University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and
Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

2014

The Pedagogical Imagination

Leon Sachs

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>

Sachs, Leon, "The Pedagogical Imagination" (2014). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 256.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/256>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINATION

[Buy the Book](#)

The
PEDAGOGICAL
IMAGINATION

*The Republican Legacy in
Twenty-First-Century
French Literature and Film*

LEON SACHS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2014 by the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska

All rights reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sachs, Leon, 1967–

The pedagogical imagination: the republican legacy in twenty-first-century French literature and film / Leon Sachs. pages cm

Summary: “Study of French education and republicanism as represented in twenty-first century French literature and film”

—Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-4505-1 (hardback: alk. paper)—

ISBN 978-0-8032-5511-1 (pdf)—ISBN 978-0-8032-5512-8 (epub)

ISBN 978-0-8032-5513-5 (mobi)

1. French literature—21st century—History and criticism.

2. Education in literature. 3. Education in motion pictures.

4. Republicanism in literature. 5. Motion pictures—

France—History—21st century. I. Title.

PQ317.S25 2014

840.9'0092—dc23 2013043102

Set in Garamond Premier by Renni Johnson.

Designed by N. Putens.

Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Reading the Republican Legacy i

1. A New Language of Learning: Object Lesson
Pedagogy and the Modern Reader 24
2. Visualizing Literacy: From Pierre Larousse to
Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* 53
3. Teaching Suspicion: Erik Orsenna's *La
grammaire est une chanson douce* as a Modern
Tour de la France par deux enfants 81
4. A Classic Dodge: Republican Conflict and Islamic
Solutions in Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'esquive* 112
5. Writing on Walls: *Laïcité* and Literary Form in
François Bégaudeau's *Entre les murs* 145

Conclusion: The Strangeness of
Republican Culture 176

Notes 191

Bibliography 209

Index 219

Illustrations

1. The *Nouveau Larousse illustré* in Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* 54
2. Varda's visit to the Musée des Beaux-Arts 67
3. Shots illustrating Varda's ludic manipulations 69
4. Instructional materials found in Alain Fonteneau's makeshift classroom 77

Acknowledgments

Many individuals have generously given of their time in reading and commenting on parts of this project at various stages of its development. I owe a debt of thanks to the following for sharing their insights and expertise: Ora Avni, Kim Benston, Stefan Bird-Pollan, Anna Bosch, Gil Chaitin, Jeffery Clymer, Isabelle Dellanoy, Andrea Goulet, Peter Kalliney, Ed Lee, Bettina Lerner, Suzanne Pucci, Marion Rust, Alan Singerman, Patricia Tilburg, and Michael Trask. My work has also benefited from conversations with a number of scholars more knowledgeable than I about the history and current state of French schooling, namely Myriam Boyer, Martine Jey, Pierre Kahn, and Hélène Merlin-Kajman.

I am especially indebted to M. Martin Guiney, both because his own work on literary education in France has been a constant touchstone for my own inquiry and because his penetrating criticism of my manuscript has helped me to better define and frame my own contribution to this growing field among Anglophone students of French culture.

I would also like to thank Patrick Bray and the French Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Bruno Chaouat and the French Department at the University of Minnesota for having invited me to present my work in their departments.

I am grateful to Gaston and Mary-Elizabeth d'Harcourt, who repeatedly and warmly hosted me in Paris, where much of the research for this project was conducted.

Needless to say, I owe a debt of gratitude to those who read my manuscript for the University of Nebraska Press; their detailed and judicious comments provided indispensable guidance for improving the project. I am also grateful, of course, to Kristen Elias Rowley and Kyle Simonsen at the press for their able, cheerful, and steady stewardship through the publishing process. I am equally indebted to Jane Curran for her masterful editing of the manuscript.

At the University of Kentucky, I have greatly benefited from many conversations with Richard Angelo, who not only read and commented on my work but also invited me to present my ideas in his department's colloquium in the College of Education. Ted Fiedler, in my own department, meticulously read the entire manuscript and offered invaluable editorial advice at a crucial moment in the revision process. I also owe a debt to the University of Kentucky's College of Arts and Sciences for providing me with a release from teaching duties in order to progress in my writing.

There are no superlatives strong enough to convey the extent of my debt to my friend and colleague Jeff Peters, who not only tirelessly read and commented on many drafts of the entire manuscript but also maintained unflagging faith in the project even when I had my doubts. A remarkably creative thinker whose enthusiasm for the exchange of ideas and intellectual discovery is contagious, he persisted in challenging me to deepen and extend my arguments in ways that I could never have done on my own. My debt to him is immense.

It is always difficult to articulate one's debt to members of one's own family, for their greatest assistance comes in intangible and very personal forms. I must nevertheless make explicit my gratitude to my mother and to my father for so readily and instinctually offering the kind of indispensable support that only family can provide. I owe a particular debt to my father, an accomplished wordsmith who, despite bemusement with the discourse of literary studies (beginning with words like *discourse*), has helped enliven my prose throughout.

The most essential thanks is reserved for the person with whom I share everything. Pearl James, the best reader I know, has sweated every page,

phrase, and word of this book along with me (while simultaneously writing her own to boot). More importantly, however, she and my daughter Chloe have reminded me every day, unwittingly and simply by being who they are, that there are things even more — much more — important. That reminder deserves my greatest thanks of all.

