

John Williams's *Stoner* and Literature as Dark Matter in the Age of Educational Managerialism

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Between January and March 1872 Friedrich Nietzsche gave five lectures on the topic of German education. For a contemporary beholder the most striking aspect may be that many of the issues raised apply to our own times as well. Nietzsche steeps the lectures in the literary form. The principal narratological device is a Socratic dialogue—tinged with parody or perhaps pastiche—between an older philosopher and his young companion. The chief villains of the tale as concerns higher education are: massification, the narrowing down or specialization of knowledge, the rise of journalism, conformism in the gymnasium (the German upper secondary school), and, last but not least, the state. Not surprisingly, the heroes are the culture of antiquity, the genius, the few elect, and scholarly discipline. In short, the truly educated person is the one who can go beyond learning for an extrinsic purpose and who would thereby distinguish herself from the masses. As to be expected, the tone is sharp and precise in the scathing attacks on the abhorrent weaknesses of German culture and education. As always, Nietzsche is entertaining in an intellectually stimulating and challenging way.

What primarily links the core of Nietzsche's critique to this study is the power of the state, which implements its supremacy by setting goals and conditions for the education system. In our times, what Nietzsche attacks would correspond to the massification and outcomes-based structure of higher education; that is, the key components of the production-oriented aspects of contemporary learning and teaching that have spread globally over higher education institutions (Biggs and Tang 9-10). A more specific question in the context of what follows is whether these educational constrictions allow any space at all for the subject of literature. As put by Éamonn Dunne while discussing John Williams's *Stoner* in terms of the concept of the "event" in relation to contexts of education:

Since I teach literature most of the time and think through literature, through stories, poems and plays, my hypothesis is that the best way to see how events take place (replace or displace us) in teaching and reading is through narrative examples. If you really think about what happens in a classroom when you teach literature it's never really about learning outcomes, trajectories, subject planning, goals or objectives or, however ludicrously, even understanding or knowledge. (76)

Such a predicament puts the teacher in an awkward situation. Teaching literature seems to be an almost impossible task. William Stoner is early in the novel subjected to what would today most certainly be labeled as “bad” teaching. Yet, the fact that such “bad” teaching somehow has the capacity to unleash the power of literature poses a question to modern pedagogical models and educational environments. In order to “happen,” literature seems to need something like professor Sloane’s provocative and insistent open-ended question about Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73”: “What does the sonnet mean?” (Williams 10). In the novel’s dramatized set-up, the teacher appears as a figure of authority and we are very far from today’s educational paradigm of “learnification,” in which “teachers end up being a kind of process-managers of empty and in themselves directionless learning processes” (Biesta 38).

Nietzsche was on to similar criticism when he argued that state goals had replaced the figure of the teacher as a leader. When attacking the state in lecture 3, the German philosopher’s main tenets come to the fore:

Why does the state need such a surplus of institutions and teachers? Why promote national education and popular enlightenment on such a scale? Because the genuine German spirit is so hated—because they fear the aristocratic nature of true education and culture—because they are determined to drive the few that are great into self-imposed exile, so that a pretension to culture can be implanted and cultivated in the many—because they want to avoid the hard and rigorous discipline of the great leader, and convince the masses that they can find the path themselves . . . under the guiding star of the state! Now that is something new: the state as the guiding star of culture! (51)

Some of the ideas are of course absurd and utterly alien to us today. But if we regard the state as the institution that stipulates the overarching goals of, for instance, secondary and tertiary education, we can clearly see it as the entity behind the managerialism and product-oriented spirit that affects our work at the university all the way down to the course level. This educational system comes into conflict with the subject of literature in that it imposes a certain epistemological cognition that may not be suitable for the study of literature. It might even stifle the passion that obviously is inherent to literature itself. This essay contemplates the tension between outcomes-based learnification and the force of literature, first through an analysis of John Williams’s *Stoner*, after which I return to the issues of teaching literature. Ultimately the claim is that the force of literature can hardly have a legitimate place in today’s

education. In order for teachers to let the dark matter of words speak for itself, they have to pretend that they are actually doing something else, that is, something more utility-oriented that can be formulated as precise learning outcomes.

