

Writing, Teaching: Making an Offering

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A BEGINNING: MAKING MORE POETRY, LESS PROSE

To begin with, form. The form of my response to Sam Rocha's "Incarnate Reading: A Cerebralist, Cows, Cannibals and Back Again." The writing is *in-*formed by the project of originary thinking, which finds its credo in an elegant axiom offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard: "*Poiein, c'est faire,*" *poiein* means to make.¹ More poetry, less prose. Affirmation of complexity, difference, plurality. We celebrate, we feast, we write, we read. Note: this beginning, already a fragment. Such is the form of my response to Rocha's essay.

THE FORCE OF THE BOOK

Main dish (question): *What could bend the plastic mind?* (The words appear italicized, drawing attention, compelling, whetting the reader's appetite. I dig in!)

Thesis: a mass with force. A book, for example. Even an essay.

First side dish: axiom on the *bending*. The plastic mind is bent by the force of the book. The book obeys Newton's first law: it is already in motion when the reader encounters it. The plastic mind is plastic is already in motion too. The force (movement) of the book and the force of the mind, intersect, collide. If the mind is bent then the book's force must be greater than the mind's. Implication: the educational *event*. Learning happens when the force of the book is greater than that of the mind.

Second side dish: inference on the *force*, movement, of the book. Rocha cites Michel Foucault, who, despite his poststructuralist street cred, claims himself an author. The author is dead, declares Roland Barthes. Long live the author, declares Foucault. "I write a book only because I still don't know what to think about this thing I want to think about, so that the book *transforms me* and transforms what I think." Here we see what Foucault elsewhere calls the "rebound effect" (*effet retour*), or the way the truth transforms us as we prepare for an encounter with it. Preparation, here, is writing. Preparation is also the state of learning as a motion. But there is another dimension to the rebound effect, which we can call the Flaubert corollary. Here the writer encounters his work transformed by its publication, by the literalness of printing, the *type-set*. Martine Reid tells us: "Curiously, when faced with the book as a object, the author no longer recognizes his own work." "The sight of my work [*Madame Bovary*] in print deadened my mind completely," noted Flaubert. "It seemed so flat. Everything looks so black. *I mean that textually*. That was a great disappointment — And it would take a quite dazzling success to drown out the voice of my conscience crying out to me: 'It's a failure!'"² The Flaubert corollary suggests the force of writing accelerates when the writing is transformed into a publication. And the encounter with this greater force is overwhelming to the author who is now shifted into the role of reader, his thoughts coming back to him

in the form of an object. Here we encounter the force of emancipated thinking, or thinking freed from the confines of the thinker.³ Publication, publicity: Flaubert's mind is deadened by the encounter of his book as *not his* book, but as an object of public consumption.

Is this "deadening" an educational experience? And what of readers who are "deadened" by a book (or essay)? We imagine students required to consume the stale, spoiled, or even rotten writing handed to them like so many factory-to-table cafeteria foods? Does the preparation, production, the printing, of the book matter? The "bending" of the mind is too neutral a description of a would-be transformative experience that aspires to be "educational." In contrast to "deadening," the bending that Rocha's has in mind is "enlivening," life affirming. It must be, or else the second, resonant version of Rocha's principal question would fail to evoke: how can a book change someone's *life*?

THE VISIBLE MAN (SIC)

The epigraph to Rocha's essay: in the beginning, the invisible man is incarnate. I read this epigraph and recall Fyodor Dostoevsky "underground man." Like Ralph Ellison's creation, Dostoevsky's famously declares he shall never have readers: "I write only for myself, and I wish to declare once and for all that if I write as though I were addressing readers, that is simply because it is easier for me to write in that form."⁴ Both men become flesh through word by speaking *only* to themselves. This is an existential self-creation through writing. First: *In principio erat verbum*. Next: *scribo ergo sum*. Does it follow that my body, written by me into being, *must* become a transformative force? Can my fleshy words remain silent to the world, private, invisible, so that I remain my own reader, underground, before and beyond the deadening publicity?

Ecce Homo: behold, the man! But who holds whom when the writer writes only for himself, remains underground, invisible? In the very last of his books, titled by the words of Pontius Pilate, Friedrich Nietzsche explains why he writes such good books. He says, "I am one thing, my writings are another matter." And, "My triumph ... *non legor, non legar*." [I am not read, I will not be read.]