Introduction

Reading the Republican Legacy

Alphonse Daudet's short story "La dernière classe" (The Last Class), published in 1872, takes place in a rural schoolroom in Alsace shortly after France's defeat by Prussia in 1870–71. Beyond the classroom walls, in the distance, one hears the military exercises of the Prussian troops, a reminder that the annexed provinces of Alsace-Lorraine have fallen to Bismarck. The story describes the schoolchildren's last French class. Thereafter, they will be required to study German. The narrator, a mediocre student named Franz, arrives late to class to discover a curious scene. Adults from the village occupy the empty seats, and the teacher, Monsieur Hamel, dressed in his Sunday best, conducts the lesson with unusual ceremony. Amid the exercises on grammar, reading, writing, and spelling, Monsieur Hamel pauses to celebrate the richness, beauty, and clarity of the French language. He also admonishes his pupils and fellow citizens for their past neglect of their studies. The teacher stresses, in particular, the urgent need to preserve and defend the French language. The nation's survival, he explains, depends on it: studying French, learning to read and write the language, is tantamount to fighting for France. As this, the last French class draws to a close, Monsieur Hamel begins to offer some parting words. Overcome with sadness, however, he cannot speak. Instead, he turns to the blackboard and painstakingly writes in capital letters: VIVE LA FRANCE! He then, with a wave of the hand, dismisses the class.

Daudet's story is as relevant today as it was at the end of the nineteenth century. Though the threats to France's security have changed, the crucial connection between education and national welfare continues to dominate politics, public debate, and even literary and cinematic production. Modern communication technologies spawning pidgin languages (of email and SMS), cultural globalization typified by the boundless American entertainment industry, and the growing impact of beliefs and practices of immigrant communities from former colonies have generated an anxiety about the survival of both the national language and republican values. Daudet's Prussian troops have been replaced by text messaging, Hollywood movies, and the *hijab* (or headscarf) worn by some Muslim schoolgirls.¹ Just as Daudet did in 1872, France's leaders, intellectuals, and educators today invoke the school as a bulwark against these potential threats to French culture and identity. And just as Monsieur Hamel's lesson suggests, the French language and literature class — the place where one learns to read and write — still constitutes the epicenter of the struggle.

The Pedagogical Imagination examines present-day versions of Daudet's story. It studies some of the most popular and critically acclaimed works of recent literature and film treating problems of education in France: François Bégaudeau's *Entre les murs* (2006), Erik Orsenna's *La grammaire est une chanson douce* (2001), Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive* (2004) and, a less obvious, more subtle example, Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000). All of these works are concerned in one way or another with what many refer to as the school crisis in France. Though typically defined in terms of academic underachievement, school violence, and student disregard for republican values, the school crisis that concerns us here is more closely related to the issues that concern Daudet: questions of language learning, reading and writing instruction, and literary studies. The works studied in these pages place the very act of reading — how we read and how we *should* read — at the center of their reflections on republican schooling and French education.

They do not merely depict scenes of learning, however. The works of Bégaudeau, Orsenna, Kechiche, and Varda engage with the question of

education through experiments with form. They represent the educational milieu — teachers, students, classrooms — but they also use formal devices such as *mise en abyme*, the play of text and image, fragmented narratives, and curious interpolations of realia to stimulate the reader's or viewer's active engagement with the material. They promote, quite simply, an act of critical reading that in and of itself, I argue, reproduces basic pedagogical principles of modern education, principles that have been especially consequential in, and central to, the French republican tradition. To put it another way, *The Pedagogical Imagination* argues that a particular conception of modern progressive pedagogy manifests itself in techniques of form and in the kinds of reading activities to which such techniques give rise. I argue that critical reading is an enactment of republican pedagogy; indeed, that the critical reader *is* a republican reader.

Over the course of the book I clarify and nuance this central claim and explore some of its broader implications for literary and cultural studies more generally. Suffice it to say for the moment that, by republican pedagogy, I am referring to a conception of teaching and learning devoted to cultivating the student's skills of independent, empirical observation leading ultimately to intellectual autonomy. To be sure, this pedagogy is not unique to France; it has deep roots in the Western tradition of scientific inquiry. But it enjoyed an exceptional pride of place in France under the regime of the Third Republic established in 1870; it became a vehicle for the spread of republican ideology inherited from the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and the first republicans of 1792 who championed education reform as a *sine qua non* of building a democratic, egalitarian society.

To say that the critical reader is a republican reader is, in some sense, obvious. Of course any reader who enlists his or her skills of textual analysis to interpret a work of literature or film is using skills of scrutiny deemed indispensable for citizens in a democratic society. What is less obvious, however, is how specific pedagogical doctrines believed to cultivate these skills manifest themselves in artistic form, or, more precisely, in the reader/viewer's engagement with questions of form. We can begin to get a sense of how this occurs by returning to Daudet's

story. Our reading of it remains incomplete. It is not enough to summarize its themes. If it is to serve as an exemplum for the larger study to follow, we must attend to its form.

There is more in Monsieur Hamel's *VIVE LA FRANCE* than the obvious expression of patriotic devotion. His patriotic cry takes a vivid, graphic form. What matters here, to use a familiar formula, is not only *what* the words say but also *how* they are said . . . or, in this case, not said, but written. The mode of delivery means everything. When the teacher switches from speaking to writing, the students are no longer listeners; they become readers. His change in mode of address demonstrates — and compels his students to perform — the very connection he has previously established between language study and the nation. After all, in order for the students to understand Monsieur Hamel's *cri de coeur*, which appears to them only in graphic form, they must decipher the marks on the blackboard. Patriotic communion occurs here through the act of writing and reading. The students assimilate the patriotic message through an act of decoding that is itself an enactment of service to the nation. In other words, what is patriotic in this scene is not only the content or message of the words on the blackboard but also the medium of communication, the fact that the words are written, not spoken, and that they oblige the students to read. Thus, with the inscription of *VIVE LA FRANCE*, reading becomes a doubly patriotic act.