Stoner is a puzzling tale of beauty and poised pain. It is a straightforward narrative and yet it is enigmatic. As a literary work of art it draws attention to the dark energy of words. In peculiar ways, decisive aspects of the text itself withdraw from the light of understanding, inevitably forcing the reader into the energetic field of affective life. On a more concrete level of Williams's work, what remains perplexing throughout the novel is exactly why William Stoner, at a precise moment in time, suddenly decides to break his farmer bloodline to devote his life to the apparently evanescent and abstract world of literary art. The academic realm he enters is made up of quite obscure values and rewards. In fact, it comes out as being completely devoid of gratification. Precisely that is what the novel seems to be about. But *Stoner* is not primarily about anything in the ordinary sense of this word. Clearly, Stoner the character becomes a scientist. Any science is a theory about the real. The initial problems here are, of course, what we mean by "theory" and what we mean by "real." Since the novel revolves around a life dedicated to art and science, as well as around that life itself as lived, it is fruitful to approach the work through two philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. They both tried to resurrect art to life, albeit in slightly different ways, and they both grappled with the relation between art and science.

In her article "Towards a Post-Modern Hermeneutic Ontology of Art," Babette E. Babich has linked Nietzsche and Heidegger in a congenial way: "If the life of grand style may be redefined in Heidegger's terms as the attuned solicitude of reflection, then Nietzsche's life of expressive power may be recognized as the artistic responsiveness of poetic thinking, which hearkens to the call of Being, spoken in stillness" (206). These ontological components apply to *Stoner* in two interrelated ways. Firstly, Stoner becomes enchanted by the world of poetry. It is as if Earth, the call of Being, is glimpsed and Stoner's whole life is changed. Secondly, we can trace the Nietzschean aspect in that his life—with all its tragic deficiencies and shortcomings—metamorphoses into an expressive artwork. The novel itself becomes the aestheticization of mediocrity. In her reading of Nietzsche, Babich also highlights an important distinction. According to her, Nietzsche identifies "the desire to control" as the "dominating drive for power" and calls this "*reactive* Will to Power" (197). In contrast, the futility of Stoner's seemingly empty life becomes aesthetic or active will to power. Stoner's blindness and insensitivity to the petty power struggles of academia first and foremost illustrate that he lives aesthetic will

to power rather than participates in reactive will to power. This may at first seem to be a paradoxical state of affairs. How can a man who appears to be passivity incarnate be said to also participate in active, aesthetic will to power?

To unravel how this may be and to make sense of the novel's important distinction between art and science, we need to dwell a little bit more on Nietzsche and Heidegger. This is crucial since Stoner devotes his whole life to science and the narrative might deceive us into reading it as something that is solely about the life of a failed scientist. But on one level, *Stoner* is not about anything other than itself. Stoner's life becomes the artwork; it becomes the "earth" that is also thematized as a life-changing force. In her article, Babich points out that this tension between art and science may be seen as a struggle between quite different epistemological dimensions.

To say that the work of art sets up a world is to say that the work of art sets the world enduringly (but not perpetually) in force. In speaking of earth, Heidegger draws our attention to the life-revealing power of the work of art. . . . [A]rt reveals the vulnerable temporality of life where science cannot. Although both art and science are ways of revealing, we recall that Nietzsche proposed to look at science through art and not the other way around. (202)

To be sure, Stoner grapples with art through scientific methods, but we can also clearly see how Stoner's life through art has precedence over the scientific outlook. The work incarnates the protagonist's metamorphosis. The novel *Stoner* is also the entity we may call the aesthetic object. The point here is that the novel tells us its story, but at the same time it itself becomes the conversion it contains, when it morphs into the aesthetic object for us as readers and preservers to behold.

Before looking more closely at the narrative, we need to establish the element of inexpressibility. Heidegger stated that "the moment when presencing sets itself forth into the objectness of the real" is an instant that "remains mysterious" (169). Similarly, in analyzing Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* with a focus on the ineffable, Timothy Walsh suggests that what holds this work together is something that "will remain inchoate and inexpressible though deeply felt" (150). This could be said about *Stoner* as well. When Stoner hears his teacher Archer Sloane read Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73," he is completely astounded. The stretched-out moment lets textual details shine forth, one after the other; explicitly here mainly as light. Light has a life of its own. It is as if Stoner sees these things for the first time. His own hands are suddenly unfamiliar. He looks at them intently. His gaze lingers. The

intensity and detail of the affects seem quite unnatural. Even the “down” of a cheek is shimmering with light:

William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloane about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their hard grip on his desk-top. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously from his fingertips through his body. (11-12)

Why is Stoner suddenly so attentive? Clearly, in this obvious shining forth of objects there is a counter movement going on. That which is truly important here constitutes the dimension that withdraws, namely the answer to the question: What is it in “Sonnet 73” that has this strong impact on the protagonist? In Heideggerian terms, the presencing itself is what withdraws, evidently because it does not ultimately belong to the world of objects. It is not available for science and analysis as an enduringly present entity, yet it is precisely this furtive withdrawal that pulls Stoner onto a completely different path of life. It is a nothingness with an immense gravity, something that eludes expression but is intensely felt. In Babich’s words, “the event or appropriation of truth in the poetic word retains the ineffability or essential evanescence of aletheic truth” (206).

