Enron, the Classroom, and *The Twilight Zone*

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The corporate scandals of recent years have not left universities untouched. Some have given back tainted donations, some have wrestled with the question of whether to remove the name of a disgraced donor from a building, and some have seen funds they planned on receiving vanish like the equity in WorldCom. Professors also ask, now and then, why nothing the disgraced executives learned in college deterred them from the chicanery that affected the lives of thousands. The question presents itself especially vividly to those who teach at church-related colleges or institutions that take "character education" seriously, because they seem to have graduated as many miscreants as have colleges that ignore the ethical formation of the students. But it is a question I think all professors, especially those of us who teach in the impractical humanities, need to face. When I imagine one of my students going on to become as corrupt as those responsible for the debacles at Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom, I wonder if they take anything from my classroom that might help them choose not to take that path.

I am a child of popular culture. Like the rest of my generation, I spent a lot more time watching TV than listening to my parents read me the Bible or the classics, and I have to admit that my ideal of the teaching profession has always been taken, in part, from an old episode of *The Twilight Zone*. In "The Changing of the Guard," written by Rod Serling himself, an elderly literature professor at a prep school is told just before Christmas that his contract will not be renewed for the next term. The professor, played by Donald Pleasance at his best, is devastated and plans to commit suicide. On a snowy evening, he walks out on campus, stands before a statue of Horace Mann, and reads the

inscription on the plinth: "Be ashamed to die before you have won some victory for humanity." He acknowledges he has won no such victory, and puts a gun to his head. Before he can pull the trigger, however, the school bells start ringing, and he goes to his classroom to investigate. There he finds a class assembled: the ghosts of all the boys who because of the ideals they learned from him gave their lives for others—either in the war or in dangerous medical research. One by one, they stand to recite the lessons he taught them: "You taught me about courage. You taught me about loyalty. You taught me about ethics and honesty." Some quote the poems that drove those lessons home. Once they disappear, he returns to his belated dinner and worried housekeeper, and as he listens to his students caroling outside his window, he is quite happy with the idea of retirement, knowing he has won many victories for mankind.

Some may consider that show sentimental, but I make no apologies for tearing up whenever I see it in reruns. And thinking about it raises the question of why we have students study literature. If I'm not mistaken, there was a time when there were two arguments for having students study old books. First, it helped them learn language. That's still true enough, even if we are teaching students their native tongue rather than Latin and Greek. Second, it helped train them morally, because it showed good and evil in their proper lights—hence such things as "poetic justice"—and celebrated the qualities that should be celebrated, such as courage and selflessness.

If I am not mistaken, we have almost completely dropped the second argument. A lot of our criticism assumes that what we teach is *not* a model for students to live by: it is, rather, a set of racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, elitist messages for them to decode and reject. We are left wondering, however, why we ask them to read such things in the

first place. And what do we celebrate in literature? Often enough, the "transgressive." Probably no writer or critic would choose an Enron boss as a hero—but many do celebrate people who cheat and steal and lie in more fashionably bohemian settings.

In this cultural context, I find myself adopting several different positions when thinking about the issue of literature and its value, especially its value as something taught to the young. (Literature needs no defense as a solace for adults who find respite from their cares in the form of another Trollope novel or the next installment of Harry Potter.) First, frankly, I despair. I think that if many of my colleagues and most of the critics who have become prominent since I was a boy are right, we are wasting our time and that of our students. They are learning nothing either useful or improving from us: they are just learning to manipulate a set of meaningless—or malignant—counters in a game without a jackpot. Second, I rebel. I think *my* students, at least, are going to learn the sorts of lessons that will comfort me when I have my midnight talk with Horace Mann. We read moralists and pay attention to morals—in Jane Austen, William Dean Howells, even W.H. Auden. Third, I have faith that if I teach the students to read anything carefully, they will be able to tell the bread from the poison. If I train readers to encounter texts seriously as works of art, I can at least hope that they will also have the discernment to find in them the moral sustenance they need. When guided by this belief, I assume that teaching people to appreciate what is good in at least one area will help them value the good in every area. (I ignore the many theorists who reject evaluative criticism and say we have no basis for saying that any text is better than any other.) Fourth, I remind myself of something else I teach which is no longer fashionable: clear prose. While my trendier colleagues tell graduate students who write readily

understandable paragraphs to make their analyses more "thick," I hold with the old idea that prose a layman has no chance of understanding is bad even for an audience of specialists—and business writers have noticed that Enron's executives used more and more business jargon as the balance sheets got shakier. Finally, I remind myself that I am a college professor: my duty is to tell the truth about my subject. I am not a schoolmaster, like the one Serling and Pleasance brought to life, whose duty is to form the character of the students.

Even so, I ask myself what I would do to prevent another alumnus from going bad as a businessman? I might teach a novel by William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. I might talk about why I thought Lapham ended the book as a hero, even though he had appeared as a fool often enough. I might ask if anyone thought he was foolish where I thought him heroic—that is, in refusing to make a deal that would keep him rich and that he knew was unfair. Or I might just talk about the book's structure and hope the message came through. In either case, I would demand that everything the students said about the book be based on evidence, that all their arguments were logically sound, and all their statistics (you sometimes get them even in English papers) bore checking, and that every intellectual debt was thoroughly cited.

Perhaps insisting on those basic rules of scholarship is a large part of the answer: if we teach intellectual honesty, we are teaching honesty *per se*. If I ever encounter my classroom of ghosts, perhaps one will be a kid I flunked for plagiarism and who went on to blow the whistle on the Enron of her era. Perhaps she will tell me as I wonder if my life has been wasted: "You taught me not to cook the books." That would be a victory for humanity that might just satisfy me.

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