Monsieur Hamel's students are not the only readers of these words. They are also addressed to Daudet's reader. As if to remind us of this, the teacher's switch from speaking to writing is accompanied by a typographical change on the page. Set off from the surrounding text in a separate, freestanding paragraph and a distinct typeface, the three words — apart from what they signify — call attention to themselves *as* written words. Of course, from the reader's perspective, all of the words on the printed page are written. But these three words are written differently; they identify themselves as being written within the fictional space as well. The same graphic image presents itself, simultaneously, to the fictional characters and the real-life reader. Reading the same words at the same time as the schoolchildren, Daudet's reader simulates participation in

the lesson. He has become in some sense a student. The typographical maneuver creates the momentary illusion that the reader and the fictional students occupy the same space of instruction. An imaginary space has come into being that conflates the boundaries of two otherwise distinct domains: the fictional classroom and the actual reading experience in the present. As a result of the particular layout of words on the page, the classroom, one could say, has been opened up or extended to include the space of the reader.

Though certainly a hymn to the nation in a moment of despair, Daudet's story is also a literary monument to France's new Republic, its third since 1792.² This is not an obvious point. The author himself was only a moderate supporter of the republican cause, Monsieur Hamel's teaching practices show no trace of the progressive doctrines that would dominate republican educational debates in the decades to come, and his patriotic tribute reveals no explicit political or ideological alignment. He writes "Long Live France," and not, as an ardent republican would, "Long Live the Republic." Nevertheless, the story plainly illustrates the close connection between popular education and national cohesion that, still to this day, has been a central tenet of republican ideology since the Revolution. While other regimes certainly made significant contributions to national education, it is the Third Republic that treated the topic with unprecedented urgency and invested the resources necessary to produce lasting, widespread change at all levels of schooling.

Part of the story's republicanism, however, lies also in its form, in the teacher's graphic message, its eye-catching presentation, and the reader's attention to it. The three words, we have seen, draw attention to the medium of the text itself as opposed to the message alone, to the linguistic vehicle as opposed to the story being told, to the act of perceiving the graphic marks on the page as opposed to the events narrated.³ This attention to modality — to the medium of communication — changes the reader's role and engages his participation in the story. The reader who pauses to reflect on this effect of form is no longer a passive observer of the narrated events. He has become an active participant in the story, awakened to the fact that he enacts the very lesson about reading the

story imparts. In sum, what we see here is a technique of form that draws attention to the concrete nature of the text, which, in turn, highlights the reader's task of observing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions about what he has observed. For some, what I am describing here is quite simply the process of careful, active reading itself. But it also reproduces with remarkable fidelity one of the most basic exercises of modern progressive education and a cornerstone of republican education reform: the object lesson, or in French, *la leçon de choses*.

First used in French nursery schools in the mid-nineteenth century and then gradually introduced at the elementary school level, object lesson pedagogy was, in essence, a rudimentary form of scientific inquiry. It trained the student to observe carefully ordinary objects found in the natural world. But following the defeat of 1870 scientific learning acquired a new, almost sacred status. This was France's Sputnik moment.⁴ French leaders blamed the military debacle on weaknesses in the educational system and put their faith in science and scientific education as the means of improving the schools. In his landmark assessment of France's predicament in 1871, *La réforme intellectuelle et morale* (The Intellectual and Moral Reform), the philosopher Ernest Renan wrote: "Education must be above all scientific. As a result of his education the young man must know as much as possible about what the human mind has learned about the reality of the universe."⁵ Over the next few decades, leaders of school reform not only sought to increase the role of empirical sciences at all levels of education but also applied new scientific insights to pedagogical practices.

As the schoolchild's initiation into the rudiments of scientific inquiry, object lesson pedagogy laid the foundation for the entire national project. "*Les leçons de choses à la base de tout*" (Object lesson pedagogy [must be] at the base of it all), Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry purportedly declared.⁶ Indeed, the principles of empirical, active learning at the core of object lesson pedagogy were adapted for use in a wide range of disciplines. Republican educators often ascribed to it a value that surpassed the specific knowledge acquired by the student in the

course of his lesson. This pedagogy, as they viewed it, trained students to think critically; it was meant to accustom the student to a mode of careful reasoning and judgment that educators believed to be characteristic of the republican mindset and that they hoped would become the intellectual habit of every citizen of the Republic. Discussions of object lesson pedagogy in late nineteenth-century France were also therefore vehicles for larger discussions about core republican values and their survival among future generations. In other words, object lesson pedagogy was — and remains — a microcosm for exploring the relationship between theories and practices of teaching and learning and a critical mindset underlying republican ideology. Debates about, and instances of, object lesson pedagogy offer the most important places for understanding the relationship between education and republicanism.

The Pedagogical Imagination goes even further. It connects the methods and rationales of object lesson pedagogy to the question of reading, meaning here the careful analysis of literature and film. Just as the concept of object lesson pedagogy was detached from its original function as a classroom exercise and turned into an idiom for speaking about republicanism more generally, so, too, can the *leçon de choses* be used as a model for theorizing the reader's and viewer's encounter with literary and cinematic form. In other words, object lesson pedagogy, a system of ideas about the cultivation of faculties of observation, analysis, and judgment in the service of republican ideals, also serves to explain in pedagogical terms the activity of interpreting works of art. It provides a model for describing the reader's engagement with form, his or her direct encounter with the arrangements of concrete, linguistic, graphic, textual, and visual materials by means of which artworks are read, viewed, and interpreted. Daudet's "La dernière classe" presents this idea in an abbreviated fashion. The works of Varda, Orsenna, Kechiche, and Bégaudeau that constitute the main chapters of *The Pedagogical Imagination* reveal it on a much larger scale. Their formal devices are more innovative, complicated, and extensive: they pervade the works in their entirety. In a bolder fashion than Daudet's brief graphic example, these works call as much attention to the material and linguistic techniques of their

own construction — what Roman Jakobson famously called the work’s “poetic function” — as they do to the (real or fictional) worlds to which they refer. They are themselves literary and cinematic object lessons. When understood as such, there begins to emerge, in my view, something “republican” about the act of reading them carefully and critically.

