

Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education¹

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Attempts to characterize and assess the import of postmodern intellectual trends for philosophy of education have often foundered on the point of providing an uncontroversial account of what postmodernism *is*. There are several reasons for why this is so, I will suggest, and a failure to appreciate the unusual relation postmodernism has toward modernism has led both advocates and critics of postmodern views to miss important, deep insights that postmodernism has to offer, particularly in helping us to think anew about education.

The first problem, noted by others, is that “postmodernism” is not a specific theoretical position itself, but an intellectual trend that comprises several quite different philosophical theories. Poststructuralism or deconstructionism is frequently taken to be synonymous with postmodernism,² but other views -- phenomenology, certain strains of critical theory, hermeneutics, some feminisms, a kind of neo-Aristotelianism, neopragmatism, and so-called “post-analytic” philosophy -- are often labeled “postmodern” as well. Philosophers and theorists as diverse as Wittgenstein (*after teaching kindergarten*), Foucault, Heidegger, Cixous, Habermas, Nietzsche, Haraway, Levinas, Davidson, Spivak, Derrida, Gadamer, Benhabib, Butler, Rorty, MacIntyre, Putnam, West, Fraser, and yes of course John Dewey, are all variously clustered within this territory, along with many others, and it is pointless (and counterproductive) to think that there is a set of common theses that can be extracted which tie their disparate views together, or a common form of argumentation that they all share.

Moreover, many of these authors have been reluctant to describe their own views by the label “postmodern,” and several explicitly reject it (a few, of course, preceded the appellation). None of the leading figures above, as far as I know, has ever tried to give a synoptic characterization of “postmodernism” as a set of theses or claims, despite the fact that this is how it is frequently summarized by others: postmodernism is said to be the rejection of the Enlightenment; it is about the infusion of power into our theories of knowledge, language, and ethics; it is antirationalistic; it offers a radical social constructivism; it privileges difference over commonality; it is about the discursive constitution of social (and natural) reality; it stresses a decentered view of the subject and the fungibility of identity; and so on. Yet the authors above would take very different stances on each of these claims, and several would find a few of them quite bizarre.

Well, then, maybe we merely have a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” operating here; perhaps there is no single set of theses that they all hold, but they encompass a loosely related set of overlapping views that are similar if not identical. This is a more appealing suggestion, but I think it too misses the point: postmodernism resists characterization as a set of theses, and it is *not* best seen simply as a rejection or refutation of all that is “modern.” Postmodernism is a much more subtle and perplexing notion than it seems, and many of its commentators, pro and con, have (in my view) missed what is most compelling about it.

The most quoted characterization of postmodernism, perhaps, comes from Jean-François Lyotard, though it is rarely quoted in full: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodernism* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”³ Nearly everyone focuses here on the idea of metanarratives, our attempts to offer general and encompassing accounts of truth, value, and reality. Postmodernism seems to be about denying the possibility of these, and rejecting as monolithic and hegemonic the ones that Western traditions have embraced. But the key term in this phrase (in translation, at least) is

“incredulity” -- a fascinating and unexpected word. Incredulity is not denial or rejection or refutation; *it is an inability to believe*. In this difference I think we see what is most distinctive and penetrating in the postmodern insight.

Lyotard goes on to say, “This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”⁴ Elsewhere he says, “What then is postmodernism?... It is undoubtedly part of the modern. Everything that is received must be suspected.”⁵ What we are presented with here are two puzzles: what incredulity means as a philosophical stance, and how it is that postmodernism can be seen as a manifestation of and an ambivalent relation to modernism, not a “refutation” of it.

