

That Teaching is Impossible

How to Live Now or Never

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1

That *teaching is impossible* is not a proposition to be argued for. It would be of little interest to offer it up for debate. It would be useless to defend it against the evidence of history or common sense. To consider that teaching is impossible is to open ourselves up to an experience of the most outlandish sort. In staging this experience I wish to contemplate the happy frustration of the urge to teach, and to affirmatively invoke the limits of all pedagogies.

It is useful for anyone who thinks that they teach to explore their urge to do so. This urge is an intimate matter, the libidinal support for the innocent claim that good ideas ought to be passed on to others. I call the claim innocent in that it usually leaves the good of ideas (and the Idea of the Good) implicit and unexamined; since the good remains unexamined, people may obtusely invoke their mere participation in efficient schooling as evidence that teaching is possible. That the school, as institution, survives; that the role of teacher is understood primarily in reference to the survival of the institution: these seem to be the only evidences necessary. But one can at least begin to account for and explore the complex of desires that aim at the role of teacher. Some of them wear the mask of the ego: I am the one who impresses the lessons.

Beyond the ego-mask, moving, that is, from what appears as inner to what appears as outer, one may observe the inevitable calcification of the urge to teach into the kinds of systems we call pedagogies. These may be described as organizations, not just of knowledge and methods of passing it on, but primarily of desire. They are institutional manifestations of the urge to teach, or rather, they are the ways in which the urge to teach, combined with other urges, invents for itself a gregarious existence, a school: This is where the lessons are impressed. In this sense, pedagogies may also be characterized as the fantasy of the efficacy of the urge to teach.

To say or think that teaching is impossible is to let go, however temporarily, of both the urge to teach and its more or less precisely formed collusions with other urges in gregarious forms, affirming rather that study is interminable, and so learning is endlessly frustrated and frustrating. To say or think that teaching is impossible is to assert that teaching on purpose, for a purpose, is impossible. For the urge in its gregarious form has other purposes, which concern the person of the teacher, his role, her specialization, in the context of the school; it has nothing in particular to do with learning. I am inclined to think that neither do schools. What anyone who thinks they are a teacher can do purposely is mainly of two natures:

- One can transmit data, information. This is better known as communication. It is commonly assimilated to teaching, but, as students well know, really has nothing to do with it. This transmission is eminently possible and does not require a teacher.

- One can model behaviors and practices, silently offering them up for imitation. This is not only possible, but inevitable. But to whatever extent we do it for a purpose, it is for one other than to teach them. In this modeling we exceed the role of the teacher.

Pedagogy, then, is precisely the in-between of the ego-mask and the school, their mutual insertion, the becoming-method or becoming-gregarious of an urge in a fantasy: This how the lessons are impressed. In this sense to say or think that teaching is impossible is also to invoke the countless ways that learning takes place despite and beyond pedagogy. This is the beginning of the antipedagogical lesson. Let us consider it.

2

Sometimes, I think that I teach. When I do so I imagine I am not alone in underlining the evident gap between discussing practices and engaging in them. Classrooms have this virtue, that in them almost anything may be said; but to the degree that the desires that allow us to survive in such spaces remain unexamined, we will tend to confuse the ability to say almost anything with the ability to do almost anything. This gap in capacity is especially manifest for me in the context of philosophy or anthropology, in courses that take up topics such as spiritual exercises, mysticism, shamanism, or the many practices that P. Hadot calls *philosophy as a way of life*. I mean any topic where what is posited is not merely thinking differently in the context of a given way of life, but a thinking that (because it is not just a thinking) requires a conversion. Becoming someone or something else, living differently, in short. One can certainly talk about such matters endlessly, treating them as historical or sociological facts, without grasping what is vital in them — without, that is, being transformed in the doing.

The minimum form of the affirmation that teaching is impossible would then be that with regard to practices that require a conversion, at least, teaching is impossible. I found in myself, not just an urge to teach, to be the teacher, but to teach these topics, and the urge was frustrated. The role of teacher became, if not impossible, at least somewhat laughable. The reason was clear enough. No one can teach such practices in a school unless it is the school of such practices: Epicureanism needs the Garden. Thinking I taught, I communicated information concerning these practices, but at a great remove; I did not model them. Moreover, some of them seem separate from any known pedagogy: mystics don't seem to me to have a school, but rather to be those who are usually expelled from schools. This not because schools are dogmatic or authoritarian (though of course most are), but because of the sort of experience that mysticism seems to entail. (Or maybe not. One might go so far as to consider the maximum form of the claim, that the problem has to do with practice as such, with any practice other than those peculiar to schools as we know them.)