My insistence on intellectual autonomy and critical inquiry as products of republican pedagogy may surprise readers familiar with the view, prevalent since the 1960s, that the republican school founded at the end of the nineteenth century was primarily a state instrument for forming a docile citizenry and maintaining social order. Countless scholars from a range of disciplines have left us a considerable body of research intended to demonstrate that, in practice and despite the rhetoric of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the republican school perpetuated traditional class divisions and relied on age-old authoritarian teaching practices used in church-run schools.

An obvious landmark in this scholarship is Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s influential 1970 study, *La reproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement* (*Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*), a sociological analysis of the way educational institutions unwittingly maintain rigid class structures through a valorization of elite cultural norms that are nevertheless touted as democratic.⁷ And, of course, Michel Foucault’s *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*), though less exclusively devoted to the school per se, has also established itself as a classic reference for examinations of the inherent and often latent authoritarian nature of the school.⁸

A more recent work in this vein, and one that is more directly concerned with present-day perceptions of the legacy of the Third Republic’s schools, is Christian Nique and Claude Lelièvre’s *La République n’éduquera pas* (*The Republic shall not educate*) (1993). Subtitled *La fin du mythe Ferry* (*The end of the Ferry myth*), this semipolemical work by two of France’s leading historians of education demythologizes the idea of the republican school founded by Jules Ferry in the 1880s as the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project. Nique and Lelièvre specifically

reject the view that the Third Republic's school was the heir to Nicolas de Condorcet's call for a mode of public instruction that would eschew moral inculcation for the sake of promoting the skills of autonomous intellectual inquiry — that is, the fundamental skills required of every republican citizen. Ferry's primary concern, they write, "was not to make knowledge available to the people but rather to 'educate' the people. He was not the proponent of Enlightenment for all but rather the champion of the 'State as moral educator.' In this sense, and contrary to what the myth affirms, Ferry's policies did not mark a break with the political regimes that preceded the Republic but were in fact completely in line with them. For Ferry as it was for earlier regimes, the State must educate the people because the education of the people is useful to the State."⁹

With the insistence here on moral education as the primary aim of Ferry's school, Nique and Lelièvre recall the classic distinction in the history of French education between *éducation* and *instruction*. The words have come to symbolize the competing ideas regarding the function of public education debated before the Legislative Assembly of 1792 and associated most notably with the opposing arguments of Rabaut Saint-Etienne and Condorcet. The Calvinist minister Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne, insisting on the importance of *éducation* ("*l'éducation nationale*") over Condorcet's view of *instruction* ("*l'instruction publique*"), contended that the former must fill a void left by the disappearance of the Ancien Régime and the clergy with their "catechisms, processions, ceremonies, sermons, hymns, pilgrimages and statues."¹⁰ While *instruction* enlightens the mind, it is *éducation* that forms the "heart," and it is the latter, explains Rabaut Saint-Étienne, that must enjoy pride of place in the new system of national education. According to Nique and Lelièvre, Ferry's school belongs more properly to this moralizing tradition than to the rationalist, Enlightenment tradition of Condorcet. What mattered for Ferry, they argue, was not the spread of knowledge and learning but rather, as it was for Napoleon and Guizot before him, the training of a compliant citizenry devoted to the ideology of the state.

One of the most recent and original explorations of precisely this moralizing function of the Third Republic's schools is M. Martin Guiney's

scrupulously documented *Teaching the Cult of Literature in the French Third Republic* (2004). Guiney argues that the school system established at the end of the nineteenth century, while presenting itself as a rival of Catholic education, actually imitated many of its methods.¹¹ The originality of Guiney's argument lies in his assessment of the role of language and literary studies as the disciplines that best served to disseminate the deceptive republican ideology. He develops this point through a comparison of the concepts of literariness and sacredness. Literature, and in particular its apotheosis in the form of a national canon, was accorded a sacred status under the Third Republic. This meant that France's great writers of the past were celebrated as the embodiment of republican values. As such, however, students did not actually learn to read the works critically: "The French literary canon operated as a type of scriptural authority for the secular power of the state."¹² One studied literature "as if it were nothing more than a guide to wisdom handed down through the centuries," and there was no "attempt to come to grips with the characteristics that distinguish it from other kinds of discourse." This practice made literature an "object of veneration" and "enhanc[ed] its aura as a pure, hermetic vessel for the unattainable Godhead."¹³ In other words, though literary studies played an important part in the school's mission to forge a coherent national identity, students did not actually learn to analyze literature in the way that we understand that activity today. Instead of learning to "read" literature critically, the student learned to worship it and, consequently, glorify the nation as well. In a word, the republican school, at least insofar as literary studies were concerned, was no more emancipatory than the Catholic school that preceded it. For both Nique and Lelièvre and for Guiney, the Third Republic did little more than put old educational wine in new republican bottles.