For me, the passage that brought these issues into clearer focus comes from Gayatri Spivak, speaking specifically about deconstruction, but with implications for postmodernism generally:

If I understand deconstruction, deconstruction is not an exposure of error, certainly not other people’s error. The critique of deconstruction, the most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything.⁶

Now we have moved into a strange terrain: one that replaces notions such as “denial” and “refutation” with notions such as “doubt,” “displacement,” “instability,” and “uncertainty.” This shift introduces a different notion of “critique.” Denial or refutation place one outside of the view being rejected, beyond and above it. But what is our stance to be toward ways of thinking that for us are necessary, that we do not know how to live entirely without -- but in which an unshaken confidence is no longer possible? Language, science, ethics, reason, and justice are features of the modern world in ways that appear unavoidable: what would the alternatives be, really? But the Enlightenment faith that particular forms of these beliefs and practices can gain universal acquiescence as the correct ones, and that through these will come the amelioration of human ignorance and other ills, is impossible to believe any longer, for reasons that have become all too evident in the social and historical events of the modern era. We who are creatures of modernity must confront a crisis of faith in its notions of progress and universal social betterment. It seems, instead, that we have exchanged older problems for newer ones, and if our ways of living are unquestionably better now in some ways, they are worse in others.

A good illustration for this problem is the recent realization that the widespread use of antibiotics has resulted in the development of new bacteria that are ever more resistant to the antibiotics we have. New antibiotics to combat those simply result in newly evolved and more deadly strains, some of which may eventually resist all treatment. Then we will really be in trouble. Does this make the development and use of antibiotics a bad or foolish thing? No -- they have saved countless lives and limited much unnecessary suffering. But will inventing more and more antibiotics make our world better and better in the future? There is every reason to be uncertain about this.

Hence it is a mistake to think that postmodernism is about the rejection of modernist conceptions of language, science, ethics, reason, and justice. Thinking that it is would require that we ask for the arguments that would support such a rejection, and ask for an account of what one is going to replace them with. And, as someone like my friend Harvey Siegel will jump up to assert, as soon as one offers something that looks like counterarguments, or tries to offer criteria of a “better” alternative, he or she is promptly caught up in a contradiction, for these are precisely the types of things that are being denied.

Here is where postmodernism is actually more profound, and more disturbing, I believe, than any simple antirationalism or relativism (although many current advocates of antirationalism or relativism have proclaimed themselves postmodern, with a confidence and dogmatism that seem utterly inexplicable given the content of what they claim to stand for). But doubt is not denial, and transcendental arguments do not work against positions that don’t claim a superior, definitive alternative.

Where does this doubt come from, then? There are at least three social circumstances that, like my example of antibiotics, should make us doubt whether doing more and more of what we are doing, even when it might be a *good* thing, will solve our problems, settle questions of truth or right and wrong, or make people's ways of living better.

The first of these is a growing awareness of the radical diversity and potential incommensurability of the different cultural forms of life that sustain groups and individuals. In the current world, media, mobility, and new forms of communication have brought these diverse cultures into much closer proximity with one another. Now, it is a mistake to *assume* that incommensurability is the inevitable consequence of such difference; but speaking practically people do sometimes reach the limit of their ability or willingness to understand one another or to pursue potential agreement with one another (some people seem to reach this limit very quickly). In the face of such a realization, an optimism that continued conversation can be successful in uniting or reconciling diverse perspectives and values, and the confidence that when one is doing so one is not simply riding roughshod over other people's favored beliefs with one's own, seems a dangerous arrogance.

A second realization is the understanding that certain dynamics of asymmetrical power which distort and compromise even the best of human intentions are inherent to the institutional and informal patterns of life in which humans are engaged. In the current world, technical systems of surveillance, manipulation, and control are increasingly widespread and subtle. We inevitably participate in these, consciously or unconsciously, nearly all the time. To my way of thinking, this does not commit one to the facile assertion that "everything is power," nor that within these patterns of life there are not significant things to say about better and worse ways of being with and treating one another. But it should sensitize us to the power dimensions of even apparently benign acts; to the limits of good intentions; to the deep culpability we all have within a world society that implicates us in a web of contingencies and interactions whose consequences are, to some degree, *always* harmful to someone; and to the dubious adventure of seeking a path toward any utopia that promises a better life for all.

