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2020

## **Pedagogy and Gospel Epistemology in the Literature Classroom**

Katherine Karr-Cornejo

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Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>2</sup>

And features of their languages too.

May you teach the virtues that Hopkins teaches—in whatever  
 language you teach.

2. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 90.

## PEDAGOGY AND GOSPEL EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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*THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING through discussion of pedagogical tools, rooted in contemporary critical pedagogy shaped by gospel epistemology (per Parker Palmer) in an upper-division Spanish poetry course. The course equips students to ponder contingent expressions of Christian faith in the context of their own spiritual journeys.*

Jay Parini opens *Why Poetry Matters* reminding the reader that “poetry doesn’t matter to most people. That is, most people don’t write it, don’t read it, and don’t have any idea why anybody would spend valuable time doing such a thing” (ix). Many students complete a course of study at university without ever encountering a poem, and may not even realize that they never did. In a world focused on use and productivity, poetry may not appear to contribute much. For those of us that teach languages and literatures, however, the linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural education of our students is poorer for the omission of the study of poetry. Studying poetry expands linguistic horizons, magnifies response to beauty, and deepens cultural awareness. These texts can be approachable, relevant, and beautiful. Teaching our students to read poetry in the languages in which it is written, and giving them a framework within which to consider its capacity to express faith and worldview connects the students’ growing linguistic and interpretative

sophistication to their own faith journeys.

This essay focuses on teaching Latin American poetry at a Christian liberal arts institution, motivated by the integration of Christian faith and learning in the upper-division Spanish classroom. Just as poetry matters, the context in which we teach matters. In my context, faculty implement the integration of faith and learning in their classes in a community in which faculty and staff profess a Christian commitment, but students are not required to.<sup>1</sup> I describe a process of experimentation, evaluation, and implementation of change around faith-learning integration in an upper-division Spanish course. I explain the concept of gospel epistemology and its connection to critical pedagogies, briefly review literature related to the teaching of literature in languages other than English, and detail the evolution of the integration of faith and learning over four semesters of teaching this course.

The notion of a gospel epistemology as described by Parker Palmer shapes my understanding of the integration of faith and learning in the Spanish-language literature classroom. Inhabiting a gospel epistemology is, for Palmer, the appropriate end towards which Christian higher education aspires. In the chapter "Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education," Palmer describes four characteristics of truth that inform this way of knowing. Truth is personal, communal, mutual and reciprocal, and transformational. As a result of these propositions, he concludes:

If we embrace a gospel way of knowing, we can create a different kind of education and perhaps a different world: a world where all of us are called to embody whatever truth we know; where we gather together with others to check, correct,

1. In 2015, our faculty approved a framework to guide common conversation of the work done in this area (Soden). This framework articulates four categories for the integration of faith and learning, which are designed to encourage faculty to draw from their own theological traditions. These categories include: a) vocation; b) ethics, virtue, and public policy; c) intersection between theological assumptions and academic discipline; and d) intersection between faith and culture.

confirm, and deepen whatever insights we may have; where we understand that, even as we seek truth, truth is seeking us; and where there can be those vital transformations, personal and social, that might take us a step closer to the beloved community. (Palmer 83)

Practicing a gospel epistemology can help to construct the Kingdom of God in the here and now and this transformational piece speaks into pedagogical practice. I understand the project of education parallel to how I understand God's transformational power in the world: both liberate us from the constraints of society and our own selves and offer us tools to change and grow into the fullness of God's dream for us.

Educators use a variety of techniques that can have the effect of liberation and transformation within the classroom. The hope of gospel epistemology as articulated by Palmer dovetails with the practices of critical pedagogies and their goal of *conscientização*, consciousness-raising. By cultivating a critical consciousness in the learner, the educator and their class have the power to dismantle oppressive relationships and institutions, transforming and liberating humanity in the process. The embodiment of a critical pedagogy such as this requires a framework that includes: 1) the reflexive consideration of epistemology; 2) attention to the location, context, and role of the student; 3) an ethic of care in the classroom; and 4) an exploration of power dynamics. Specific awareness of these principles must be built into embodied classroom practice.

When I contemplate the reflexive consideration of epistemology, as an example, I guide students in both a questioning of knowledge production and in the creation of new knowledge. Part of this creation involves valuing the personal wisdom and experience that each member of a classroom community contributes. To create a brave space that recognizes the full humanity of each of the classroom participants, we establish clear expectations for classroom conduct that enable students to explore and challenge their perspectives while remaining in relationship with one another. Students are empowered to explore their personal and academic interests as they relate to the course. For example, students

who have a passion for advocacy connect with the *poesía comprometida* and both conduct their own projects related to it and seek it out in their own advocacy contexts. Students develop their own voices in dialogue with the instructor, assigned texts, and one another.

