

Writing From Our Selves: “Postmodern Doubt” and Non-Stupid Hope

Mary S. Leach
Ohio State University

I much appreciate Nick Burbules's efforts to clarify what this "thing" called postmodernism is *not*. I agree that to think of this turn of thought in terms of a common set of arguments, theses, or claims -- even ones having a good family resemblance -- has not helped us in our attempts to talk with each other about it from within it or outside it. This addition reaffirms my idea that perhaps postmodernism has come of age. I suspect we are all a bit relieved.

Indeed, we now have at our disposal historical and critical guides to the concepts of the postmodern which help bring more clarity and thoroughness to discussion of the many different uses made of the term across a number of different disciplines (literature, architecture, art history, philosophy, anthropology, and geography to name but a few). We also have enough distance to get a better idea of a three-way split that has developed. There are those who refuse to admit that postmodernism engages with anything that modernism is not better able to explain and who also defend the values of modernism as they relate to both intellectual work and political analysis. This grouping has established itself as a counter-balance to those others who, from such a "reasonable" standpoint, display what are viewed as the "excesses" of postmodernism. A third path is occupied by many feminists and post colonialists and there is in this work *both* a notion of the counter-cultures of modernity *and* a remorseless critique of modernity. These writers are looking to accounts of postmodernity as a way of finding a place to speak. They search for a space from which to develop that critique of the places and the spaces of exclusion *inside* and outside of modernity.

Nick Burbules's entry into my own reductive description helps by changing the focus within this mix of discourses, pushing beyond some of the confusion promoted by the current multitude of varying positions. He asks us to focus on what he perceives as a common mood these positions share; a common attitude that is expressed, albeit differently, in the literary style that many who engage in this work have adopted in their recognition that the achievements of the Enlightenment have also been complicit in the long oppression, long colonization, and long subordination of many.

For his analysis, Nick chooses Lyotard's much used phrase, that the certainties of modernism -- its metanarratives we once held dear -- can only be replaced by a self-conscious incredulity, to set out his conception of doubt, and goes on to assess the literary expressions used to characterize this doubt. He examines the familiar narrative "tropes" of irony, tragedy, and parody and then assesses them as to the risks each pose for us as intellectual workers and teachers. He asks a number of crucial educational questions along the way. By the end he offers his own thoughtful answers -- ones I can only welcome.

Just as poetry is the expression of the poet's experience and thinking and thus of the acting person, so too is the practice of criticism. The discussion which ensues of the *limitations* of consciously articulated interpretation and understanding, in fact, does not look out of place in any of the so-called postmodern, post-Heideggerian versions of "practical wisdom" -- what feminists have called "situatedness." The insight I see at work here is close to a current postmodern sense that what we experience in the present as valuable has arisen through the values of the past. This allows us not only to understand the past, but to experience continuity of value even if we cannot step out of our

own temporal situation to find "disinterested" conceptual terms or abstractions which may describe experience. We are situated in a history which cannot be wholly grasped conceptually but which shapes what we are, *including* how we attempt to conceptualize it. To offer a critique of Cartesian method, then, of the idea that rationality can only be founded on scientific foundationalist principles of verification, is not to collapse into a total relativism and chaos of value and meaning, but to develop instead a version of a practical wisdom which accepts situatedness in a life world. This "situatedness" does not eliminate all reference but rather calls for close examination of those moments that are *least* assimilable to our understanding, becoming a warning to ourselves of the prescriptivity of language.

If Nick's project is in any way reflective, expressive of his own philosophical and educational journey, (and I believe it can be read this way in terms of tone -- a certain earnestness of spirit), then perhaps he can take "heart" from the recognition that there are other "attitudes" which have arisen from other's situatedness -- other (smaller) extant centers of interpretation by which to renew a world. These have been constructed from the local, the daily practices of those who have lived mostly in silence within the dominant discourses, on the margins of the center that only the few have been privileged enough to occupy.