So what is left in such situations? The mere intention to teach what is impossible to teach, I suppose: the urge in its raw and complicated form, not its calcification into a pedagogy. We can try to collectively give in to the will to knowledge, to more than idle curiosity. That is, to what is in fact possible given the practices and ways of life that make schools as we know them possible. (As opposed to, and without in anyway devaluing, those that destroy them, or mutate them until they are unrecognizable.) But I find that this will and that curiosity are unevenly distributed. You, teacher, must seduce your students into a certain fascination. That is what I call modeling, at least when modeling has a chance of success. It is akin to what psychoanalysts call the transference, or to hypnosis when it is grasped that what is at stake in it is something other than mind control, that the one hypnotized must at some level accept the process. It must involve your body, teacher, your gestures, movements, laughter: the mask, its generation, and its corruption. Those particulars can never be bypassed in the mimesis of the model.

But even if the will to knowledge or more than idle curiosity can be modeled and imitated, (and I do think that they can, on purpose and accidentally as well!) I do not think it is wise to claim that teaching has therefore happened, and is therefore possible. Something else is at stake. In modeling, the teacher's ego-mask is revealed in its development (from the urge to the role), but also in its happy failure: the failed transition from the urge through the role to its calcification as pedagogy and its sedimentation in schooling are all provisionally laid bare. In at least one

important sense, the teacher is naked. What has been modeled and perhaps imitated is still quite separate from the topics in question, from the experiences at stake in them. What has been staged is rather an antipedagogical problem.

3

Can one pass on anything other than the will to knowledge and more than idle curiosity? What about less exotic practices, those that seem more at home in what we know as schools? For two years I was part of a university committee concerned with feminist studies. Once, in the course of a review of our work, we tried to define what constituted, for us, a specifically feminist pedagogy. The conversation was both frustrating and (at least for me) quite amusing. (Giving students a greater role in planning the curriculum, someone suggested. Allowing people to speak from their experience, another said. Encouraging connections between class readings and real-world issues, a third added. And so on.) The more concepts and examples that we collectively proposed, the clearer it became that we could produce no difference between a specifically feminist pedagogy and good pedagogy in general. It seemed as if the problem was that we had it as our goal to stay away from the humdrum of the generic, unmarked good, and to cleave rather to a more rarefied good, the sharp edge of feminist politics. But in that humdrum, generic, unmarked mainstream, there are said to be good teachers, are there not? Is their pedagogy not good? Many, arguably most, of them are in no way feminists. Our true problem was not our desire to cling to the specificity of feminism — it was that we assumed that we were the ones who impressed its lesson, that our school was where the lesson was to be impressed, and that feminism, our method, our pedagogy, was to be how the lesson was to be impressed. We had supposed that teaching is possible.

Do these assumptions have anything to do with feminism as a way of life? If feminism can be learned, not as a set of theories or ‘studies’, but as an attitude, as something that can grow into a resistant politics, it is because some of us are capable of modeling it as it exists and develops in our lives. As such it has zero informational content, or its content is incidental. That something like feminism exists at all suggests that it was, at some point, invented. At that time those who invented it were not producing new information (at least that was not what was remarkable in their invention). They were problematizing existing practices and the ways of life they flowed out of and into, proposing new ones. That something like feminism is still possible, still remarkable, suggests that someone can stage that problematization anew, in effect reinventing feminism. What does any of this, however, have to do with schooling?

The committee’s troubling, unstated conclusion was that we, presumably experts in feminism as study, could not guarantee that, in teaching classes with feminist content, we were teaching feminism. (A student could, for example, pass a course with flying colors and in some fundamental way remain oblivious to sexism. The same went for us as teachers of the course). Or, if we were teaching feminism, we could not define in what ways we were doing so in the context of feminist studies.

It ought to be clear by now that this version of the antipedagogical problem does not merely concern feminism. So, where to go from here? One familiar path is that of a certain resentment, leveraged in this case against the good teachers who do not mark the differences that we do, leveraged against students who do not become feminists or whose feminism is alien to us, lever-

aged ultimately against ourselves, in our inevitable failure. This resentment is fed by the failure of an ideal of representation and inclusivity (its index: the presence of a certain sort of data, of information) to effect anything other than a reform in schooling — in the curriculum, I mean, in studies, defined according to the standards, the good, of what we know as schools.

Another path, which I admit I fell into as if by instinct, would be that of bemusement. It would be to simultaneously admit that teaching is impossible and that feminism, if it is a form of resistance and not just of study, will be reinvented quite despite those of us who, well-meaning, might think we are teaching it.