The Pedagogical Imagination, however, takes a different view of republican pedagogy and its legacy. It aligns itself with recent scholarship in history, philosophy, and political science that provides a corrective to the perception of the republican school as only a rigidly traditionalist, authoritarian institution. The recent works of Yves Déloye, Pierre

Kahn, and Eric Dubreucq stand out in this regard. In *École et citoyenneté: L'individualisme républicain de Jules Ferry à Vichy* (School and citizenship: republican individualism from Jules Ferry to Vichy) (1994), Yves Déloye compares school manuals used in Catholic schools with those used in the new republican classroom at the beginning of the twentieth century to show that the republican schools were indeed training students to become self-reliant and independent thinkers in ways that traditional religious schools did not. Much of the historian Pierre Kahn's work, but in particular his *La leçon de choses: Naissance de l'enseignement des sciences à l'école primaire* (The object lesson: Birth of scientific education in the primary school) (2002), demonstrates that the grade school exercise of the object lesson and other elementary introductions to science provided more than merely basic practical training suitable only for the lower classes. He argues that this first introduction to scientific inquiry shared the same epistemological foundations as advanced scientific training offered in secondary schools and higher and should be understood as a genuine prologue to more sophisticated critical thinking. Eric Dubreucq's recent study of three towering figures in republican education reform (Henri Marion, Ferdinand Buisson, Émile Durkheim) examines the philosophical foundations of their respective ideas on education and pedagogy.¹⁴ He concludes that despite their differences, these leading educators all viewed republican educational thought as a form of critical thinking that puts into question its own model and its own foundation. Moreover, argues Dubreucq, this intellectual principle survives today as a pillar of republican ideology. To this group of French scholars, we should add the work by the American historian Patricia Tilburg. Her recent *Colette's Republic* shows how the writer-performer's highly original and even audacious artistic experiments on the Paris music hall stage bear the mark of the progressive republican education she received as a girl in the 1880s.¹⁵ Together this research indicates that the view of the republican school as only an oppressively authoritarian institution is skewed and that the educational reform pursued by republican leaders at the end of the nineteenth century was more emancipatory and less paternalistic than much late twentieth-century scholarship would have

us believe. *The Pedagogical Imagination* lends its voice to this recent rehabilitation of the republican school's debt to the Enlightenment project. By examining the linkages between pedagogical doctrine and critical reading, it demonstrates, moreover, that literary scholarship has a part to play in the study of republicanism, a field often thought to be the preserve of historians and political theorists.

The Pedagogical Imagination is not a survey or inventory of contemporary works on French schools. Its ambitions are both more narrow and more profound. I have chosen to read works that demonstrate with particular force the relationship between republican pedagogical doctrine and artistic form. To take form seriously as an integral part of the act of reading and as an agent in the production of meaning requires deliberate examination of select works. This constraint, however, befits the topic at hand. For the very question of breadth versus depth — the quantity versus the quality of readings — resonates with issues at the heart of republican pedagogy. Republican pedagogues debated whether the object lesson served primarily to have students gain broad knowledge about the natural world or acquire the skills of painstaking observation and analysis. In a manner recalling Montaigne's famous distinction between a "well-filled head" and a "well-made head," they debated whether to prioritize *what* one learns or *how* one learns. Education leaders such as Ferdinand Buisson and Henri Marion, we shall see, insisted on the importance of the latter. By treating the works of Varda, Orsenna, Kechiche, and Bégaudeau as literary and filmic object lessons, it is only natural that I examine them accordingly — with the kind of scrutiny that is the cultural legacy of republican pedagogy.

My own reader might balk at my suggestion that critical reading be understood as an enactment of republican pedagogy and, by extension, a certain idea of republican ideology. After all, the practice of critical reading or close textual analysis is a centerpiece of humanistic inquiry in numerous fields that may have little or nothing to do with French much less republican traditions. What, then, permits me to propose so intimate a link between this type of reading practice and republicanism? Needless to say, I do not mean to suggest an exclusive relationship

between the two. Of course critical reading as it is practiced by teachers and scholars and taught to their students owes its existence to a wide range of philosophical, intellectual, and cultural traditions rooted in, and traversing, different national and linguistic communities. Nevertheless, to acknowledge the overdetermined nature of critical reading does not in any way discount the value of exploring one particular strand of a complex weave or one particular branch of an ornate latticework. What is more, one could argue that the bond between language and literary studies and *raison d'état* is unusually pronounced in the case of France, that French regimes have nurtured this linkage in a sustained and concerted fashion that remains unparalleled. The Académie française with its extraordinary role in the shaping of French cultural policy over the centuries and across successive political regimes is an obvious symbol of this nexus between language, literature, and the ideology of the state. More to the point is the example of the *explication de texte*, the famous exercise in painstaking textual commentary and analysis that became the centerpiece of literary studies in the Third Republic's lycée.¹⁶ A predecessor to later versions of close reading, the *explication de texte's* rise in importance accompanied, and was a manifestation of, the scientification of teaching and learning throughout the French schools. It was thus, like the object lesson itself, a symbol of ascendant republican ideology. What is perhaps most remarkable about the *explication de texte* is that, to this very day, English-speaking teachers and students of literature continue to use the French term to refer to close textual analysis in general.¹⁷ It would thus seem that there is something in the collective literary imagination of the Anglophone world that equates critical reading with this exercise issuing from the French republican tradition. In short, other nations and other traditions have certainly emphasized critical reading, but France has placed the concept at the center of an intense public debate about educational policy and woven it into the very fabric of government itself.

