

Education as Destiny: A Reader's Response

Jim Garrison

Virginia Tech

Mine is a reader's response to René's paper, written in the spirit of Louise Rosenblatt's, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem*, where the word poem I believe refers to *poiesis*, in the sense Diotima the Mantinean teaches the young Socrates toward the end of the *Symposium*, as denoting any making, creating, or calling into existence. Rosenblatt rejects the notion of artistic intent as determining the meaning of a text. Sometimes artists do not explicitly intend anything, and even when they do they are often unclear or even confused about what they actually accomplish. For Rosenblatt, the meaning of a text emerges in transaction with the reader. We may readily generalize this insight to say that the meaning of any artistic work emerges in the transaction between the work of art and those that engage and interpret it. Nonetheless, neither the creative work of art nor the creative work of the interpreter is beyond intelligent criticism. My first reason for writing a reader response is because I think René Arcilla is appealing to the PES community to help him call something into existence that cannot, perhaps, be explicitly and univocally named and may never fully arrive anyway. To that end, he should find our individual responses here today and in the days to follow helpful to his project.

Arcilla brings an existentialist sensibility to his philosophizing that has been absent from philosophy of education for at least a generation. What is life? How should I live my life? What does life mean? Existential questions such as these demand one answers them in action even if one never explicitly formulates them. What is education? How should I educate? What does education mean? These are similarly existential questions demanding existential replies. Arcilla brings both sets of questions together by advocating "education as destiny."

If I read him right, Arcilla rejects intellectualism in that he realizes reality overflows the conceptual confines of discursive thought. I have witnessed this many times in personal conversation when I finally think I have named what we

have been pursuing in some or another peripatetic only to have him appreciate it, mull over it, and then ask: what about this or how about that or are you sure this person, place thing, event, and so on fits your description or definition? Rejecting intellectualism is tantamount to repudiating the fateful Parmenidean claim that it is the same To-Be as to To-Know that has dominated twenty-five hundred years of Western philosophy. Knowledge is not our primary relation to reality. Arcilla is a post-metaphysical thinker that also rejects the primacy of the epistemological in modern philosophy, or what a friend of mind calls “philepistemy” as opposed to philosophy. He does not reject knowing so much as puts it in its proper place within a life well lived.

Wisdom is beyond knowledge though it requires knowledge. Arcilla realizes it is more important to be *somebody* than to know *something*. Therefore, he seeks education as destiny as something that “evokes the totality of my life,” something that “cannot be measured,” something “more akin to ‘fate,’” something “speculative and experimental,” something of which, he declares: “Conclusive answers are of course beyond me.” When he looks for inconclusive answers, he turns to the arts and “educational scholarship rooted in the humanities.”

Being a post-metaphysical thinker, the humanities for Arcilla do not involve any fixed essences (or *eidōs*), some fundamental foundation (or *archē*), some substance (*ousia*), or some ultimate telos (or *entelecheia*). Without recourse to the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion, he seems to have figured out for himself that the deep, dark secret of humankind is there is no deep, dark secret. Instead, and I think this is important for understanding his project, humanism is an endless quest to work out our humanity together and to create a shared destiny by drawing on all available cultural meanings regardless of culture of origin, while creatively and critically engaging these meanings in ways that affirm education as endless formation.

By turning to the arts as “guides for redeveloping the meaning of education,” Arcilla is often operating in the domain of expressive rather than stateable meanings, which allows him to press beyond the limits of language. My second reason for writing a reader response is that I believe Arcilla is, in part, striving in his paper to express something that can be gestured toward

with words, but cannot be stated as truth functional propositions. Arcilla finds directions for his project “implicit in the painting discussion,” but he would betray the project if he insisted that everyone must interpret how Pissarro’s painting “allegorizes a key feature of an education,” as he does, or that his is the only worthy interpretation of the painting as educational allegory. There is no entelecheia for education as destiny; there is no final formation. One’s fate can be creatively formed and re-formed; it is not predetermined. However, others may preform our fate, and we may docilely follow.

Arcilla’s critique of lifelong learning may be read as a warning against following a pre-scripted life of the kind a one-size-fits-all standardized schooling assumes. It is the kind of life that leads away from education as destiny. Lifelong learning can lead to hyper-rationalized forms of life that are as sad as, although less interesting than, the lives that comprised the classical Greek tragedies of rationality. Indeed, one of the current drivers of the idea is that in the global economy labor must be constantly retrained to keep up with emerging technologies and shifting market demands, prompting us to live lives lacking a “unifying sense of purposes” and identifying with the things we can own or consume. It leads us to confuse having more with being more.

The existentialist realizes we can consume knowledge, or any experience, much as we consume a commodity, and that, therefore, knowing or even experiencing more is not necessarily being more. For one thing, knowledge could actually diminish us. One of my favorite rock and roll lyrics is from Bob Seeger’s “Running Against the Wind”:

I remember how she held me oh so tight

Wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then¹

I have not plumbed the ultimate meaning of these lines, for I do not think there is any such; however, I personally respond to them with a sense of loss and only sometimes with a sense of tragic wisdom. Might not being a young fool drawn out of their self in love be a higher state of being than being old and overly wise. Have you never wished you did not have to bear the burden of knowledge? I wonder! Of this I am more confident; if wisdom lies in the

education of the human *eros* to desire the truly good in thought, feeling, action, and others, then if loves knowledge is for our growth it is also for our pruning.

