

In Education, Excess Without Remorse

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The teacher is, hereby, in.

To respond to a philosophical paper in a conference setting such as this is triply representational. It is representational first because it is my role, the role of the interlocutor in this dialogue, to represent the written piece that I have prepared for this response. As I am the mouthpiece for this text that I have prepared, I am in a position to represent, in dialogue, to what the text of my paper says. To borrow the metaphor that Stephanie Mackler and Doris Santoro borrow from Peggy Phelan, I must “paper it over.” I must paper over my own paper.

It is representational secondly because the act of responding to a paper at a conference like this is surely a re-enactment of the pedagogical practice of reading, and responding to, the paper of a student. By this I am surely not trying to say that I am in some sense the teacher of the writers of this paper. Although, by starting my response with the statement that “The teacher is, hereby, in,” my utterance will no doubt be taken by some to be an authoritarian claim that I have something to teach these paper-writers, these students who are looking for a good grade. I do not mean such a claim, and am, in fact, trying to point out the unfortunate yet inevitable fact that it does not even matter whether I make such a claim. I am, in fact, in a pedagogical relation to this paper and its authors. By saying, “The teacher is, hereby, in,” I am trying to make such a point *hypervisible*. I am trying to underscore, by way of a performative utterance, the pedagogical relation that gets enacted during a response to a conference paper. I am here borrowing John Austin’s, Jacques Derrida’s, and Judith Butler’s use of the “performative.” When we respond to papers, we represent what we do every day in classrooms.

If the first sentence in this paper (about the teacher being in) sounded presumptuous, then it is perhaps still doubted that I am in a pedagogical relation as a respondent. To clarify, let me offer a third sense in which this response is representational. It is so in the sense that I am hereby called to give an educative account of the paper that has just been read to you by its authors. I am asked to read the paper, no? I am asked to assess the paper, no? I am asked to critique the paper, no? I am asked to offer revisions if necessary, no? In good pedagogical form, the teacher is to be attentive to student work, to provide coherent assessment of student assignments, and to provide ample guidance to further student learning. And so am I asked to do so in response to this paper entitled “Thinking What We Cannot See.” In this third sense, then, my response will be representational: Namely, that it will be understood as making a representationalist judgment, and perhaps rendering representationalist advice, on what the paper says. To render a textual judgment falls within the realm of representation because it assumes that the text is bounded enough, represent-able enough, that a judgment can be made.

As Mackler and Santoro point out, it is part of the oppressive tradition of educational researchers, and of educators in general, that they tend to do their work

following representational paradigms. Quoting Mimi Orner, Janet Miller, and Elizabeth Ellsworth, they note that “educational practices—research, writing, and pedagogy—are normally representational practices. Typically, they try to control excessive moments.” So as I proceed with the following attempt at a performative intervention into “Thinking What We Cannot See,” I will do so with the knowledge that the task of responding in a performative way to a conference paper is itself just as difficult as the task towards which Mackler and Santoro make a gesture in their paper, namely, the valuing of the invisible. Nevertheless, I will try to make this paper something more than representational even if it is securely, and triply, representation. That is the thesis of this paper: that something representational can also be turned into something more than representational, but without any nostalgia for the nonrepresentational; and, that a “pedagogical turn” can be a turn toward excess.

THE INVISIBLE VS. THE VISIBLE

Dear Mackler and Santoro:

On the very first page of your investigation into the invisible of pedagogy, you write that “to represent something is, in a sense, to make it visible to others as a possible object of reality.” So that which is visible is that which is represented and that which is invisible is that which is not represented. But given the rich description of the “moment” of performance that you offer in the latter part of your paper, I wonder if the distinction between representation and non-representation is really as synonymous with the distinction between the visible and invisible as you seem to imply. Or, to put it another way, is that analogy between the representational and the visible one that helps your argument, or one that hurts it? What I mean is this: I take it that the main thrust of this paper is that there must be a moving away from the trap of representation, a moving towards a valuing of the sorts of practices that are not strictly representational. Yet, in the act of distinguishing between the visible and the invisible as a subset of the representation/non-representation binary, you have create a sort of realist correlation between words and things. You seem to imply that the visible things are the ones that get represented while the invisible things are the ones that do not get represented.