My insistence on form and especially formalist reading aligns my project with the recent trend in literary and cultural studies most commonly called New Formalism. This renewed interest in formal matters — the latest reminder that form does matter — arises out of what many perceive

as an excessive concern in some New Historicist criticism with theme at the expense of form.¹⁸ New Formalists, or at least those in the movement's "activist" wing, applaud the political engagement characteristic of New Historicism.¹⁹ They lament, however, the tendency among New Historicists to treat texts as mimetic illustrations of historical and political reality and, consequently, to tolerate practices of reading that, in their neglect of formal complexities, undermine the very *raison d'être* of literary and cultural studies.²⁰ New Formalism refuses to treat works of art as mere "bundles of historical and cultural content."²¹ It insists on reading practices that, in their attention to form, "constitute form itself as a meaningful content."²² In the preface to his recent *Play and the Politics of Reading: The Social Uses of Modernist Form*, Paul B. Armstrong lays out with particular concision what is at stake in the New Formalist turn: "If reading itself is a site of important social and political activity, then the *how* of that experience is as important as the *what* of a text's mimetic commentary, and maybe more so. Asking questions about how formal textual strategies seek to engage a reader's assumptions and conventions is a specifically literary way to do the work of social, political criticism. This kind of close attention to the pressures and designs of the reading experience is something that we literary critics are (or should be) particularly skilled at."²³

The Pedagogical Imagination asks these very questions. It examines the way the "formal textual strategies" on display in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *La grammaire est une chanson douce*, *L'esquive*, and *Entre les murs* "engage the reader's [and viewer's] assumptions" about republican schooling, republican pedagogy, and the historical and ideological forces residing therein. Of course, form is inseparable from content. We experience the one in relation to the other. As Ellen Rooney puts it, "reading is . . . corrosive of the facile opposition between form and content, because we must reinvent their relation in every new context."²⁴ The literary and filmic readings in these pages do just that. They investigate the necessarily dialogical relationship of form and content and reveal what this particular dialogue expresses that is not otherwise articulated by either of the "conversants" — the *how* or the *what* — alone.

Since all of the works I use to develop my argument have appeared since the year 2000, Daudet's story might seem an odd choice as an introduction to my topic. What could a relatively forgotten story from the 1870s have to do with this group of internationally successful and award-winning works from the start of the twenty-first century? More than one might think, I argue. One of this book's aims is to establish connections between present-day cultural production and the history of republican pedagogy, of which the early decades of the Third Republic, the years subsequent to Daudet's "La dernière classe," constitute a pivotal, defining moment. No matter how obviously rooted the works of Varda, Orsenna, Kechiche, and Bégaudeau are in questions of contemporary society and culture, they are concerned not only with events of the moment. They participate in an ongoing and century-old (if not older) conversation about republican education and pedagogical doctrine. Their richness and lasting interest can only be appreciated when situated in this broader context.

Chapter 1 develops the historical context outlined above by examining the way republican educators spoke and wrote about the new pedagogy, and the object lesson in particular, at the turn of the twentieth century. This "pedagogical revolution," as Durkheim called it, had its roots in a contest between scientific thought and the classical humanities reaching back to the Renaissance.²⁵ We also see how, at the hands of these educators, object lesson pedagogy and its parent concept, intuitive learning, became associated with rigorous rational inquiry, not an obvious connection given that learning through sensory perception was typically thought to be easy, spontaneous, and unaided by reason. Finally, the chapter highlights similarities between the language of object lesson pedagogy and that of twentieth-century formalist art and criticism. The purpose here is to bring together, within a single frame, these two distinct discourses — one about modern (literary and filmic) art and the other about modern pedagogy. Though each of these discourses is familiar enough in and of itself, the bridges connecting them remain relatively unexplored. *The Pedagogical Imagination* is an exploration of what one such bridge might look like.

Chapter 2's treatment of Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*) continues the historical contextualization begun in chapter 1. Of all of the works in this study, Varda's film documentary offers the most explicit and sustained look at the survival in the present of traces of older institutions, discourses, and practices. It is thus eminently pertinent for the relationship I am proposing between nineteenth-century republican pedagogy and its legacy today. A documentary study of the age-old practice of gleaning, the salvaging of leftover, unwanted food-stuffs, Varda's film might appear at first glance to have little to do with contemporary education. This changes, however, when we consider that it is framed by scenes of reading instruction and that gleaning itself, as Varda sees it, is a metaphor for the act of reading. The opening montage simulating a perusal of the Larousse dictionary prompts a reflection on Pierre Larousse (1817–1875) and his legacy. Not only a lexicographer, publisher, and ardent republican — a French Noah Webster — Larousse was also a teacher who developed innovative techniques for reading instruction that relied on the same principles we find at the heart of object lesson pedagogy. Varda's own cinematic technique of using word- and image-play instructs her own viewer to read digital visual media according to Larousse's methods. In sum, this chapter proposes that we see Varda as a kind of modern-day Larousse.

Gleaning, then, is not only about salvaging foodstuffs or other discarded objects. For Varda, it is a metaphor for recuperating and recycling all kinds of things, including fragments of the past, those forgotten or neglected chapters of history. By using her art to glean — or re-collect — these episodes, she also finds new purpose for them, thereby assuring their survival over time. This is precisely what her film does with Larousse and his method of reading instruction. It puts this forgotten chapter of republican education back into circulation. Varda breathes new life into Larousse's legacy by showing its applicability to the question of literacy in the age of digital visual media. Understood as a recuperation of the past, Varda's gleaning also serves as a metaphor for what is attempted throughout *The Pedagogical Imagination*. My return to late nineteenth-century republican pedagogical doctrine for the purpose

of finding its resonance in twenty-first-century artistic treatments of education is a kind of historical gleaning à la Varda.