A third realization concerns language, and the particular way in which discourse -- language in use -- colors and shapes our ways of living and being in the world. Our practices of communication, explanation, justification, truth-telling, and so on (and our apparently nonverbal practices as well) are always partly expressions of the particular language or languages we have. But because our languages are diverse, and non-congruent, there will always be a limit upon any particular discursive system as a standpoint, in a place and time, within which one can try to describe all matters of truth, value, and so forth; such matters will always be to some extent the expressions of *this* language, and *this* place and time. This realization does not lead to relativism, necessarily; for there is usually a good deal of overlap or intertranslatability among different discursive systems. But there are also gaps and discontinuities. Any theory of realism, reason, or objectivity must give credit to this point, I believe.⁷

These three realizations, which I am suggesting underlie the postmodern incredulity toward some of the promises (or presumptions) of the Enlightenment, are not presented here as definitive counterclaims or proofs. Despite how others may have written about them, I do not see them as new totalizing accounts of The Way Things Are. Each, for me, is a disturbed and disturbing suspicion, a loss of faith, really; if they have any convincing force with you, it is because you already suspect much the same thing. The many authors noted at the beginning, I believe, each shares these kinds of suspicions, to some degree -- and *that* is what makes them postmodern.⁸

If I am on to something worthwhile, that postmodernism should be viewed as, at heart, a kind of doubt and not a new alternative position or cluster of positions, then it is fair to ask what kind of doubt it is. It is not a Cartesian doubt: a doubt which says that whatever is not clear and certain must be rejected (a doubt which, for Descartes, never reached all the way down). Cartesian doubt was always doubt in the service of seeking certainty.⁹ Here again, we return to the very different

connotations of the term “incredulity,” an inability to believe -- an inability to believe in modernism any more, or to believe in it in quite the same confident way. But what we are incredulous toward are our own presuppositions and procedures. It is like laying out a carpet in a small room; one is always having to lift up one foot to create a space to put down the other.

What pervades the various postmodernisms, I am suggesting, is not a set of theses or positions, but a common mood or attitude. This *postmodern doubt* is of a wholly different nature from Cartesian doubt. One thing that differentiates various postmodern theories is how they characterize this doubt. With a nod to Hayden White,¹⁰ I will describe these differences in terms of three narrative tropes; they are ways of coping with the paradox of doubting the very things one can hardly do without, or problematizing the very language and voice with which one speaks the words of problematizing (for Jacques Derrida, this sometimes takes the form of *erasure*: of crossing out the words he uses to express certain ideas, but in also allowing them to remain, as crossed out, in the text). These tropes can be seen as ways of making somewhat coherent and livable what remains a conflicted, unstable outlook, an outlook of sustained tensions and of dis-enchanted hopes -- this is an aesthetic coherence, not a logical one. As styles of writing, these tropes express in literary *form* what is also a kind of philosophical *substance*. Finally, these tropes provide some challenging models for education.

The first of these is the *ironic*.¹¹ Irony is one way to take back with one hand what we give with the other; one can have either, but not both. Milan Kundera writes, “Irony is irritating not simply because it mocks or irritates but because it denies us our certainty by unmasking the world as an ambiguity.”¹² In expanding on this idea, Alven Neiman writes,

How does the ironist become ironic? In what does her irony consist? First of all, the ironist is aware that even as she doubts the veracity of her final vocabulary, she is immersed within it. She recognizes that all doubting, as well as all believing and knowing, takes place within quite restricted spatial and temporal parameters. She is aware that argument and explanation must come to an end, but that the end is not, as foundationalists have thought, to be found in “Reality’s own language.”...Secondly, the ironist recognizes that in thinking and speaking she makes assertions and argues, within limited contexts, over what is true and false, over “what is the case.”...Her irony stems, then, from the fact that she and other ironists cannot take such behavior literally or entirely seriously.¹³

The distinctive style of ironic writing in the postmodern vein is of twists and reversals, of feints and seeming concessions, which fade away upon closer examination. The greatest risk of irony, however, is to collapse into nihilism: that in his or her detachment and trying to avoid being seen as too closely tied to any one position, the ironist takes no position at all.