My first step in designing and preparing for a new course in Latin American poetry was to seek peer-reviewed research to inform my curricular design. However, there is a relative paucity of work that studies teaching literature, and specifically poetry, in languages other than English. A body of work in second language acquisition focuses on how teaching literature interacts with language acquisition, particularly in foundational language sequences.<sup>2</sup> Many of these studies conclude that studying literature results in a benefit to the learner for linguistic awareness and cultural knowledge. In the United States, researchers like Amos Paran note curricular divisions between language teaching and learning and literature “as well as the division between the focus on language learning in the initial stages of an undergraduate degree, and literature learning in the later years of study” (466). This division is also reflected in the knowledge-base for teaching literature; Charlotte Melin identifies many fields as contributors to that base: literary scholars, literary theorists, applied linguists, creative writers, EFL, ESL, rhetoricians, writers, and cognitive psychologists (351). While a number of studies seem to perpetuate an outdated view of literature pedagogy in which the teacher interprets the texts for the students, providing the “right answer” to a poem, there are examples from scholars in English studies—including literary studies, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing—that try to understand and improve literary teaching. Many of the texts about teaching poetry, from both applied linguistics and English studies, focus on students creating poetic work, which is a different task than poetic reading. The

2. Amos Paran’s survey of the state of the field a decade ago is helpful for context. For more advanced learners, David Ian Hanauer’s work concludes that “poetry be used in the second language classroom with advanced language learners as a task that can enhance linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language” (320). However, the pedagogical link between this task and the work of literary studies has yet to be investigated.

literature on the teaching of literature in languages other than English for advanced learners, heritage speakers, and native speakers of those languages remains scant.

Having found little support or inspiration in the research available, my experiences and known resources guided my choices in designing the course. This course focuses on equipping students with tools to read and appreciate lyric verse in Spanish from the Latin American context while also teaching them to read and write within the discipline of literary studies. Gospel epistemology calls us into common practice, even when it is new and difficult. Reading practices done in community are fundamental in this course, as we check, correct, confirm, and deepen our insights.<sup>3</sup> Students may arrive in this course never having read a poem in Spanish, a situation that may be common across institutions. Charlotte Melin observes that “poetry is often excluded from language instruction due to the perception that it is archaic, inherently difficult to understand, and permanently lapsed into marginalized status” (349) even in English studies. Considering this lack of prior knowledge, I organize the class around broad themes in poetry which allow us to learn about varied cultural contexts:<sup>4</sup> beauty, faith, gender, love, metapoetry, politics, and race.

As faith is one of the explicit categories around which I’ve selected poems to be read, making explicit the connection between Christian faith, the course content—reading and analyzing poetry well—and course practices flowing out of an understanding of gospel epistemology felt most natural by that point in the course.<sup>5</sup> As part of my initial

3. As a teacher whose Christian faith manifests itself within the Anglican tradition, this common practice parallels the spiritual power and intimacy of participating in common prayer. This connection illustrates how my academic context encourages me to “draw deeply from [my] theological tradition” (Soden 3). In our practice we shape our belief.
4. Many of us may have been taught under a coverage model, that is, that students must be exposed to or engage with particular texts because they are what the canon has determined matters most. However, demonstrating knowledge of literary history is not one of the student learning outcomes for this course.
5. For the most recent semester I taught this course, in this section students read poems by Antonio Cisneros (Peru, 1942-2012), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Mex-

course design I articulated guiding questions for each thematic section, including the “why” of thinking about poetry and aesthetics or poetry and politics. These guiding questions help students make connections among poems and to think about the ways in which these themes are contingent and non-exclusive. These questions allow for rich conversation over the course of a semester.

My commitment to helping students consider the epistemologies that influence their interpretations and their own positions as learners and producers of knowledge was expressly addressed through the calendar of readings. When we read a poem like Roque Dalton’s “Para un mejor amor,” students were encouraged to think about why it was located in that category. My choice led to conversations about how things can be categorized, evaluating those categorizations, and embracing the notion that this poem can be many things at the same time. It also helped students to build their own connections among poems over the semester. In written homework reflections, students referred back to earlier poems that had resonated with them, or that they recalled from a class discussion, to link their reading and understanding across chronology, style, and theme. The corpus of poems explicitly related to faith with which students worked was fairly limited, yet through this explicit and repeated exercise in making my course design decisions visible to my students, they were encouraged to develop questions and connections between poems. They also were invited to relate the poems to their personal experiences, studies, and emotional and spiritual lives. For example, poetry related to love prompted reflection on their own lived experience in relationships, studies in other fields such as psychology and health sciences, and the church teachings they had received about different types of love. Students did this work explicitly in homework reflections and in class conversation. When this occurred, I affirmed it with feedback in written or spoken form.

ico, 1648?-1695), Vicente Huidobro (Chile, 1893-1948), Gabriela Mistral (Chile, 1889-1957), Nicanor Parra (Chile, 1914-2018), Gonzalo Rojas (Chile, 1916-2011), César Vallejo (Peru, 1892-1938), and José Watanabe (Peru, 1946-2007).