Erik Orsenna's *La grammaire est une chanson douce* (*Grammar Is a Sweet, Gentle Song*), discussed in chapter 3, is a philosophical tale in the moralist tradition and explicitly displays a debt to both Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Jean de la Fontaine. It also gleans and recycles for its own purposes fragments of the republican past. It tells the story of an incredible journey taken by two schoolchildren to a magical land where the French language literally comes alive, where words and phrases are living, breathing, sentient beings. Having lost the ability to speak as a result of a shipwreck, the children embark on a fresh exploration of their native tongue. They rediscover the rules of grammar, acquire a rich and colorful vocabulary, and learn to combine words, phrases, and sentences to produce eloquent, imaginative prose. And, according to the logic of the story, the purpose of this linguistic reeducation is to acquire the skills enabling one to emulate the great literary authors such as La Fontaine, Proust, and Saint-Exupéry.

The children's tale is also a thinly veiled polemic against the gradual decline of traditional literary studies in the secondary school curriculum. If the story presents literary sensibility and prowess as the highest purpose of language study, this view is opposed to recent trends in French class that ignore the uniqueness of the literary work and train students to subject it to the same dispassionate semiotic analysis that one might apply to any "ordinary" text, such as a news article, an advertisement, or products of popular, "low" culture. Orsenna dramatizes this opposition in the opening classroom scene preceding the adventure story. Here, the children's kindhearted French teacher who uses nurturing methods to introduce students to the "magic" of the French language and its literature finds herself reprimanded by the inspector from the Ministry of Education for her failure to hew to the dry, technical, jargon-filled structuralist methods prescribed by the state. The story thus stages a Manichean opposition between the scientific training in textual analysis and a more humanistic — and thus humane — exploration of the wonder and beauty of literary arts. It is, in other words, an opposition between

cold, rational science and the affective experience of the humanities. Orsenna's tale would appear to take up unequivocally the cause of the latter.

I argue, however, that the story actually has a much more ambivalent relationship to the scientific tradition than the opposition of the opening chapter would suggest. We see this by comparing it not with La Fontaine or Saint Exupéry (to whom its debt is explicit) but rather with another famous story of the adventures of schoolchildren: G. Bruno's bestselling *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* (*The Tour of France by Two Children*) (1877), a quintessential monument to republican ideology. Like G. Bruno's story and instructional manual, Orsenna's children are separated from their home by a violent incident; a shipwreck in *La grammaire* serves a narrative function similar to the calamities set off by the Franco-Prussian war in *Le tour de la France*. At the end of their respective journeys, each set of children is reunited with family, defined in terms of a national community. In Bruno's manual, the nation is represented largely in geographic terms; for Orsenna, it is a matter of language and literary patrimony. The exploration of regions, industries, and products in Bruno is replaced in Orsenna by the discovery of parts of speech and grammatical rules. In a word, Bruno's *France* becomes Orsenna's *French*. What is more, both stories rely on a juxtaposition of text and image and expect their readers to "learn to look" in ways recalling the tradition of object lesson pedagogy. The similarities between the two works put the significance of their differences in greater relief. In Bruno's manual, a product of its positivistic epoch, the celebration of scientific progress and technological advances is accompanied by a denigration of works of fiction. It is precisely because it actually mimics the "tour of the nation" model that Orsenna's corrective to Bruno's mythophobia is so apparent. Orsenna, I argue, borrows the republican paradigm but reinvests it with a more humanistic message. It rewrites or, to borrow Varda's terminology, recycles *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* and places literature at its center. In other words, it reinscribes literature at the heart of the republican educational enterprise.

The work studied in chapter 4, Abdellatif Kechiche's film *L'esquive* (*Games of Love and Chance*) is about an ethnically diverse group of high

school students in the working-class suburbs of Paris who are rehearsing for a school production of a classic French comedy of manners, Marivaux's *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (*The Game of Love and Chance*). Like Orsenna's tale, it also addresses debates over literary education. But the principal conflict here concerns progressive republicanism versus traditional republicanism. For Kechiche, the primary question is whether traditional literary training rooted in the study of the national canon is consistent with the republican promise of providing an egalitarian education preparing all students, regardless of their backgrounds, for full integration into republican society. The topic revisits from a different angle the issues at play in Orsenna's tale. Since the 1970s, with the increasing democratization of French secondary schools, an ongoing topic of debate has been whether traditional literary studies serve the needs of students from immigrant and working-class families who, unlike many of their peers, do not acquire at home the cultural knowledge and language skills needed to succeed in this field of study, historically the preserve of elites. The debate has over time hardened into a dispute between rival camps. Traditionalists defend the national literary patrimony and its prominent place in the curriculum. Reformists have sought to transform literary studies into a general language arts curriculum that focuses on a variety of literary and nonliterary "texts" studied for the purpose of helping students acquire practical communication skills rather than literary culture per se.

My analysis centers on the scenes of formal classroom instruction and, in particular, the contradictory message of the French teacher who represents at one moment a progressive view that is suspicious of elite (and elitist) literary studies and, at a later moment, a traditionalist view that defends these selfsame studies in the name of republican universalism. The teacher, in other words, expresses opposing viewpoints in the longstanding debates about literary education. On the one hand, her disparaging remarks about the futility of the acquisition of literary culture amounts to a denunciation of the false republican promise that France's racial and ethnic minorities, through education and the learning of French cultural codes, can become fully integrated citizens in

French society. On the other hand and at a different moment, the teacher vigorously defends the possibility of self-emancipation gained through the imitation of a language and culture that is not one's own, a position in line with the doctrine of republican universalism. By situating this conflict of viewpoints in the figure of the teacher — that is, in one and the same person — Kechiche preempts facile readings of the teacher as merely an instrument of an authoritarian institution blindly committed to defending republican orthodoxies. The film “dodges” (*esquive*) such simple interpretations. The basic conflict of the film, then, is how to square the republican commitment to integrate France's multicultural population with a commitment to the value of republican universalism. The film sets up these rival camps — reformists and traditionalists — in a dialectical opposition. Its reluctance to choose between these alternatives illustrates one of the many ways in which the film remains true to its organizing principle captured in its title. But this dialectical structure is also a means by which the film passes the responsibility of judgment on to the viewer, and thereby also remains true to the republican message of intellectual autonomy so forcefully championed by republican educators a century ago. *L'esquive* nevertheless offers, albeit allusively (*en esquivant*), a way around the impasse it constructs. It proposes a rereading of the Marivaux play at its center by going outside the French tradition and using the interpretative lens of Farid al-din Attar's *Conference of the Birds*. The film's evocation of this twelfth-century Islamic poem not only produces a novel interpretation of the French literary classic but also affords a means of reconceptualizing the true universality of republican doctrine.