Do you really mean to say that there is a world of things down there, and that those things either get “papered” into representation or else they get to have their wonderful “excessive” life unfettered by words? To make such an assumption is actually to fall precisely into the trap of a representationalist perspective. It is to assume that language exists on a different ontological plane than other, more “genuine” human states. And, within your argument, it is to betray a profound nostalgia for the things in themselves rather than the things that come to us all papered over in language. To put this in your own terms, you are carrying out the same unfortunate move as the researcher who, when asked, “How do you know?,” responds, “I know because that is what I saw.” In your case, when asked, “How do you know?” you seem to be responding, “I know because that is what I *did not* see.” Either way, it is a realist/representationalist response.

My suggestion? Drop the whole visible vs. invisible distinction. To invoke invisibility and visibility is to look much too hard for a real-world correlate to the

problem of representation. It makes your work take on the realist tendencies that you (wonderfully!) critique in the beginning of your paper. The argument should stay at the level of representationality/performativity rather than at the realist level of visibility/invisibility.

COMMENDATIONS AND RE-COMMENDATIONS:

Ok, now where I really thought your paper was fruitful was on the theme of tradition vis-à-vis specificity. When you use Phelan's notion of "the moment" of performance, the moment as oscillation between the specificities of enactment and the generalities of role, when you use this oscillation to think about pedagogy, you are really on to something. From this part of your paper, I learned a lot. Your paper shows that it is in the very nature of the pedagogical encounter that there will be moments that avail themselves to the happy oscillation that exists between tradition (a general, unconscious, absent, set of cultural and institutional practices), on the one hand, and the unique pedagogical enactment, on the other, the enactment that cannot but exist in its own particular way. It is this tension, this tilting back and forth, between the general and the specific that, as you so nicely point out, makes the "moment" of pedagogy rife with possibilities for challenging the oppressive representational practices (notice that I did not say "oppressive practices of visibility") that tend to obtain in most educational circumstances. I take your paper to be advocating that oscillation. As you put it, "If the teacher only engages in a strict repetition of some perceived 'original,' then she does not treat her students fairly as Other or the moment as sufficiently unique.... Likewise, the answer is not for the teacher to ignore the tradition entirely."

But what is the deeper nature of this oscillation? And, once we know its deeper nature, how is such an oscillation to be fruitfully carried out in pedagogical spaces? This is where I have some ideas that might push your paper along. Let us take, for example, your description of homework assigning as part of the teaching tradition. It seems to me that you have just broken the tip of the iceberg when you note that teaching traditions inhere even in such mundane acts, and that such acts perform a part in the tradition/Otherness oscillation. Let us look at more of the iceberg, at more of the oscillatory practices in pedagogy.

To examine oscillation in its depths, we might look at the symbolic functioning of the teaching tradition. By symbolic functioning, I mean more than those traditions that are repeated over and over. I mean also the symbolic activity of *authorization* that teaching entails. In educational institutions, we as educators are in the symbolic business of authorizing our students. When we say to a student, "Paul, you are a good writer," we are not only giving a representational account of the sort of writing that Paul does. We are doing more: We are actually authorizing Paul *to be* a "good writer." When we say "Julie, you are a great artist," we are inscribing her into the symbolic role of *being* an artist. By virtue of our own institutional place as teachers, we are in a position to enact our own authority in ways that *authorize* others. In this way, the tradition of being a teacher in this institution we call a school is involved in the complex process of authorization in the same way that folks in many other institutions are. Think of the minister who pronounces a couple legally married, or

of the doctor who confers upon medical students their new status as doctors, or the harbormaster who says, "I christen thee Titanic."

Within this teaching practice of symbolic authorization, there is an oscillation that is akin to the tradition/Otherness back-and-forth that you have identified: Symbolic authorization is predicated partly upon sameness and partly upon difference. To authorize the Other, one must do two things. First, one must initiate the Other into an institutional tradition that has been around for a long time and that will continue to be around. For instance, as one authorizes a student to be a great writer, there must be an institutional/symbolic identity for the concept of what it means to be a great writer. There must be a pantheon of great writers so that such an identity makes sense. This part of authorization is predicated on sameness.