Almost assuredly, knowledge pruning and even the refusal to learn is part of the kind of learning Arcilla wishes to approve; that is, the kind that “enables members of our culture to express and even celebrate a longing to learn how one should live a coherent life.” However, if he seeks George Lukács’s “unifying sense of purpose,” I would urge him to reconsider the role of logic and *hexis* by not so quickly running the two together.² For instance, when Arcilla speaks of “a shapeless bag of reified qualities and abilities like a runner’s body or a knack for logic (*hexis*).” While he is rightfully wary of the limits of discursive logic and hypostatized notions of rationality, the *logos* in its other senses such as ratio and proportion can serve his ideal of education as destiny quite well. It is the *logos* in the latter sense that yields *hexis* as a relatively stable, unified disposition in thought, feeling, and action, which is necessary to anyone wishing to pursue life with a unified sense of purpose eventuating in a wholeness of human being.

There is also the sense of *logos* as discourse of which logic as ordered discourse is simply an instance. Surely the conversation of humankind serves Arcilla’s sense of humanism well. I do sometimes worry Arcilla is overly individualistic in his conception of destiny, which might leave him with a lonely choosing will defiant of human relationship. I, too, want to affirm self-creation, which is why I eschew any hint of selfish self-creation. My own sense is that for social creatures such as ourselves, all self-creation is social self-creation whatever Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, Charles Baudelaire’s Dandy, or Richard Rorty’s Ironist might think. No doubt, René does well to speak of one’s individual destiny; at least I am sure I worry about mine. However, right relationship to the environment including our community is critical to education as a worthy destiny. Aesthetic sensibility is an important part of wisdom, but so too is ethical sensibility. The two are related in the classical Greek *kalokagathos* that considered the beautiful, the good, and the harmonious as one. A mere aesthete might misperceive education as destiny as romantic escape. In future work, I urge him to say more about such things. Nonetheless, Arcilla is right that consuming

fragmentary pieces of knowledge, enabling us to perform varied socially useful functions, may deflect us from forming a unique unifying purpose that would allow us to make a truly unique contribution to the human community rather than a merely serviceable one.

Arcilla's "existentially hopeful interpretation ... of lifelong learning" breaks the notion that learning and education are synonymous. Existentially, knowing more is not necessarily being more and certainly knowledge alone will not allow one to affirm their "whole life non-contradictorily." I suspect that Arcilla's postmetaphysical sense of wholeness ranges far beyond merely logical consistency to a larger sense of coherence that includes openness, playfulness, and change. I would also note that his insistence that life is more than "the energy which animates us" is a refusal to accept reductive answers to the existential question, what is life? Arcilla binds his existential questions to "my fate," which places "my life in the shadow of death" as a unifying limit declaring "a whole life is a mortal one."

Arcilla struggles with something that "eschews describing, let alone explaining"; he only "tries to point out the object well enough for us to interact with it." It is a journey requiring grace; hence, it is not just something that can be willfully taken or acquired like learning, but something for which we must prepare ourselves to receive. Rather than being explicitly called, grace is often something we fall into, providing we fall with grace, which might mean falling from the grace of received cultural norms and patterns.

Arcilla wishes to lead us away from "practices inside or even outside of classrooms" toward "a type of work of artistic culture," but surely artistic culture is a form of practice. I urge him to be wary of too facile a fine art versus practical art distinction, if that is what he is after here. By releasing imaginative possibilities, so-called fine art is often the most practical of things.

I believe Arcilla is pointing toward something that can be shown, but not said. Whatever the meaning of life, it is beyond the limits of language alone; that is why Arcilla turns to the artistic practices of creating expressive meanings. He explicitly says that what he seeks "eschews describing," which is why, I think,

he also says: “‘Education as destiny’ is meant not to answer, but to evoke, the question of what its object feels like, of how it may be experienced.” We may not be able to state it, but we may discern education as destiny by its look and feel if only we can evoke its presence in our lives. A sensitive, perceptive, receptive, and imaginative character is required to wisely evoke a destiny; it cannot be simply willfully taken, nor commanded into being.

Arcilla invites us to investigate “a genre of works that express and illuminate the experience in concrete ways.” He turns specifically to painting, although I’m confident sculpture, poetry, the blues, or any other mode of expressive meaning would work just as well for him. I would add there is no need to confine ourselves to the so-called fine arts.

Arcilla provides us with his own interpretation of Camille Pissarro’s *Two Young Peasant Women* as an educational allegory. He does so to offer directions for working out his project of education as destiny, which he believes we should seek especially in works of creative imagination. If there is to be lifelong learning it “should be humanities learning,” we are told. I urge Arcilla to say more about such learning.

I see Arcilla as offering his own expression of meaning as it emerges out of his transaction with Pissarro’s painting and, of course, we may render his response subject to intelligent criticism. That is good because, as I suggested in my opening paragraph, Arcilla is calling on our community to help him call something into existence. I have offered one response by a member of the PES community. It will be interesting to see how others in the community respond both to him personally and to his call.

1 Bob Seger, “Against the Wind,” recorded 1979, track 6 on *Against the Wind*, Capital Records, 1980, album.

2 Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 100.