A second narrative trope is the *tragic*. Tragedy arises from a pained awareness that the contraries we embrace are often equally valuable; that when we critique our own presuppositions the resulting uncertainty is difficult and disturbing; that we desire both, but can settle for neither. I have written on this topic elsewhere:

[T]he issue of tragedy is not a simple one of optimism versus pessimism....[T]he “tragic sense” refers to a larger awareness of the impediments to success, the prospects for failure, and the limits to our effort....To view education from the standpoint of tragedy is to abandon foundationalism and to believe that doubt and uncertainty make us *better* educators -- in part because they reemphasize our dependence on each other, including our students, and in part because they insulate us somewhat from false claims for the value of what we have to offer. It means to focus less on specific outcome standards, and more on creating opportunities for discovery, discussion, and development in our teaching....Most of all, it means to adopt a much greater modesty in our claims of social transformation or reform through educational processes....The tragic sense of education requires us to continue our efforts without deceiving ourselves about the complications and contradictions inherent in the endeavor.¹⁴

The distinctive style of tragic writing in the postmodern vein is of conflicted wants and intentions, of antinomies that stand unreconciled, of loss and even nostalgia for a less daunting view of the world.

The greatest risk of tragedy, however, is to fall into pessimism, to abandon what Richard Rorty calls an “unjustifiable hope” even in the face of disillusionment.¹⁵

A third narrative trope is the *parodic*. Parody treats the paradox described above with a wink and a shrug, enacting a perspective while simultaneously lampooning it; or provisionally embracing multiple perspectives without actually advocating any of them. The parodist thrives on paradox, and sees in it an opportunity for humor and for critical commentary.¹⁶ We see this love of paradox brilliantly exploited in the novels of Joseph Heller. In the world of *Catch 22*, for example, people are only allowed in to see the Major after he has left the office; the only people in meetings who are allowed to ask questions are those who do not have any questions; and pilots who are clever enough to try to get out of flying bombing missions by pretending to be crazy encounter “Catch 22”:

“You’re wasting your time,” Doc Daneeka was forced to tell him.

“Can’t you ground someone who’s crazy?”

“Oh sure, I have to. There’s a rule saying I have to ground anyone who’s crazy.”...[But] there’s a catch.

Catch 22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy.”¹⁷

The distinctive style of parodic writing in the postmodern vein is of play-fulness, with “play” meaning both the playing of games and the playing of a performance. The parodist is an artful dodger, inhabiting but not inhabiting the position he or she seems to hold. The greatest risk of the parodist, however, is to become the cynic, to adopt any or all positions without regard to responsibility or integrity.

These three narrative tropes, which I am merely sketching here, are three ways in which authors cope with the paradox at the heart of postmodern doubt. Each begins with the embracing of apparently contradictory or self-undermining positions, but turns that realization into a larger vision of possibility within a conflicted, uncertain world. As tropes, they provide a sense of meaning and significance in the face of incompatible wants or beliefs, each with a distinctive style and tone that will appeal to certain personalities more than others. I hold the tragic closest to heart, but I can hardly argue for it as the best or most “true.” All of these tropes (and perhaps others, as well) have in common the holding of conflicting stands in tension; of doubting that with which we are not able to part; of critiquing the very language, presuppositions, and forms of reason that enable us to offer critique at all; of having positions, without claiming more for them than can be sustained in the face of a skepticism toward all positions.

Education seems to be an endeavor of an entirely different spirit. Our teaching and learning activities express an implicit faith in progress and betterment. Every teaching and learning act implies a judgment that some things are more important to learn than others. Authority, of one type or another, appears to be an inevitable dimension of every educational relation in which we encounter one another, however much we may mistrust positions of unequal power. Despite the value one might place upon diversity and “difference,” education is inherently an activity containing moments of “normalization,” of bringing people to become more alike, at least in certain respects. Yet each of these dimensions of education -- of progress, of privileged knowledge and value, of authority, and of normalization -- is profoundly challenged by the postmodern critique described previously. The realizations about modernity discussed earlier, concerning radical diversity, the ubiquitous and subtle manifestations power can assume, and the discursive construction of our understandings and values, throw into doubt the frameworks of justification, the distinctions, the rationales that have allowed us to maintain the activities of education as clearly legitimate and well-directed. It seems impossible (it certainly feels impossible to me) to continue in such endeavors with a clear sense of confidence and security that our good intentions provide a guarantee or counterbalance against the abuses each threatens. Yet it seems equally unacceptable, and self-defeating, to abandon all educational efforts, or to continue them only in bad faith about the problematic nature of the assumptions and values upon which our efforts depend.

