

A Playful Mis-reading of Desire

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My remarks open with a strategic reading of Hilary Davis's self-reflective critique of desire. I aim to appropriate this critique in the name of educational and academic discipline, which is to say, the will to truth. The middle section of the essay illustrates why mine is a mis-reading and why her analysis might be susceptible to appropriation. Finally, in the closing section of the essay I suggest a posture of playfulness as an effort to establish the conditions of possibility for poststructuralist reflection on teachers' desires.

A FOUCAULDIAN MISREADING

In the following scene, I cast myself as an erstwhile, not so queer, representative of the local, *hypothetical*, college of teachers staff, reading in the next several paragraphs an excerpt from my report on the promising new self-assessment strategy I have read about in the Davis's work.

1. Davis urges professors to embrace the erotic in their teaching through a process of self-reflection that critiques both the spoken and unspoken effects of their desire. By way of example, Davis submits her own "desire to be loved by her students" to critical scrutiny and is able, thereby, to unmask deep desires lurking beneath it. With admirable integrity, Davis does not stop at the socially acceptable versions of a desire for recognition or the desire to avoid conflict, but discovers in them hints of desires for sameness, authority, control, and homogeneity.
2. By further processes of critique Davis troubles the gendered nature of her desire to be loved. She realizes that it compels her to miss noticing her students' resistance and even more importantly to assign herself extra work.
3. Surely the greatest advantage of Davis's scheme for self-reflection on teacher desire is its capacity to generate at least some understanding of areas we have simply not addressed to date: spoken and unspoken desire. Teachers will recognize these features of their inner lives quite readily. I am convinced that it would be relatively easy to encourage them to adapt this process of self-reflection to their situations and follow up on it with a self-directed goal setting exercise. Thus informed, their teaching action plans could be expected to increase professorial effectiveness greatly. In addition, transcripts of professors' desire self-analyses, together with their self-directed assessment forms, could be displayed in the faculty documentation room during semi-annual program reviews.

Turning from the report, if I have been successful, those of you who are familiar with Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power will recognize the generation of a discourse of truths about desire, together with an implicit production of a particular subjectivity, "the desiring professor." I have represented Davis's reflections as a practice situated in an administrative and disciplinary apparatus which bids us tell

the truth about ourselves as desiring teachers. A student of the practices and statements that make up the “how” of disciplinary discourses, Foucault wrote about a will to truth that inhabits social institutions which play a role in what he calls “governance” or care of the state.¹ Schools are one such social institution *extraordinaire*, as they discipline students, teachers, parents, trustees, professors and colleges of teachers in ways that create both describable populations and useful — what he calls *docile* — individuals.² Disciplinary knowledge is also implicated in what Foucault has dubbed power/knowledge. “We are living,” he says, “in a society that, to a great extent, is marching ‘toward the truth’ — [a society] I mean that produces and circulates discourse having truth as its function.”³

Herein I attempted to cloak Davis’s process of self-reflection in the guise of the confession, an examination of conscience practiced as an examination of (un)consciousness.⁴ For reasons that will become more obvious as I go along, I want to call this “will to truth” version, a “serious” reading of teacher desire.

THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR A DISCOURSE OF TEACHER DESIRE

My belief that this is a *mis*-reading of Davis’s account is based on two arguments. First, I read her as explicitly disavowing such a project. Second, the feminist and poststructuralist accounts of desire to which she draws our attention at the outset of her essay arguably work against this “serious” reading. In particular, they contest the nature of the inferred desiring subject and the status of truth claims about desire. In the interest of brevity, here, I shall address only the latter.

Davis tells us that all texts “are accompanied by an excess of meaning.” To flesh this out, in her references I encounter, in Shoshana Felman’s article, “Psychoanalysis and Education,” the following assertions:

The discovery of the unconscious... is that the implications of meaning infinitely exceed the signs manipulated by the individual. As far as signs are concerned, man is always mobilizing many more of them than he knows.⁵

For knowledge to be spoken, linguistically articulated, it would constitutively have to be supported by the ignorance carried by language, the ignorance of the *excess of signs* that of necessity its language — its articulation — “mobilizes.”⁶

These passages help me to see the active, performative sense in which texts are accompanied by an excess of meaning. Davis’s description of her understanding as “partial,” suggests not just that it is incomplete, a passive “part” of a not-present “whole;” it is, rather, active, situated, and strategically “partial.” It is constituted by the questions she selects and the conditions within which she attends to desire. It is accompanied by what she does not say. Because telling the truth about ourselves tends toward the singular, the reductive, the self-contained, a “serious” reading would render flat the textures of analyses that Davis’s work foretells. Yet, I believe that the “serious” reading, pushed by conditions of possibility that privilege the will to truth, could prevail in contemporary academic discourse and educational practice.

In brief, I suggest that a technocratic rationality is already present in much of the educational psychological discourse that figures strongly in the assessment of students. Since the 1968 *Living and Learning* report on Ontario schooling, if not before that, the science of the learner has been a central factor in pedagogy.⁷ Generations of teachers, themselves, now identify with such confessions as “I am a

visual learner,” “I am an adult with ADD.” Is it a large stretch to imagine calling from them confessions like “I am a teacher who desires”? Further, I suggest that the connection to governance for such confessions is quite readily made via the already existing and dominant discourses of teacher effectiveness and accountability. Thus, it seems to me there are strong reasons to expect the kind of misreading of poststructuralist analyses of desire that I have caricatured here.

In the final section of my comments, I want to sketch one avenue of resistance to the appropriation of poststructuralist analyses of desire by “serious” readers, an avenue I gleefully call “the will to play.”

THE WILL TO PLAY

The play in a line or the play in a steering wheel refers to a tolerable distance from “true.” Jane Flax writes of the “play of justice” using this notion of a creative space outside of true to incorporate a sense of the multiple stories needed to engage a spirit of justice that will do justice to difference.⁸ Maria Lugones writes about a playful attitude of self-construction that holds no rules to be absolutely sacred, defies the project of competence, and anticipates uncertainty by cultivating an openness to surprise.⁹ In resistance to the “spirit of seriousness” that is engaged via the will to truth, a will to play turns a project of visibility, of reflection on “one’s self,” into a game of hide and seek, a performance, or as Jane Gallop has written, an impersonation:

The personal as mask is what I here propose to call im-personation, the personal as performance, as what one takes on. Following Grumet, I would argue that when the personal appears it is always as a result of a process of im-personation, a process of performing the personal for a public.¹⁰

Perhaps “playing” ourselves as we analyze our teacherly desires, rather than “taking ourselves (and our desire) seriously” will yield the kind of radically incomplete inquiries that, I believe, Davis advocates.

1. Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” *Ideology and Consciousness* 7 (1979): 5-26.

2. See Bruce Curtis, *Building the Education State: Canada West, 1836-1871* (London: The Athlone Press, 1988).

3. Michel Foucault, “Power and Sex,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1990), 112.

4. *Ibid.*, 111.

5. Shoshana Felman, citing Jacques Lacan, “Psychoanalysis and Education,” in *Learning Desire: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Culture, and the Unsaid*, ed. Sharon Todd (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

6. *Ibid.*, Felman’s words.

7. Dennis Hall, *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario* (Toronto: Newton Publishing Company, 1968).

8. Jane Flax, “The Play of Justice,” in *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 111-28.

9. Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19.

10. Jane Gallop, “Im-Personation: A Reading in the Guise of an Introduction,” in *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation*, ed. Jane Gallop (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9.