Chapter 5 examines *Entre les murs* (*The Class*), François Bégaudeau's novelistic chronicle of life in a troubled Paris middle school. While reactions to the book (and to its film adaptation) have praised its objective, impartial look at the problems of student underachievement and disobedience in today's classroom, this overwhelming interest in the docunovel's verisimilitude has been accompanied by a lack of attention to the work's form. Concern for the reality beyond the text, the external world to which it refers, has resulted in a neglect of the text itself, of its

intrinsic properties. In short, the outside has eclipsed the inside. This is no small matter for a book whose title so clearly calls attention to the relationship between exterior and interior. On one level, of course, the title refers literally to the interior space of the school, a space of great concern to the general public, but whose actual goings-on remain largely hidden from view. When we attend, however, to the work's formal properties — its language play and innovative structure — we see that it contains a reflection that destabilizes the dichotomy of inside and outside with respect to both the literary work and the domain of education.

As with all of the works in this study, our reading of *Entre les murs* requires that we situate it in the context of contemporary debates and their relationship to the history of republican education. The issue that stands out in Bégaudeau's work, given its concern with the inside-outside binary, is the status of the school as a kind of "sanctuary." To what extent, if at all, should the school and its curriculum be susceptible to factors, influences, and forces existing in society at large — that is, in the world outside its walls? The question harkens back to the revolutionary period and (as mentioned above) Condorcet's conception of public instruction, which, according to hard-line defenders of *laïcité* (that uniquely French brand of secularism), lays the foundation for the idea of the school as a sanctuary. According to this view, the school is a site of pure rational, unimpeded inquiry in which the student cultivates his or her intellectual autonomy in a space protected from the influence of outside authorities such as religion, family, or other preexisting moral systems. Today the topic manifests itself most obviously in the question of whether and how the school should adjust its educational program and methods to the needs and abilities of an increasingly multicultural student body. How, in other words, should a student's particular cultural identity and background affect what is expected of him or her, with respect to both academic achievement and comportment, in the republican classroom? The question takes us right to the heart of republican doctrine and, once again, the ongoing conflict between, on the one hand, conservative republicans, defenders of orthodox universalism that makes few concessions to cultural particularisms, and, on the other hand, more

progressive, multiculturalist republicans who call for a school that is more sensitive to and accommodating of the particular situation of students from immigrant communities or historically marginalized populations.

This chapter shows how all of these issues play themselves out through Bégaudeau's elaborate metaphors of walls, a constant setting up of boundaries and frontiers — for example, between students and figures of authority, between rules of grammar and actual language use — that are invariably transgressed. This dynamic reappears in the work's form — for example, in Bégaudeau's extensive use of *realia*. The text is strewn with bits and pieces of authentic documents from the real world of the school (music lyrics, messages from the Ministry of Education, fragments of student assignments) that produce a disorienting effect for the reader. Paradoxically, then, those very moments when the real world most ostentatiously intrudes in the text are also moments that call attention to the surface of the text, to its textuality. They are object lessons and demand the reader's attention to the very act of reading. In other words, it is when the outside obtrudes into the reading experience that the reader becomes most aware of the intrinsic properties of the text. In the end our task is to show how this textual experience should be understood as a literary enactment of the dilemma, paradox, and contradictions at the heart of the republican concept of *laïcité*, a concept that Bégaudeau nevertheless wants to salvage insofar as it describes the reader's autonomous engagement with the literary text. Reading, according to *Entre les murs*, is a performance of *laïcité*.

The concluding chapter is more than a recapitulation. It insists on the role works of art and artistic analysis must play in the study of republicanism. Taking as its point of departure a recent remark by two eminent historians that “republican culture must rediscover its strangeness” if it is to be perceived afresh and in all of its complexity,²⁶ the conclusion argues that it is, indeed, through formalist reading of literary and other cultural artifacts that one can achieve precisely the kind of renewed vision of republican culture that the historians call for.

The foregoing chapter breakdown makes clear that the literary and filmic works featured in these pages approach the topic of education

in distinct yet interrelated ways. They address many themes: reading and literacy, class difference, institutional authority, multiculturalism, science versus literature, progress versus tradition . . . the list could go on. These topics are some of the thorniest in past and present debates over republican education and the values of the Republic. Newspapers, periodicals, radio, and television report on them tirelessly, and they have staked out large territories in the blogosphere.

But the works of Varda, Orsenna, Kechiche, and Bégaudeau differ from these other media. As works of art, they do not report on or represent the reality of the school in any simple, mimetic fashion. They promote, I argue, a critical examination of schooling that comes into existence in the act of careful reading itself. Such reading, which necessarily attends to techniques of form, enacts core principles of republican schooling crystallized in the foundational exercise of the object lesson. As my discussion of Daudet's "La dernière classe" demonstrates, the most lasting lessons of these literary and filmic works reside not in *what* they depict but rather in *how* they depict, which, in turn, guides how we read. It is in this way that reflections *of* education become reflections *on* education.