4

Let us consider, then, the lesson of resistance, turning from reformist to revolutionary pedagogies. Another university tale: I was once asked to speak at a symposium called “Achieving Success as a Latino.” I was asked by the organizers to address the difficulties Latinos and Latinas might encounter at a predominantly Anglo institution: obstacles, more generally, that all minorities face in the educational system. I said more or less the following: I don’t want to speak purely in praise of schooling, the overcoming of obstacles as progress, confusing the efficacy of schooling with the unqualified good of learning. I want to affirm learning in its entirety and as a process, with all of its conflicts and breakdowns, not to adopt a narrative of successes in the face of hardships. I regard phenomena such as Latinas dropping out of school, not going to college, feeling alienated in college, not just as problems to be solved institutionally, by schools or by groups in schools acting as their proxy. If we view all of these ‘problems’ as negativities, deficiencies, bad attitudes, we miss their complexity, what in them is positive, is desire. I think Latinos and everybody else have countless reasons and ways to engage with schools. I also think that Latinas (and everybody else!) have good reasons to resist some or all of what is institutionalized as education. Among other things, I am referring to what we know as schools: generally, spaces where training, discipline, authoritarianism, bureaucracy, are made more or less efficacious; spaces that are often culturally hostile or indifferent, etc.

A young Latino indeed ought to ask himself, What is school to me? Why should I risk my life for this? — of course life here is not the life taken away by the gun or torture, but the life of one’s barrio, community, friends, family — because many aspects of what it means to feel in one’s own skin, at home, or in a community are threatened in schools. That’s on the side of the construction of identity, a sense of self. On the side of the destruction of identity, the desire that so many of us have to overcome what we’ve been told we are — that process and its freedom are also threatened in that schooling has always had to do with acculturation to a dominant culture, language, religion, etc. And also in the sense that schools neither teach nor favor rebellion. Institutionally this is discussed in terms of curriculum and catchphrases like campus climate, diversity, etc., but I think the real issue is one of power and gregarious desires: the school’s explicit and implicit hierarchies and their insertion into greater social arrays. Let us consider those seen as problems or at least having problematic attitudes as resisting. I think that they are right to do so, at least as right as the schools in exercising power and modeling gregariousness. Some are more at home here than others. People inhabit, move through, move in and out of a school, at different speeds, for different reasons, in different moods, using different gaits. To regard resistance as a problem to be resolved by the school, or by us as its proxy, is to

fully reinforce the role of the teacher in the school: I am the one who solves this problem — I transform this problem into the good of the lesson.

The critical question is: how are we using the school? What are we doing here if teaching is impossible? And this implies its converse: how is it using us? What is it doing with or to us (acknowledging that it is not a thing or subject, but the anonymous, gregarious actions of others)?

5

That talk ended with a proposal that I now recognize as well-intentioned (perhaps influenced by the good intentions of the symposium's planners) but poorly thought out. It was a gesture characteristic of a certain anarchism that claims for itself the side of the good, that proposes its revolutionary politics as the staging of the ultimate good.

I said: So much for the side of the institution! Schooling doesn't — can't — end there. Gregariousness certainly does not. It is part of being engaged with an institution, resistantly or not, that one tends to orient much of one's discourse and practices around the institution. (Supposing one wanted to define institutions, it might be worthwhile to begin by describing the various forms of this operation of capture.) It takes some distance (and dropping out, along with the other forms resistance takes, is a way to attain that distance) to be able to speak of schools as I have been doing, or of pedagogy as an outgrowth of the urge to teach. But really, there are schools everywhere. If I were to discuss the other possibilities for schooling I could of course talk about activism, popular education, etc., but I would rather race to the utopian end and propose that schools should have the ultimate goal of abolishing themselves as particular, separate, specialized spaces. My political proposal is that all of society be a school: that the social field be coeval with the space of learning. This means, of course, that there would be a series of spaces, remarkable places of learning, rather than one megainstitution. It could come about through a collaboration between those happiest with schools as we know them, and those who resist or refuse schooling, relatively or absolutely.

My anti-political criticism of that political proposal is that making a plan for all of society (especially one with a grandiose slogan such as abolish schools as separated spaces!) without aiming at annihilating what we know as society is to give ourselves a Cause. The Cause of Making All of Society into A School. Now the mask is transformed. I am no longer in the role of teacher, but that of teacher-activist: I am still the one who resolves this problem — now putatively through revolution instead of reform. Schooling would be coeval with society in the worst sense, fostering in people not only the illusion that teaching is possible, but that freedom can be taught (anarchist pedagogy in its most nightmarish form). We would have set out with the best of intentions and ended up with the most grotesque gregariousness. It is true that study is interminable and that schools are everywhere; but schooling is not for all that omnipresent — it can and does end.

