to him woefully misdirected and ruinous to learning.

Learning requires the teacher to be learned. Not only does the good teacher know his or her material, the teacher loves the material. That sentiment is quickly communicated to the pupil. As a student, Parini took a course on the history of Western literature with Professor W. Edward Brown, who read in the original, and with ease, French, Italian, German, Spanish and Russian texts.

Oddly enough, Dr Brown was not a gifted performer in the classroom. He read from densely prepared lectures, rarely pausing to make a point stick, or changing the pitch of his voice. He would cough – or clear his throat with a husky rumble – every two minutes or so. This was wildly irritating. But his erudition and passion for literature and ideas were obvious, and students admired him, even worshipped him. The main lesson I learned from this important teacher was that content matters more than anything else. You cannot fake the substance of a course . . .

Clearly Jay Parini is in love with his subject, and has made it a part of his life. As I said, he is a poet. Good poems draw from life, and become a part of one's life. One poem, confesses Parini, has become an intimate part of his own psychology. It is Yeats's 'Among School Children', with its final stanza:

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole.  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

His students at Dartmouth had more mundane ideas. Their goal was Wall Street or General Motors, while Parini thought of teaching as 'the common pursuit of true judgment', a phrase of T S Eliot's. He was not comfortable as a gatekeeper for corporate America.

I found only one error in Parini's book, where he says he often 'poured' over student papers.<sup>1</sup> This high standard may be achieved because of his belief in constant revision.

It was Yvor Winters who once noted that life is a process of perpetual revision in the interests of greater understanding, and I try hard to keep this ideal before the students. I revise my own opinions constantly, before their very eyes, basing these revisions on new information, on fresh perceptions, on discovering contradictions in my own thinking or the thinking of my students . . . there is a natural wisdom among the young that refreshes me, that startles me, that often forces me to reconsider long-cherished ideas and assumptions.

Parini holds that the good teacher wears a mask and puts on a performance for the class. He or she dons a persona, from the Latin for sounding through (*per sona*) a mask as in ancient Greek theatre. It is foolish to think that a mask is not 'authentic', that there is something shameful about 'not being yourself'. After much teaching experience, Parini is 'perhaps a little more willing to play with the mask in front of the class, wiggle it free, peek round its fiery shield'.

Again, the good teacher inspires passion in his class. Parini tells a story of the poet teacher Robert Frost. Early in the student year Frost entered a class whose members had just written their first paper. He asked if anybody had written anything they would stand by passionately. When nobody raised a hand he promptly threw all the papers into the trash can and stalked out.

I leave this fascinating book with an image of what true teaching is. Again it involves Robert Frost. Parini quotes an account by Charles W. Cole, later president of Amherst. In the 1920s Frost visited Cole's German literature class.

Frost began to discuss metaphors in an easy way, asking occasional questions to bring out our ideas. Gradually the evening shadows lengthened and after a while Frost alone was talking. The room grew darker and darker until we could not see each others' faces. But no one even thought of turning on the light. The dinner hour came and went, and still no one of that half score of hungry boys dreamed of leaving. We dared not even stir for fear of interrupting. Finally, long after seven, Frost stopped and said, 'Well, I guess that's enough'. We thanked him and left as if under a spell.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 40.