

## Saving the “Orphan” Text from the Teacher the Father

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Charles Bingham engages us in a *hermeneutics* of the teacher’s authority to choose and assign texts and a *deconstruction* of the teacher’s nutritionist role as a reader whose reading of such texts constitutes a supplement necessary to render students’ relation to these texts pedagogical. Bingham’s admission (sincere or strategic, it does not matter) to the students that he has not the answer, that he does not own the text, is not new. It is reminiscent of Socrates’ tactics of irony and *aporia*. “You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired,” Socrates “confesses” to Meno at the beginning of a dialogue whose theme [*sache*] is virtue (*Meno*, 71b). The text that Bingham reads is not original or authentic either. It is an autobiographical re-enactment of a displaced event, a confrontation between teacher (Bingham) and student (Darrel). Bingham’s narrative *re-enacts* spoken claims of this dispute (that is, the student’s claim about the assigned text’s lack of authority and the teacher’s confession — to the class and to us — that he had not read the text he had assigned) but also enacts unspoken claims, claims that though never voiced in the dispute are still “there,” prejudices amidst other hermeneutical horizons (that is, the student’s disapproval of the teacher’s pedagogical performance, his prejudices about what is relevant to teacher education or, even, what is the tradition — “the” canon, perhaps — of teacher education).

Bingham’s approach is deconstructive. Breaching phonocentrism, he follows traces of what was not spoken out. But his re-enactment and reading of the pedagogical exchange is deconstructive in another, less obvious manner, for another, more radical question. Though not “named,” this question functions as a supplement in Bingham’s contemplation: *Is critical pedagogy prejudiced against tradition?* Bingham’s narrative deconstructs critical pedagogy by revealing prejudices built into its narrative tropologies.

### THE FIRST TROPOLOGY/PREJUDICE

The first tropology is the narrativization of the teacher as the “villain,” the bearer of institutional power despite and beyond his personal pedagogical philosophy, and the student as the disenfranchised soon to become redeemed “martyr” through his defiant talking back. Bingham’s scenario shows that authority is not something teachers *have* beforehand and exercise or something they *do not have* but still channel and facilitate through their institutional positioning. Between authoritarian and authoritative authority — a typology that Bingham uses as an analytic tool but also questions as a horizon too rigid for a phenomenological understanding of the teacher-text relationship (“ghettoizes,” “dichotomizing,” “too simplistic”) — I would like to suggest another understanding of authority: Authority as a performance enacted by *both* teacher and student; excitable as they both lay claims on it, vulnerable as they can both question the legitimacy of each other’s claim. “[A]uthority cannot actually be bestowed but is earned, and must be earned if someone is to lay

claim to it. *It rests on acknowledgement* and hence on an act of reason which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the better insight of others.”<sup>1</sup> Pedagogical relations, because they are dramatic, reveal this performative element.

#### THE SECOND TROPOLOGY/PREJUDICE

The second tropeology in narratives of critical pedagogy that works as an unjustifiable prejudice is the treatment of a historically and culturally specific student-teacher confrontation as a metonymy that represents, recasts, and encapsulates the historical rupture between modernity and postmodernity, between enlightenment’s belief in reason and poststructuralism’s proliferation of perspectives and particularities. Pedagogical narratives, however, do not recapitulate the history of educational ideas. In fact, our students, despite their possible postmodern condition as mobile, hybrid, displaced, and decentered, search for security and utility in their courses; in their readings they search for closure and finitude of meaning. The youth of the student does not guarantee his attachment to historically “new” ideas or textual tactics (for example, a reading list that deconstructs the canon, a text that is offered as a supplement rather than a textbook with ready-made questions and answers) in the same way the teacher’s becoming of age does not necessitate his becoming a gatekeeper of dogmatism.<sup>2</sup> Darrel does not appear here as a discontent of modernity but rather as a spokesperson for Enlightenment’s grand “grand-narrative,” that is, the rejection of authority.

“If authority displaces one’s own judgment,” writes Gadamer, “then authority is in fact a source of prejudice” (*TM*, 278). Passing judgment on the relevance of the text, Darrel questions the authoritarianism of teacher-imposed syllabi. But in reacting to authoritarianism, he is already caught in another kind of prejudice, the same kind of prejudice that infects the Enlightenment and frames its denigration of authority: the assumption that authority means “blind obedience” to dogma and command. “But this is not the essence of authority,” insists Gadamer. Authority has to do with knowledge and not with obedience.

Its true basis is an act of freedom and reason that grants the authority of a superior fundamentally because he has a wider view of things or is better informed.... Thus acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational or *arbitrary* but can, in principle, be discovered to be true (*TM*, 280).

#### APORIA

So, where does this hermeneutical circle of authority bring us? At the idea that “talking back” is as authoritarian as to institutionalize silence by consensus? At the happy passage of an ideal speech situation where texts are transparent, students are happy and teachers redeemed? At the conclusion that questioning authority already ensnares one in other kinds of authority? I will resist the diagnosis of performative contradiction — a diagnosis that, as Derrida points out, is nowadays becoming a popular tactic for denigrating aporetic thinking.<sup>3</sup> I will also resist Bingham’s interpretation of the supplement as the nutritionist addition and offer an alternative reading of this scenario by interrogating the authority of the student’s *aporia* rather than the authority of the teacher’s confession. His dissident questioning might be symptomatic of overhastiness (an unjustifiable prejudice, in Gadamer’s hermeneutics). But it could also be possible that his complaint is the performative staging of

an *aporia* and not the expression of a question. Questions demand answers and filling in the missing pages. *Aporias*, on the other hand, require us (teachers) to provide space, to nurture discontinuity, and not to supplement nutritionist readings for continuity, not to conflate pedagogical care with the fantasy of a nutritionist placenta.

How does one nurture *différence* in the classroom? *Différence* is not a normative pedagogical principle. Designing our syllabi rhizomatically does not also authorize us to use our students to implement our pedagogical design. As Cornelius Castoriades puts it, “every pedagogical procedure that does not aim to the maximization of students’ self-engagement is wrong; and every pedagogical system that cannot respond reasonably to the possible question of the students: why we have to learn this [like this], that pedagogical system is defective.”<sup>4</sup> We could supplement our reading as the missing pages, but that would not make such a pedagogical system any less defective, any less authoritarian. The text will still be *our* text, for *our* quests. The real challenge is to address the students’ question “why do we have to learn this?” while, at the same time, enabling our students to deconstruct their modernist understanding of learning, reading, and text. Perhaps, then, one is not authorized to design his classes in a Derridean manner if he is not also willing to teach Derrida for beginners. The answer is not to supplement the missing pages. The answer is to address the question: “Would Darrel purchase the text if he knew that some pages would *always* be missing?”

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1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995), 279. This book will be cited as *TM* for all subsequent references.

2. Actually Gadamer suggests that the older the educator becomes, the less likely he is to embody the authority of tradition: “when his charge comes of age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator” (*TM*, 280).

3. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; Or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Cultural Memory in the Present Series), trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

4. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Psychoanalysis and the Command of Autonomy,” *The Speeches in Greece* (Athens: Ipsilon, 1990), 85 [book in Greek].