The questions remain as a framing mechanism for the course across semesters.<sup>6</sup> They are on the syllabus, the course calendar of readings, and handouts for each thematic section. Students answer the questions on the final exam. Revisiting the same questions with new evidence, together, helps us to practice a gospel epistemology in the classroom. We embody the truths we understand from our own experiences and reading. We collaborate together to test, interrogate, and connect our insights. We are transformed by our reading and our conversation. Those “aha!” moments show up related to language, to culture, to context, even to theology. A great joy in teaching this course is students’ provoking those moments for me with a poem that I’ve read more times than I can count.

In the faith thematic section of the course, two questions guide our inquiry together: How is the relationship between the poetic voice and faith or belief expressed? What are the limits of the cultural expression of faith and true or authentic belief? I begin the section with a short presentation on poetry and faith expression, touching briefly on the Psalms, Spanish mysticism, and religion as a metonymy

6. Each thematic category has questions to focus our conversation. From the start of the course, an overarching question is, what does poetry do?

Theme	Question(s)
Beauty	How do we define beauty?
Faith	How is the relationship between the poetic voice and faith or belief expressed? What are the limits of the cultural expression of faith and true or authentic belief?
Gender	How is a masculine poetic voice constructed? How is a feminine poetic voice constructed? How are women’s roles and the feminine in the poet’s society portrayed?
Love	How is love as a concept represented in poetry? How is the relationship between lover and love object expressed?
Metapoetry	What is the role of the poet?
Politics	What is the social function of poetry? How is political commitment expressed lyrically?
Race	What constructions of racial identity are found in poetry?

for culture. Given that a number of our students are unfamiliar with Christian faith practices outside of their own varied traditions, I also take time to emphasize the normative place of Roman Catholicism in Spanish American faith practices. In that class session and subsequent meetings, we complete a series of activities designed to help students practice their close reading skills, which draws student attention to language and its function. Marjorie Perloff reminds us that “we cannot separate a close reading of the poem from at least some reading of the poet’s culture” (xiv). In other sessions students work together to complete specific reading and interpretive tasks: read and comment on their classmates’ written reflections, engage in pair and small group work on specific poems, and present their readings to the class. A class activity that consistently provokes a positive student response involves writing observations, uncertainties, or questions on notecards or post-it notes. Students then go through them in groups or as a whole class. My role as the professor is to frame these activities, provide tools for the students to complete them effectively, and synthesize conversation into written notes on the board as students discuss their readings of the poems. I do my best to de-center my authority as the teacher to allow students to shape not only their ways of knowing, but also to help them to become cognizant of their role as active participants in building meaning.

I teach this course roughly every other year, and each time I return to it I revise the thematic section related to faith. The second time I taught it, I modified the unit to include voices from outside the cultural mainstream. This allowed greater connections between units in the course and more nuanced cultural content. Additionally, students from underrepresented backgrounds expressed appreciation for this change. The third time, I implemented an assessment activity consisting of a two-paragraph written reflection responding to the questions of focus for the section. From that activity, I was able to observe the unit’s effectiveness; students demonstrated their ability to articulate an overarching understanding of the relationship between a poetic voice and the expression of Christian faith, and they gave clear examples from the readings to support this articulation. Students also showed

that they are thinking deeply about ideas around cultural authenticity and Christian practice and were able to identify where the poetic text illustrated these things. Students noted that cultural information may be necessary to understand faith expressions in poetry. They also observed that language can only express a fraction of the experience of belief.<sup>7</sup>

In my most recent offering of this course, I built on the strengths of previous assignments. Students were able to answer the questions I asked them the first time I used the assessment activity, but I was surprised by how they distanced their own voices and experiences from their responses. In class conversation, this group of students had brought their own experiences to bear on their interpretations of poetry, but when asked to write they engaged with the disciplinary assumptions of literary studies in that distancing. As I want to integrate faith and learning well, I resolved to try to bridge that gap. In my desire to prompt connections students might make between their own faith and experience and what they observe in the poetry they have read and studied, I had students complete a non-graded in-class free write exercise on the first day of the faith theme.<sup>8</sup> They reflected on a series of questions: how do you define faith? What cultures do you identify with? How does your faith, or worldview, connect to the cultures you identify with? Or, how does your culture influence your faith practice? These questions were designed to help students connect their lived experiences and worldviews with the relationships among faith, culture, and poetry. At the end of the thematic section, students completed the evaluation activity from the previous semester with the addition of a new question that prompted personal reflection of their

7. For this assignment students have the option to write their responses in either English or Spanish. I give students this option in recognition that they may be more true to their thoughts in one language or another, due to the personal nature of this reflection. About three quarters of the students across both sections of the course that have completed this assignment did so exclusively in Spanish. The remaining quarter either responded in English, or a combination of the two.

8. As was the case with the initial assessment activity, students had the option to respond in either English or Spanish.

own worldview as it related to faith and poetry.

The complexity of the relationship between a poetic voice and the expression of Christian faith was articulated again in the most recent group of students. In doing so, some students focus on formal elements of the poetry; others focus on contextual readings; and still others connect the poems to their own theological and devotional understandings and practices. Many students give specific examples of poems that have helped them to grasp this relationship. They also express a nuanced understanding of the relationship between faith and culture in the poetry. One student noted that "the way the culture expresses their faith varies and can limit how others view their authenticity." Students communicated their caution on the subject of religion and how it can be used to maintain social cohesion or to coerce or oppress others. Reading poetry that engaged seriously with religious doubt helped students to engage with difference within a culture.

This group of students found dissimilar aspects of the faith/learning practice meaningful than previous sections of the course. More explicit personal connections to these poems were articulated by students, which may be a result of the free-write activity and the additional homework question. A student shared some of the poems we read in class with their small group at church. Another student wrote, "I also see myself reflected in some of the poetry, especially in how I want my future to be." Many students found (and expressed) affirmation for their faith journeys in the poetry we read. My next step for the exercise of gospel epistemology in this course is to guide students in connecting their personal reflections explicitly to the disciplinary assumptions inherent in reading poetry. I am considering additional modifications to the homework assignment or engaging in a different in-class activity or series of activities that would help the class to reach this goal.

To the surprise of several students at the end of the semester, their relationship with poetry had changed from Jay Parini's description. They began to understand why someone "would spend valuable time" to read and study poetry. Poetry matters, and it means most when read in community, although this pedagogical practice following the notion of gospel epistemology can be applied across other areas of

literature teaching. The practice of getting direct feedback from students related to the goals of the integration of faith and learning provides Christian faculty with insight to improve our work in this area. Our observations of students and allowing students to articulate their experience of the integration of faith and learning, in a non-evaluative manner, gives instructors a tool that values the students' creation of knowledge and their lived experience in their class and provides useful feedback for further refinement.

In seeking to methodically evaluate my implementation of the integration of faith and learning in a Latin American poetry course, I have found that the application of critical pedagogies, animated by my own faith commitments, allow me to practice greater faith/learning integration. Reading, analyzing, and synthesizing in the classroom community allows us to seek truth together while valuing each voice. This common and repeated practice parallels *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, our habits shape our beliefs. Poetic content is particularly well-suited to this approach to faith-learning integration. Its relative brevity allows students to read and re-read, its linguistic content stretches the capacities of advanced learners, its form invites careful analysis and thought, and its content connects to other areas of knowledge and expertise that students may have. This pedagogical approach, coupled with poetic content, may be a prime way to help foster student spiritual growth linked to their academic work, as they make explicit their own incarnational readings and experiences with poetry, language, and cultures.

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## RELINQUISHING THE CENTER: ENGAGING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ROLE-PLAY

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*THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES HOW ROLE-PLAY PROVIDES A DYNAMIC SPACE for engaging students in the development of the Christian virtue of justice. It describes a semester-long activity developed for an upper-level Spanish language literature course to incorporate social justice teaching and learning practices. In this process, students are guided in relinquishing their own point of view as the center from which to make sense of the world in order to adopt the way of thinking of the "other" to envision the world from another's perspective.*

Social justice pedagogy challenges educators to rethink educational environments and curricula. Social justice teaching and learning practices require teachers to "see" their students and curriculum in a way that encompasses understanding who the students really are (background, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.) and how the curricula/texts include or exclude them. The explicit seeing of each student articulated by the educator can, in turn, help students to lean in to "see" other people and who they really are. As Sonia Nieto defines it, social justice is "a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity" (46). To achieve this justice in the classroom, Nieto advocates critical, multicultural pedagogy in which "students learn to view events and situations from a variety of perspectives" (44):

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Volume 21

Spring 2020

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