Among other things, hands are for grasping objects, but that which his hands cannot hold is the dark matter of the words that suddenly rules his existence. “What does this sonnet mean?” Sloane asks, and Stoner raises “his hands up toward the air,” as if trying to seize an invisible piece of matter in the emptiness, but eventually he “cannot finish what he had begun to say” (Williams 12). The dark matter that governs this scene flows out into the room from the Shakespearian text, but it makes itself manifest as withdrawal. Similar to the astrophysicist, we must “fall . . . back on a term like ‘dark matter,’ which does not so much delineate a known entity as to a gesture toward a region of inquiry that remains highly tentative and problematic” (Walsh 77). In addition, we clearly witness the power of the poetic word, since Stoner is not only intellectually affected. His whole body undergoes some kind of metamorphosis. His perceptions tingle with life. Earth has been glimpsed as

the ineffable revealed through words. Earth has briefly shown itself and receded back into its concealedness. The Nietzschean link is prominent too. The protagonist begins to become the life he has glimpsed. This happens despite any human willing: active will to power sweeps Stoner along, setting him on a path he has not chosen but which has chosen him. This is to some extent what Roman Ingarden calls the “check,” that is, the emotional phase of the aesthetic experience, in which some particular quality of the world or the artwork strikes the experiencing subject with varying force (192). Ingarden claims that the phase that follows consists of a radical change of attitude, “from the natural attitude of active life to the specifically aesthetic attitude” (194). I, however, claim that in *Stoner* this is not merely a temporary change of attunement. It is an ontological shift that is irreversible, pointing towards the Nietzschean dimension of the work. Stoner partly becomes the artwork and the world becomes art. Thus, on the readerly level, William Stoner becomes the novel *Stoner*, and throughout the work the momentary echoes and withdrawals of earth remind the reader of this irreversible ontological turn.

I contend that the dimension of withdrawal is the constitutional component of the whole narrative. Precisely since it cannot be held in the hands, the frequently recurring phenomena of hands in the novel emphasize the non-holding and non-grasping. But the failure itself makes manifest the text-constituting withdrawal, which in its dimension of unknowing has a life-giving and healing power. Stoner’s father looks into his empty hands when trying to understand his own position in the world and simultaneously attempting to grasp what the consequences of sending his son into the unknown dominion of education might ultimately imply. But he stares into emptiness and withdrawal:

His father shifted his weight on the chair. He looked at his thick callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away. He laced his fingers together and held them up from the table, almost in an attitude of prayer. (Williams 4)

There is no answer to be found in the empty hands. Just traces of a hard life of working the soil. The interlacing of the fingers fills the void temporarily with a gesture towards prayer, indicating words sent out into the emptiness and silence. In prayer—as well as in the case of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73” when read by Sloane—the words recede back into the dark matter of their inexplicable origin. On the level of hands, there is actually no distinction between what has happened to the father’s hands and what befalls Stoner. It

is not possible to say that the father's hands represent concrete work and Stoner's hands and mind become preoccupied with something abstract. The ontological shift cancels that binary. For Stoner, literature cannot be washed away. So when eventually the father's "fingers tighten . . . upon themselves, and his clasped hands drop . . . to the table" (4), it is not an act of surrender or despair but of giving himself over to unknowing and withdrawal. The scene foreshadows the fatalistic dimension of the work.

After Stoner has realized that he will become a literary scholar at the university—and Sloane has claimed that this calling is to be seen as analogous to having fallen in love—he has a similar feeling of enhanced perceptivity as after having been struck with the Shakespeare sonnet.