My questions, then, are: What sustains a commitment to education in the face of postmodern doubt? How does this change in commitment change also our conception of education and of the activities that constitute it? A fuller exploration of these questions ought to consider some of the possible practices of teaching and learning in each of these three modes or moods: the ironic, the tragic, and the parodic.¹⁸ Here I can only offer a general overview of how the spirit of postmodern doubt challenges some of our conventional understandings of and approaches to education.¹⁹

Education involves engagement, among persons and between persons and the matters to be explored. Yet for this engagement to avoid dependency, there must also be a critical distance. Playing with the tropes of irony, tragedy, and parody are among the ways that we can avoid taking ourselves as teachers too seriously. We can adopt certain stances without fully endorsing them. We can question our authority, and invite others to question it, even within contexts that arrogate authority to us whether we wish it or not.²⁰ At a deeper level, we can adopt methods of inquiry and interrogation but also turn these methods upon themselves, exploring their usefulness *and* the limits of their usefulness. Such a stance allows for both a respect and appreciation for perspectives and approaches that broaden our understandings, but also a wary suspicion of the tendency for teachers, texts, and methods to become hypostasized, entrenched.

Education also involves purposefulness and direction. But purposefulness can become counterproductive when, for the sake of achieving certain purposes, other educational opportunities are squandered. The two-sidedness of postmodern doubt resists easy teleologies: we have purposes, but cannot hold to them slavishly -- in fact, when our purposes are multiple and conflicted it becomes impossible to expect them all to be satisfied fully. Nor can we assume that a single participant's purposes in an educational encounter, even the teacher's, can automatically hold sway. Irony, tragedy, and parody allow for taking specific concerns quite seriously, while also maintaining a detachment from them or turning them into objects of question. What this allows for is an involvement in the educational matters at hand while remaining open to the unexpected, the tangential, even the countervailing moment that disrupts one educational purpose for the sake of another.

Education also entails some conception of development or "growth." But from the perspective offered here, such development cannot be seen as simply linear and unidirectional, nor as steady, nor as stage-governed, nor as representing unambiguous "progress." The kinds of teaching and learning that take seriously the ambivalence of postmodern doubt entail a high tolerance for difficulty, uncertainty, and error. Difficulty, in this sense, is not simply the challenge of a problem to be overcome, but sometimes the lingering difficulty of a problem never fully solved, a mystery never fully untangled. Uncertainty is not only a transient state of puzzlement, but an acceptance of the provisional and contingent in much that we believe and do. Error is not only the direct spur to learning that Karl Popper, among others, cherishes (make a mistake, then try to correct it); it is a dimension of *every* learning moment. An error is not usually a simple falsehood, replaced by the truth -- it is more often an unacceptable *version* of an idea or value, thoroughly entangled with many other ideas and values that we are not prepared to abandon altogether. Change, then, even in the face of error, is harder than philosophical accounts of learning often acknowledge. Here difficulty, uncertainty, and error come to be seen from the postmodern view, not as flawed states to be overcome, but as ongoing conditions of the educational process itself -- indeed, as educationally beneficial conditions, when they can serve as correctives to complacency or arrogant surety. One might respond to these conditions differently, depending on whether one adopts the ironic, the tragic, or the parodic attitude.

A standard tenet of traditional analyses of the concept of "education" is that it necessarily implies betterment; that it is contradictory to say one was educated, but for the worse. I think we need a different way of thinking about education, as a literal dis-enchantment or dis-illusionment. Education does involve the gain of new understandings and new insights, to be sure, and these should be celebrated with real pleasure when they can be achieved. But when the critical gaze of

postmodernism is turned also upon itself, apparent gains become more ambivalent, successes appear more partial and provisional. We see losses as well -- indeed, we see the inseparability of “gain” in one sense and “loss” in another -- so that if we attain a kind of betterment, it is not unalloyed. Moreover, a far-reaching postmodern doubt confronts the recognition that from the vantage point of some future realization, the successes celebrated today will come to be seen as tragic errors, or laughable ones, or as rueful blunders.