Recently Cornel West reminded his audience of one of these other "moods." In fact, in his talk he referred to what he called the "Greek, white male trope of tragedy," the received story of the fallen hero who in mythic tales cannot finally escape recognition of his own human mortality. West said that the experiences expressed in those stories could not speak to or for Black males whose selves had been historically constructed as *sub-human*. He pointed instead to other assumptions written into his people's music. Hauntingly he repeated, "nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, glory hallelujah!" He called our attention to that last phrase, "glory hallelujah," and where it had come from, describing it as *both* a cry of misery *and* an expression of great hope sung with rhythmic energy by the most vulnerable. West argued that by understanding their own history and holding on to an "audacious hope," Blacks' struggles can, and do sustain, even in this uncertain present. The point here is that the coherency of the image meant to be grasped in the familiar trope of tragedy is neither coherent nor an image "livable" from African-American lives. The larger complaint is that what such problematical topics of, say, human nature, culture, history *are*, how they might be spoken about, and the kinds of knowledge we can have of them have been historically constructed from hypostacizations of concepts explaining an aesthetic developed by those in the center of white Western European culture. The philosophical frameworks of the Enlightenment and much of modern social and literary thought have always required a great deal of mental gymnastics on the part of many of us. The "risks," then, that the three tropes may hold are not applicable to all, perhaps not even sensible to many. For instance, the charge that feminists, using the tactics of irony, are skating toward nihilism makes the ones I know smile in disbelief.

One more example drawn from the micro-narratives expressive of the daily experiences of parenting. I want to offer these as instances of *willing* optimism -- non-stupid hopes for each child's future in the face of those social circumstances Nick describes. Well understood are mothers' experiences with the limits of their good intentions, the limits of their (conflicted) desires in recognition of the (often life-threatening) risks their children take and encounter every day. Yet, most never think of abandoning their educational efforts or their struggles to change concrete conditions for their children. It is with a sense of wonder that they tell of watching and participating in the *continuous* formation and reformation of identities, where factors they do not choose seem to play an ever increasing role in determining who their child becomes. In the shared instances of these settled practices there is a recognition that the received, abstract norms of virtues, knowledge, and truth often have little to offer in particular circumstances to guarantee the "success" of their "life's work." At its best, a parent's stance *embraces* the uncertainty, not with an inability to believe in her endeavor, but with a bearing of responsibility to the growing materiality of another *within* all the complications and paradoxes.

When Nick asks if a view of education that takes the critical gaze of postmodern realizations into account is inspiring enough to sustain our commitment to teaching, I can honestly answer "Yes," and we have examples to point to. They persist in those often phantom-like supplementary narratives sedimented from presences lying outside the invocation of the traditional, public collective "we." There are plateaus of meanings upon which to draw -- ones which regularly privilege the common and everyday, the ordinary and unpretentious. Paying serious attention to these situated discourses may risk encouraging that dreaded postmodern impulse of excess, of course.

A CAVEAT

My own rhetorical flight could be read here as a tendency to recast the philosophical dilemma of totalities in the vocabulary of the sublime. One could posit that the contextual criticism I engage in here, one which ostensibly has forsworn transcendental purchase, remains mired in a romantic epistemological paradigm which frames me as a Romantic writer whether I like it or not. I am aware of the "double edge" of narrative. I also read the familiar tropes as curiously gendered. Still, both narratives and tropes *can* be capricious. The point I am trying to make is not one of the possibility of human agency with the certainty of a knowledge or a meaning which grants a reason to act and to which action can appeal for guidance. The acts of mothering, like teaching, I believe, *exceed* the horizon of the rational, conscious human subject -- its understandings and guarantees -- in activities of repeated insistence on the remaining of the other. A mother's declaration for the *future* life of a child, for example, is not a statement of the facts, the fact of the relation or a state of things.

We are involved, which is why we act. To this responsibility belongs the future-oriented temporality of the performative -- the positing of a non-stupid hope as a call from *within* the confusion and contradictions. If anything my effort here is to open up a counter-sublime, putting pressure upon dominant paradigms of literary authority, and, in this instance, to pose a trope of sublime *inarticulation*. Here the educative question would be to ask what would happen if we simply stopped playing the game of aesthetic mastery in relation to the sublime and focused, instead, on the network of social relations that the notions of mastery and competency both imply and help to reproduce.

Nick argues we need a different way of thinking about education, and by implication, teaching. And, I believe this is so. We might begin by confronting head on the central problem of modernity: the loss of transcendence, whether through God or the proletariat or science, and by confronting head on the immensities of the ordinary: of birth, and change, and death. Specifically our task may be to *both* actualize an ability to live with ambiguity, hesitation, contradiction, and paradox *and* still be capable of belief such that we bring that capacity to our educational practices in an ever changing openness of the self and other outside a narrative of deliverance.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED