

Teaching Statement ~ Evander Price

Lionel Trilling once described his method as a teacher of English as a process of helping his students “look into the Abyss.” By “Abyss,” he meant the outer bounds of what is known and knowable. Patiently and concertedly he would lead his students to the edge, and they would peer in, and the Abyss would invariably reply:

‘Interesting, am I not? And *exciting*, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes to your being whole, or well-rounded, students.’

Trilling jests, but there is a kernel of truth here that is central to my teaching: great literature and art force difficult questions on readers, and my role is *not* to answer these questions, but rather to provide different tools (flashlights, perhaps) which might illuminate some bit of the Abyss. I find the best approach to the Abyss is an iterative one: each lesson a different tool, suited to different questions.

Many courses are designed around problematizing a central question, often one of genre definition. Take science fiction for example: What makes fiction “science” fiction? By revisiting the same question every week, I help my students build working answers to these questions (i.e., “science fiction is an experiment with real life as its control,”) that I then challenge (“is the story of Daedalus a science fiction story, given this definition?”), problematize (“what might it mean to think of the Bible science fictionally?”) and sometimes completely obliterate (“what can we say is absolutely *not* science fiction?”) so that a new answer can be rebuilt from the rubble.

Then there are the many other questions that science fiction asks. Part of the wonder of science fiction is it provides a vehicle for thinking about alternative worlds. How would the world be different if people couldn’t judge each other based on looks? (Ted Chiang, “Liking What You See: A Documentary”) What would happen if women didn’t need men to reproduce? (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* & Alice Sheldon “Houston, Houston We Have A Problem”). What if the afterlife were different? (*Black Mirror*, “San Junipero”). At what point do human beings become *too* reliant on technology? What if time weren’t a line? Would you want to see the future, if you couldn’t change it? (numerous stories). Learning to think science fictionally is a life skill that is fundamentally about imagining how the world as it currently is could be different.

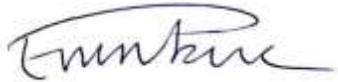
These are not easy questions. My role is to provide some analytical tools: “a *novum* is the thing that, if it weren’t there, the science fiction would just be a fiction;” “a *neologism* is an invented word, often helpful to constructing a science fictional world;” or “the *chronotope* describes how time is imagined and metaphorized within a narrative.” Each class, my students get a new tool in their critical thinking kit. They tend to quickly catch on to this structure. Discussion sometimes requires I model how to use these tools, but often it springs organically from students excited to try them out for themselves. Then, I reinforce their critical thinking skills with focused iterative assignments that are meant to give them the opportunity to hone a particular skill that can be used for tackling longer assignments later in the semester. For example:

Choose a single neologism from a story we have not discussed in depth. What is its etymology? How does the neologism operate in the story? Is it necessary to the story? What makes this an effective neologism, or how might it be improved? (500-750 words).

I know I've done my job well when students use these tools in ways I hadn't expected, often demonstrating that a given tool has wider applicability than I anticipated. Though I've used science fiction to exemplify my teaching method, the same toolkit approach transfers well to many other subjects I have expertise in, such as American literature, American art, and time theory.

A cornerstone of my teaching is knowing my students well. I've taught students from all sorts of backgrounds and levels of college preparation, and as a senior residential tutor in an undergraduate dormitory, I am well-aware of the wide array of idiosyncratic pressures my students face that can hamper learning. I rely on their individual interests and strengths to augment discussions, and encourage them, in the spirit of academic community, to rely on one another. Part of the importance of providing a common set of analytical tools is it creates a shared lexicon—where no one need feel ignorant or left out—ideas can be freely tested in the laboratory of thought. I also employ an anonymous online comment box for students to voice any concerns they might have. These are some of the strategies and experiences I use to build a space of trust necessary to productive learning. At its best, I experience the pedagogical delight of learning alongside my students as the spirit of critical inquiry and collaboration leads us to confront the Abyss, and back again.

Very best,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Evander Price". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "E" and a long, horizontal tail.

Evander Price

“Every day was a new revelation... I have always said in my saying or teaching, ‘Make the result of teaching a feeling of growing.’ That is the greatest incentive to continue developing yourself. The feeling of growing. And today a little bit more than it was yesterday. And a little bit more than it was last year. You see? That you feel: I’m getting wider and deeper and fuller... I have made a sport of growing myself. That was a big sport, and therefore helped me with the sport to make others grow.”—Josef Albers