Is this a view of education robust enough to guide our activities; is it optimistic enough to motivate us in our teaching and learning efforts; is it inspiring enough to sustain us? It would hardly be consistent with this view to give such questions an unqualified answer. But, for me, this is where things stand. I think that there is a kind of direction, purpose, and inspiration here, if different from the kinds we might wish for. But there is a corrective, too: a corrective against arrogance, against complacency, against the closing off of certain questions as settled -- and that is, after all, what any honest approach to education requires.

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1. This essay has benefited from the comments and suggestions of the Philosophy of Education Discussion Group at the University of Illinois. I would specifically like to thank Zelia Gregoriou, Melissa Orlic, and Ralph Page for detailed comments on the manuscript, and for several useful references.
 2. See, for example, Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Poststructuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), ch. 5.
 3. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv. Italics in original.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 12. See also his comment that “post” cannot mean simply coming after and surpassing modernism, which would itself be a very “modern” notion (76).
 6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word” (an interview with Ellen Romney) quoted in Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27. Elsewhere, Butler provides her own formulation of this idea: “To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps more importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized,” in “Contingent foundations: Feminism and the question of ‘Postmodernism,’” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.
 7. See Nicholas C. Burbules, “Reasonable Doubt: Toward a Postmodern Defense of Reason as an Educational Aim,” in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education: From Theory to Practice and Back Again*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York, Routledge, forthcoming).
 8. An even stronger assertion along these lines is in Bruno Latour’s, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). For Latour, the “crisis of modernity” is not that circumstances have changed which suddenly throw modernist hopes into doubt, but that in fact modernism was always somewhat self-deceived about its capacities to carry through on its promises, and has only recently become aware of it: “Postmodernism is a symptom, not a fresh solution. It lives under the modern Constitution, but it no longer believes in the guarantees the Constitution offers” (46). For Latour, the postmodern critique does not go far enough, because it accepts and defines itself against the problematic category of the *modern*: “Modernity has never begun...Hence the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has not even started!” (47). Instead, Latour wants to advocate a “nonmodernism” that interrogates within the modern the *always present* “hybrids” and oppositions that belied its categories and boundaries. This perspective, he says, preserves the insights of postmodernism in the “ironic” sense, as I am describing it here (134).
 9. See Wlad Godzich, “Afterword: Reading Against Literacy,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 129-30. Also see John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1929).

10. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). His tropes are different from mine: Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire.
 11. Of course, the standard text here is Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). However, it is not clear to me how consistently Rorty maintains the tone of irony, especially when he is discussing political matters. See also Alven Neiman, "Pragmatism and the Ironic Teacher of Virtue," in *The Educational Conversation: Closing the Gap*, ed. James W. Garrison and Anthony G. Rud., Jr. (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press), 61-83.
 12. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, quoted in Alven Neiman, "Ironic Schooling: Socrates, Pragmatism, and the Higher Learning," *Educational Theory* 41 no. 4 (1991): 371-84.
 13. *Ibid.*, 374-75.
 14. Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 471, 478. For a very thoughtful reply to this view, see René Vincente Arcilla, "Tragic Absolutism in Education," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (1992): 473-81.
 15. Richard Rorty, "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 208.
 16. Though little has been written about parody in education, one book, B. Paul Komisar's *Natural Teaching Encounters* (Philadelphia, Penn.: KDC Enterprises, 1976) has been analyzed by Richard Angelo as a book of parody, outlining in a decidedly unromantic way six dimensions of teaching, such as Exuding, Manipulating, and Credomania. Komisar's strategy is to identify paradigmatic instances of teaching from other contexts and to use them to satirically characterize more familiar, "romantic" images of teaching. Richard Angelo, "Myth, Educational Theory, and the Figurative Imagination," in *Philosophy of Education 1978*, ed. Gary D. Fenstermacher, (Champaign, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1979), 227-38.
 17. Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 40-41.
 18. See also Neiman, "Education and Some Types of Irony."
 19. I think that these reflections have different, though reciprocal, implications for us as teachers or as students. Here, for obvious reasons, my primary concerns are with the significance of these reflections for teachers.
 20. See also Nicholas C. Burbules, "Authority and the tragic dimension of teaching," in *The Educational Conversation: Closing the Gap*, James Garrison and A.G. Rud, eds. (New York: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1995); and Elizabeth Ellsworth "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297-324.
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