Is *this* the risk Rocha exhorts, "the risk of cannibalizing *oneself*"? [Here "oneself" is made to appear most delectable.] What does one sacrifice in becoming real, embodied, a man of flesh, bone, and substance *yet* invisible, underground, cave dweller, alone in the desert? The tongue? Yes! *Via Apophatic*: the way to God through negation, silence. *Apophatic phenomenology of cannibalizing oneself*: Søren Kierkegaard's leap of faith, an inverted Socratic dialogue, the Augustinian confessional! If Flaubert was made "blind," like Oedipus, by the printing of his creation, the flattening of the words of his novel, the result of the apophatic phenomenology of *bodyeating* is the silencing of the voice, the quieting of communication, and thus the regeneration of the capacity to hear.

Nietzsche's desire: to be heard. A reversal: somebody hears out of things, including books, what they do not know already. He says, "Let us then imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of all sorts of experiences which lie utterly beyond

any possibility of frequent, or even rare, experiences — that it represents the first language for a new sequence of experiences.” My triumph: I write to myself. I am not read, I will not be read. I am silent, and I am heard. Behold, the invisible man! “In that case, simply nothing is heard; and people have the acoustic illusion that where nothing is heard there *is* nothing.”⁵

THE GIFT OF TEACHING

“There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. So long as I considered the strictest silence my religious duty I strove in every way to preserve it. But ...”⁶

Rocha is clear: the risk of cannibalizing oneself entails the sacrifice of the body. Fear and trembling. The anxiety and dread of becoming an object of communal judgment; of experiencing the deadened force of publicity. This is the risk of the self as a visible, public *persona*. This is the risk of teaching. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. Teaching is the time of speaking. And this speaking is the feeding of books, yes, but also the feeding of the text that is oneself; the bending of minds by the greater force of the one who bears the weight of history, conveying what John Dewey calls the “consciousness of the race,” and “the funded capital of civilization,” and what Hannah Arendt prudently calls “the world.”

Teaching is the ultimate sacrifice. Here, now, we recall Barthes’s famous adage: “the birth of the reader must be paid for by the death of the author.”⁷ While it is not necessarily what Rocha has written, his description conjures up the embodied, fleshy *persona* of the teacher as the Incarnation, the Word that becomes flesh and is ultimately sacrificed. But like the Eucharistic celebration, teaching and learning is the feast where real things are consumed (eaten and drunken) after symbolically and magically being transformed into the flesh and blood of everlasting Life. The feast enlivens. The teacher encounters himself, again, and lives on in his students, his readers. The mortal sacrifice is redeemed by the immortal life of the mind, understood as the collective cultural history of humanity at work. Teaching: the death of the subject, *or* becoming object. Back to the things themselves! Edmund Husserl’s maxim as an ontology of teaching. Existential trinity: In-itself. For-others. In-and-for-itself-and-others.

AN ENDING:

Third law, translated: for every action (subjectivity, writing, self-creation, for instance), there is an equal and opposite reaction (thus, objectivity, reading, self-sacrifice).

1. The use of Lyotard’s axiom as a credo for my project of originary thinking was initiated in my review essay of Michael Fielding and Peter Moss’s *Radical Education and the Common School*, which appeared in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 31, no. 5 (2012). The project of originary thinking might be generally described as the attempt to think through writing, to originate new forms of thought via experiments in writing. See Eduardo Duarte, *Being and Learning* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2012), as an example.

2. Martine Reid, “Editor’s Preface: Legible/Visible,” in *Yale French Studies, Number 84: Boundaries: Writing and Drawing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1994), 9.

3. I presented on this theory of emancipated thinking at the Philosophy of Education Society Conference 2008. See my “Kant, the Nomad, and the Publicity of Thinking: Finding a Cure for Socrates’ Narration

- Sickness,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 368–375.
4. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, an excerpt in Walter Kaufman, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 82.
 5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2009), 717.
 6. Søren Kierkegaard, “Introduction,” *The Point of View of My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, A Report to History*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).
 7. Roland Barthes, “*La Morte de l’auteur*,” cited in Reid “Introduction,” in *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*.