I would rather restate that teaching is impossible (and this time perhaps the modesty of the claim, so hard to see at first, begins to shine through). To focus our efforts, our analyses, on failure and resistance is to grasp the eccentric but vital role of modeling in the transmission of practices. It is inevitable that modeling will meet resistance. A model may be imitated, counterimitated, or met with sovereign indifference. We might cooperate, we might fight, or we might ignore each other. In that social chaos, in its interstices of order and stillness, someone might learn something. But nothing about this can be guaranteed. Why assume, why hope, even, that we

will all collaborate? Why sculpt the mask in a way that arrogantly banks on success? It is the urge to teach, again reaching for the form of its survival. I impress the lesson that schooling is interminable.

6

I have already said that modeling is inevitable, and implied that it maybe done more or less purposefully. This is difficult because we habitually vibrate in sync with others who share our models, and in this local phenomenon the entirety of our interactions is to effect tiny variants, microimitations and counterimitations, of each other's practices. The micropolitics of power; or, a day in school. But modeling is also impersonal and indefinite. Its tautological claim: I am the one who lives as I live or even I am the one who expresses the model that I am modeling.

The fullness of a self or a person is, as far as I am concerned, always and only an artifice, that of an apparently completed mask. The mask of the teacher, however, is incomplete. To think, to say, to embody I am the one who impresses the lesson is to simplify, to fool ourselves into identifying with our own mask, to frustrate the many other desires clamoring against the role, demanding, if you will, other masks. To seduce anyone else (to seduce oneself!) into fascination with a model is something else than to mistake oneself for the one who impresses the lessons. It is rather to display the urge, the mask, the frustrated tendencies to pedagogy and schooling, with all of their defects and failures — the failures of the simple mask of the teacher, the gregarious phenomenon of the school, and ultimately the failure of method, of all pedagogy. This impersonation shows what in the urge to teach is impersonal.

One way to conceive of this impersonality is the *silent teaching* R. Blyth reports on in his books on Zen.

We teach silently and only silently, though we may be silent or talk.

Silence: the offering up of the model for imitation, with no attendant command to imitate (or maybe with the most parodic of commands). Informationless speech, laughter, sighs... your body, again, teacher, in its becoming-mask. Everything else is a dance of data.

Irreparably, to live is to offer one's life up for imitation. People teach what they can. People teach what they teach. Everybody teaches everybody else.

This is what I was getting at in deemphasizing the distinction between what can be passed on purposely and what is passed on inevitably. I am more interested in whether such things are done gracefully, as one may live one's life more or less gracefully. And perhaps the most graceful lesson is that teaching is impossible. But how is that to be passed on?

The only way to teach not teaching is really not to teach.

7

One final antipedagogical lesson, this one specifically for my friends, the anarchists. I hope it is clear that I have written from my own resistance. I like to think that, despite my several decades of study, I have resisted schooling. But my distance is double, since I observe that I maintain a willful incompetence when it comes to political movements that amounts to a form of resistance. There are, after all, schools everywhere! It is my style, my predilection, my wu wei regarding

schooling, regarding the roles of academics and activists. I believe that everything I have proposed about the urge to teach, about schools, and about pedagogy applies mutatis mutandis to activism, organizing, movements. Try the experiment yourself: go to a rally or meeting looking for teaching. You will find it. Ah, the pedagogy of rallies and meetings!

Some activists and their theorist friends are busy looking to the primitive past or the utopian future for a humanity without social institutions, as though discovering their absence someplace, somewhere, could lead to their amelioration or eradication today. Now, the absence of a given institution, especially one that I find intolerable, such as money or the police, is indeed a fascinating question for study. But study is interminable; it only leads to more study. I prefer to add to study another practice, to model a kind of disappearance, an incompetence that is a way to absent oneself from routinized activities on the side of schools as well as the side of the movements. It is possible to live this as something other than a negation. And as in all modeling, what I can do is simply to offer up the urge to teach and the urge to act as some desires among many. We can try to (and I suppose that we should) eradicate whatever social institutions we find to be intolerable; but we can also do what we can, silently, to lay bare our desires as we discover them, our social teachings as they meet resistances that, after all, have their reasons. We can be naked, with a mask on. Naturally, to call oneself an anarchist is to wear a fanciful mask: *I am the one who...* But if anarchism is our perhaps inevitable pedagogy, anarchy could be something else: our antipedagogy.

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