Second, though, there must be a *validity* to symbolic authorization. One does not become a great writer simply by virtue of being judged "as great as those others." One becomes a great writer, moreover, through the intersubjective process of authorization. There remains a magical dimension to institutional authorization. The authorization must be "happy." It must "catch on" in the particular identity of this particular Other. So, while there is a sense in which a teacher, by virtue of her position as one in the know about what it means to be a great writer, is in a position to authorize any old student to "be" a good writer, it is not actually the case that such a symbolic investiture is guaranteed to be taken up by any old student. For some students, such a nomination may turn out to be valid, but for some it is destined to fail, to remain invalid, to stay un-investitured. On one side of this symbolic process of authorization, we have the general workings of tradition; on the other, we find the vicissitudes of validity that are specific to particular Others.

Eric Santner, in his recent work, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, claims that validity (what you have called Otherness) must actually trump meaning (what you have called tradition) during symbolic authorization. Following Santner, there is "a surplus of validity over meaning, necessity over truth, that is at some level operative in all institutions that regulate symbolic identities."¹ My point is that the school is one such institution. Along with Santner, I would suggest that there is a more profound level at which the oscillation between tradition and Otherness operates. It operates at the level of symbolic identity formation in schools. At such a level, there are two operations that are being carried out by teachers: One operation is the meaning-laden one, the one that you have so apply termed "representational," the one that provides teachers with the traditional toolkit that serves to quantify, assess, measure, and, to follow Paulo Freire's terminology, "bank" students.

Another operation, though, is the rather magical practice of authorization, the operation of validity that, if it is to "catch on," must do so in ways that are specific to the particularities of the student. Such validity is made available by virtue of the teacher's institutional position, but it is not, "thereby," guaranteed. There must be "an excess of validity over meaning" for such a happy investiture to obtain.² When such an "excess" clicks in, then the second operation is successful. Earlier, I suggested that an oscillation between representation and performativity needs to take the place of your visibility/invisibility dichotomy. Santer's two operations of

institutional identity throw further light on representation and performativity: The first of these operations corresponds to the representational realm while the second operation corresponds to the performative realm. The first educational operation describes, or represents. The second enacts, or performs.

What am I recommending now that I have commended your attention to oscillation? I am recommending that we consider “excess” not as something that we have missed (not as the unseen), but as something that we have the potential to authorize by virtue of being educators. This is a movement away from lamenting the inadequacies of representational communication, and a movement toward celebrating the vicissitudes of performative authorization. My point is this: It is actually not possible to move away from representation. By virtue of tradition, as you have so correctly pointed out, teachers and researchers are already ensconced within a representational paradigm. It is thus not useful to lament the inadequacies of representation. The only thing we can do as educators is to encourage the oscillatory.

For, the fact that we cannot get away from representation does not mean that we cannot work the gap, the gap between representationality and performativity. It is this oscillatory gap that I recommend. Forget what representation cannot do. Keep in mind rather what oscillation *can* do. We may be stuck in a representational paradigm, but it is also that same representational paradigm that makes available the performative. In a paradoxical way, the limits of representation are also the springboard for the performative. There can actually be no performativity *without* representation. There can be no oscillation without the representational pole of the representational/performative binary. A teacher will represent, yes. But, that does not preclude what a teacher might, “hereby,” do, performatively.

It is in this oscillatory spirit that I say your paper is very important. I say so as a respondent and as a teacher. As a respondent, I mean to represent this particular paper at this particular time. I mean to represent what your paper is: it is very important. As a teacher, I mean to give your paper clout in a performative way. I mean to “hereby” let others know that your paper is important. I mean to give it the longevity it deserves to have after this particular event. I mean to point out the terrific usefulness of pedagogical oscillation from the specific to the general, and back again. Such an oscillation will perform excess without remorse.

1. Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 53.

2. *Ibid.*, 51.