

Encountering the texts

by [Richard Rosengarten](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

*By Herman L. Sinaiko, Reclaiming the Canon: Essays on Philosophy, Poetry, and History. (Yale University Press, 338 pp.)*

Those who practice the religions of "the book" are no strangers to questions about "the canon." What has been fodder for the religious ages has now become an academic cottage industry. Led by the notorious Bloom Brothers, the late Allan and the ubiquitous Harold, a growing number of professors have written about what ought to be read and why.

Herman Sinaiko, professor of the humanities at the University of Chicago (Allan Bloom was his colleague), makes a distinguished contribution to this genre. The essays collected in *Reclaiming the Canon* are the fruits of a lifetime of teaching, mostly to undergraduates. The book is not a rant. It is grounded in encounters with the texts Sinaiko most values and wants us to ponder. Sinaiko selects what seems to him to be the very best that has been thought and said, largely without considerations of race, gender and class.

Sinaiko's deepest allegiance is to Plato, who sets this book's questions and establishes the standard for what merits our attention. Sinaiko extensively discusses the *Laches*, *Protagoras* and *Republic*, and more briefly but just as intensely explores a number of Plato's other dialogues. He endorses Alfred North Whitehead's famous observation that philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato.

He might, however, amend Whitehead to say that the same is true of art. Sinaiko loves literature. While Plato is the only philosopher who garners sustained attention here (Confucius does merit an appreciative chapter), a range of novelists and poets appear. In terms of space, Homer ranks a telling second, closely followed by Tolstoy and then by lyric poets from China (Li Bai, Du Fu) and England (Yeats, Blake, Hopkins). Herodotus, Conrad and Mary Shelley each rates a chapter.

Sinaiko pays the reader the twin compliments of lucidity and nuance. Familiarity with the text is not required (teachers will quickly recognize a skilled practitioner of the art of enticing students to read what appears at first ludicrously long or

inescapably dull). The familiar will be rendered provocative and the unfamiliar will compel your attention--and may in the end lighten either your wallet or your library's bookshelf.

Less pleasurable than the essays on specific writers but at times quite fascinating is a set of loosely related topical essays interspersed throughout the book. The broad theme of these is the nature of dialogue and its role in pedagogy. We get glimpses here of Sinaiko's abiding love of the classroom, respect for students, and surprisingly fierce insistence on what he calls the innate sophistry of the college professor. Sinaiko argues that we should read philosophy because it asks the right questions, and that discussing those questions--besides being one of the most intrinsically rewarding ways to live--can substantially advance our understanding of human life.

Plato stands at the center of Sinaiko's canon for at least three reasons. First, Plato's dialogue form is the most appropriate and honest method of philosophical investigation. It acknowledges such elements of the philosophical task--belied by the expository genres adopted by Aristotle, Descartes and Kant--as uncertainty, vacillation and (most interestingly) failure. Second, as an art form the dialogue allows Plato to take seriously art's claim to truth and the complex competition between poet and philosopher. This honors an essential impulse of human life that too often goes unattended in philosophy. Finally, the sheer range of Plato's output and the profundity of Socrates' contribution are simply unequalled in the history of thought.

Sinaiko occasionally alludes to Greek religion or to Christianity, but never in a systematic or sustained way. Absent is any discussion of texts from the scriptural traditions of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. This is an odd omission in a book about canon-making. Discussion of the Bible would have added complexity to Sinaiko's canonical principle, in which everything that rises ultimately converges around a Platonic theme. Encountering together Deuteronomy and Job, for example, enhances one's sense that works addressing the same theme in divergent, even contradictory ways can usefully, creatively and even truthfully coexist. Sinaiko's colleague Gerald Graff has appropriated this practice and fashioned a manifesto for pedagogy in the humanities: "Teach the conflicts!"

Explicitly addressing canonical religions would do a great deal for an already very accomplished book. It would clarify Sinaiko's approach and make demands that would play to his strengths. It would, for example, insist that Dostoevsky receive

equal billing with Tolstoy, and that Aristotle be elevated to a place near Plato. It also might force Sinaiko to discuss more texts bidding for entry into the canon, if only to consider why not to admit them. It would be fascinating, for example, to read what he has to say about Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

An undeclared but definite subtext of Sinaiko's book is his frustration with the degree to which scholarship in the humanities has become specialized. Sinaiko has avoided this, and his book resolutely addresses those questions traditional to his field. It is to his credit that he takes Plato's myths seriously, and it would only enhance his already capacious sensibility at least to gesture toward those other traditions of thought and practice that not only conclude with myth but begin there.