

## Sartre's Sadism and Grace in Teaching

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In "Teacher as Sadist, and the Duality of Self and Other," Gayle Turner goes against mainstream tendencies to celebrate the positive possibilities flowing from recognition of our relational nature. Turner focuses instead on some ways "relational identity may manifest itself as destructive." To use Sartre's succinct crude summary: "Hell is other people."<sup>1</sup> And for the classroom teacher, these "other people" are the students, whose very gaze can threaten our own cherished identities, self-images, and enactment of teacherly roles. In Turner's words: "a teacher may inadvertently adopt a sadistic identity in the attempt to disrupt relational identity formation."

As one of those mainstream enthusiasts, I have not been entirely oblivious to the dangers attendant upon celebrating our relational nature.<sup>2</sup> Yet, I confess that before reading Turner's essay, sadism was not among the dangers I had contemplated. And I still find myself somewhat resistant to accepting her description as an accurate account of teachers I have known. Nevertheless, I have learned how much does go on "inadvertently" in the course of my own actions; so I cannot dismiss Turner's suggestive claims out of hand. In fact, upon reflection, I began to wonder whether it is possible for teachers, myself included, to be anything other than sadists with those students who want to engage in their own freely chosen activities instead of doing what we, their teachers, want them to do. Might any attempt to change students' meaning-making or to redirect their activities run the risk of being sadistic on this interpretation?

Indeed, let us complicate the situation further by recognizing how many identity-constructing efforts go on in schools, often at cross-purposes: students trying to construct their own and each others' identities; school officials, parents, politicians, testing agencies, along with teachers, all making attempts at identity construction. A multiplicity of forces contribute to the situations Turner describes as "stripping students of all free intentional activity" blocking the possibilities for that "complete engrossment" which "is the condition for grace."

What is this "grace" and how might it enter, or re-enter, our teaching and learning relationships? Let's go back to Sartre's description in *Being and Nothingness*:

In grace the body appears as a psychic being in situation...and is understood in terms of the situation and of the end pursued. The graceful act has on the one hand the precision of a finely perfected machine and on the other hand the perfect unpredictability of the psychic.... The graceful act in so far as it reveals the body as a precision instrument, furnishes it at each instant with its justification for existing; the hand is in order to grasp... apprehended in terms of a situation which requires grasping....And in so far as it manifests its freedom through the unpredictability of its gesture.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to the classroom, we can see how teachers do sometimes act with grace in Sartre's sense. Consider an instance of what William Ayers terms "creative insubordination:"

I had been teaching at P.S. 269 for about four hours when the intercom squawked for the seventh time.... The seventh mindless interruption... the seventh reminder that our space was not our own and that learning was not respected. I got a screwdriver, pulled a table over to the wall, took apart the intercom, clipped the wires, and reassembled the whole thing. I then sent a student to the office with the bad news that our intercom was dysfunctional. It took three years to repair—three years of liberation from the box.<sup>4</sup>

Ayers's act of "creative insubordination" fits Sartre's description of "grace."<sup>5</sup> And such acts of "creative insubordination" can protect students, as well as teachers, from certain sadistic forces operating *outside* the classroom. We still have not, however, resolved our initial dilemma of sadism *inside* the classroom.

Let us revisit another example from Sartre. Here I have "just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole," when "all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean?" For Sartre, it means, among other things, "shame": "shame of *self*... the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging."<sup>6</sup> Sartre assumes I must experience the other's gaze as shaming, or threatening, as diminishing my sense of self. But what if the footsteps in the hallway belong to my friend who displays a delicious interest in what is being said behind the door and viewed through the keyhole? What if we were undertaking a joint investigation with common purposes?

Returning to education we can ask what might be some joint investigations with shared purposes, or at least with compatible, mutually negotiated purposes, for teachers and students? I cannot pursue these questions here other than to note that successful teachers demonstrate amazing ingenuity in their ability to match standard subject matter with their students' interests. Yet one could still object that the dangers of a covert insidious control could increase as teachers become more adept at manipulating what students believe to be their own expressions of free choice. If we take Turner's worries seriously, what else might we do as educators? I suggest that we follow Turner's lead and make these issues a direct object of classroom study and open discussion. For example, teachers and students could together investigate conflicts in meaning-making.

And, finally, we can study sadism itself: ask, as Turner has done, what makes it operate, and how do we free ourselves from it? These are not easy inquiries. Yet, let me suggest a couple of directions. First, I would include a look at internalized sadism. To take a mild, everyday example, Turner's account of the hungry wife and mother peering into the refrigerator could be interpreted, on the one hand, as a caring, thoughtful, relational being considering relevant consequences, or it could, on the other hand, illustrate someone subjecting herself to sadistic superego attacks which leave her starving and sullen.

Second, I would ask what we can learn about sadism from the paradigmatic worst case scenarios. In the book *Imagining Argentina*, Lawrence Thornton's clairvoyant narrator gives a chilling and illuminating account of heroic insight:

For over a week Silvio will be kept alone in his stinking cell. Not even the guard who brings his food in a dirty tin plate morning and evening will speak to him, except to say that he is not permitted to speak. The only voices he will hear are those of people screaming. There will be no doubt in his mind that he will become one of the screamers. And he is right.... Silvio will be taken back to his cell and dumped on the cold cement floor. His eyes will be swollen

shut for a day or two, his mind clotted with pain. After a while food will arrive and as the pain diminishes he will understand. They want him to live in fear, to reduce him to nothing more than wild eyes and a pulse that rages whenever he hears footsteps in the corridor. He knows, by means I cannot explain, that his captors are aware that the fear of torture is even better than the real thing in breaking down resistance. He will laugh at that discovery until the scab on his cheek breaks and then he will not laugh any longer. He will sit there, feeling the pain in his cheek, gazing at the hazy light coming from a window high on the wall opposite the door.... A week before he loses his ability to think Silvio will crawl across the floor of his cell where he has seen a tiny piece of wire. All day, with infinite patience, because he will be injured in a way that makes movement of any kind difficult, all day long he will work with that piece of metal on the concrete wall. When it grows too dark to see he will work by feel. What he will inscribe on the wall is this: I AM SILVIO AYALA, AN ARGENTINE, WE ARE LEGION.... I wish that I could save Silvio from the sea, where his body will float, moved by the slightest ripple, a flower of death on the blue sea still within sight of the shore. I cannot, but I can tell you that Silvio will refuse them everything but his death.<sup>7</sup>

Silvio comes to know “that the fear of torture is even better than the real thing in breaking down resistance.” When we are not able to free ourselves from sadistic powers in our environment, our fears may operate to take us even further away from ourselves. Thus, fear gives impetus to sadism; and sadistic power gets strengthened when we hold onto our fears.

Let us return now to the classroom one more time. Can teachers and students together look, side by side, through the keyholes where our hidden fears operate, listen at the doors where fears whisper to each other? If we can listen to what our fears say and study how fears move us or paralyze us, there is a chance that we can loosen their hold and thus become less controlled by sadistic tendencies. And then there is a chance we will recognize not only how our fears separate us from each other, but also how they separate us from ourselves.

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1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1953).
  2. Ann Diller et al., *The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy and Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), chap. 7.
  3. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 489.
  4. William Ayers, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 129-30.
  5. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 489-90.
  6. *Ibid.*, 317-20.
  7. Lawrence Thornton, *Imagining Argentina* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 140-43.