His lips were tingling and his fingertips were numb; he walked as if he were asleep, yet he was intensely aware of his surroundings. He brushed against the polished wooden walls in the corridor, and he thought he could feel the warmth and age of the wood; he went slowly down the stairs and wondered at the veined cold marble that seemed to slip a little beneath his feet. In the halls the voices of the students became distinct and individual out of the hushed murmur, and their faces were close and strange and familiar. (19)

That which is the ultimate force of this affective attentiveness is not present. One might argue that Stoner feels the exhilarating effects of having made a decisive choice in his life. But why would that entail such a shift in attunement? As in the earlier case mentioned I see this as part of a structured absence that profoundly governs the work. As put by Walsh when discussing other literary works: "Out of this larger pattern, a central uncertainty sometimes arises . . . and whatever it is at the center—or more precisely, what is *not* at the center—is, paradoxically, what holds the work together" (132). In a similar way in *Stoner*, that which structures the scene is not present, but its energy has a decisive gravity. Stoner's fingertips are "numb," yet he seems to be able to "feel the warmth and age of the wood." Clearly, that which extromissively animates the perceptual processes does not have anything to do with exteriority. That which makes sense of Stoner's affective attentiveness is not in the world of ordinary baryonic matter. The similarity with natural science's conception of dark matter is that it constitutes an entity that can only be known through its effects. The difference is that the dark matter of words itself will never be scrutinized by the scientific gaze. Even though Stoner and Lomax are in certain respects diametrical opposites, Stoner can sense a certain connection, which is made possible by the power of literature: "William Stoner felt a kinship that he had not suspected; he knew that Lomax had gone

through a kind of conversion, an epiphany of knowing something through words that could not be put in words . . .” (100).

What does the conversion or ontological turn in *Stoner* say about the issue of learnification addressed in the beginning? Probably only that there is inevitably a dimension of literature that cannot be taught or learned. It can only be experienced haphazardly. The link to Nietzsche’s concerns expressed in the lectures is that the driving force of learning generally, and in literature specifically, will always have to exist as an *ad hoc*, invisible, and unarticulated educational aim. We teachers of literature design neat courses with clearly formulated learning outcomes aligned with teaching-learning activities and adequate assessment. At the same time we are forced to pretend that the dark matter that fuels the whole machinery does not exist. Perhaps this has always been the case and it would just be foolish to think that it could be otherwise. That so many of the problems Nietzsche addresses persist may just indicate that education will always contain tensions between pragmatic and more idealist stances. To substantiate the last point let us imagine a university course in literature:

On completion of the course the students are expected to have:

- unlearned everything they previously thought they knew
- given themselves over to unknowing
- gone through a conversion or ontological shift
- fallen in love with literature and the world

If such a suggestion for a course plan was sent to the faculty, they would most certainly suggest that the author of the learning outcomes contact a therapist. Yet, would we say that what happens in *Stoner* lacks importance? Perhaps we have to stop where *Stoner* stops when trying to formulate what “Sonnet 73” means: “It means . . .” (Williams 12). Maybe that is all we need to know: it means.

Even if literature teachers may agree that literature means, that it is immensely important, it still remains an open question what the study of literature should mean and do in our contemporary world. As stated by the editors of Nietzsche’s lectures, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, Nietzsche opened up fundamental questions about the possible function of the humanities. The fascinating thing is that these questions are still relevant today.

Edmundson, Deresiewicz, and Delbanco try to win over readers by affirming the unique value of studying the humanities. The case they make isn't a repurposing of the utilitarian logic favored by critics of the humanities: namely, that the humanities teach transferable skills. It is a loftier position. In the hands of dedicated teachers, the humanities guide students through immersion studies in works that, exotic or irrelevant though they may seem, can change their lives as no other material can. Nietzsche shared this belief, but he was not content, as Edmundson, Deresiewicz, and Delbanco sometimes seem to be, to recite the credo. Before a supremely cultured audience in Basel, he took a different tack, challenging his listeners to consider a number of unsettling possibilities that have relevance again today. What if really opening oneself up to the life-changing study of humanities will often require an initial faith, so that those who already have this faith are the ones in whom it is likely to be renewed, and those who don't might well remain outside the cycle? (Nietzsche xxiv-xxv)

The dilemma is that if only a few who have faith should engage with, for example, literature, then how could what happens in *Stoner* occur? In any case, one thing that is undoubtedly needed is devoted teachers.

To conclude, already in 1872 Nietzsche pinpoints the potentially stifling effects of an overly pragmatic and aims-oriented education. As illustrated by the analysis of *Stoner* as an aestheticized life, the dark matter of words accentuates an immanent tension in the subject of literature. The actual energy of the subject is not available for the epistemological system that managerialism imposes upon it. Thus, the literature teacher has only two options: to pretend that this force does not exist or to pretend to be doing other things while still preserving the power of literature as a vitalizing component. Either way, the teaching and learning will inevitably become hypocritical in a way Nietzsche at all costs seems to have wanted to avoid.

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