

Knowledge Transmission Is a Manner of Speaking

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Paul Standish's fine essay, "One Language, One World: The Common Measure of Education," provides a Derridean interpretation of the possibility that language might be forced to take on an instrumental form, as opposed to a sacred form. I wholeheartedly agree and commend Standish's efforts to turn this Derridean essay on to educational concerns, and, in fact, I simply want to turn the Derridean account more sharply toward pedagogy.

In the essay of Jacques Derrida's to which Standish refers, "The Eyes of Language," it is pointed out that language in general has a sacred life, but that the particular sacredness of language also has the paradoxically sacred ability to call itself *out* of its own sacredness.¹ This is clearly evidenced when it comes to the correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Franz Rosenzweig. Interpreting this correspondence, Standish and Derrida remind us,

Words are not just tools, fully present to us for our use: they depend in their essence on this non-presence. Better put, the spectral aspect of our words — and hence of our thought and being — defies any oppositional logic of presence and absence. Indeed, some sense of this is evident in Scholem's double reference to the ghostly (*gespenstisch*) character of the language, ultimately its haunting by the name of God. Secularizing the language, we are "playing with the ghosts."²

Scholem's concern is serious. He is afraid that when Hebrew is used in such an instrumental fashion, the results will be disastrous. The sacred language will come back to take revenge on those who have instrumentalized it. But as Standish and Derrida aptly note, this tendency to secularize language is not only particular to the instrumentalization of religious speech. It is a more general tendency in all sorts of linguistic interpretations, not the least of which being philosophy. Philosophy itself has, by and large, had a "blindness to the fact that language is not just a grammar or a system of communication and reference but, beyond these, a naming."

In "The Eyes of Language," Derrida notes of Scholem's letter that it is written in *German* even as it is trying to denounce the instrumentalization of Hebrew. It would thus seem that Scholem must use the medium of an instrumentalized language to warn of the instrumentalization of a sacred language. Yet at the same time, and in German, Scholem claims that language *cannot* actually be instrumentalized, that the secularization of language only happens "in a manner of speaking," which Scholem renders in the French as *façon de parler*. Hence: There is *really* no such thing as a secularized language. However, "it is secularization that allows us to speak of a secularization that does not take place."³ Secularization thus "speaks of itself [parle d'ell-meme], but there is nothing else." There is actually no such thing as instrumental language, but because we presume that there can be such a thing, it is by virtue of such an instrumental presumption that instrumental language has a life (even if that life is not really a life).

Turning directly toward pedagogy, it is altogether possible to see this blindness about language in the general tendency to believe in the transmission of knowledge *through* language. Again and again, we hear pedagogy described in terms of “direct instruction,” “efficient delivery of curriculum,” “transmission of cultural codes,” or “depositing of knowledge by means of narration.” Yet at the same time, one must wonder amazedly at the presumptuousness of such common turns of phrase, or, to use Scholem’s words, these “*façons de parler*.” Let’s put it bluntly: Pedagogy is a mystery. Words are spoken, and language is used, yes. Things are learned, yes. However, there is simply no evidence whatsoever that any knowledge can be, or has ever been, transferred from one brain to another brain. Knowledge does not transfer from the blood and guts of one head into the blood and guts of another head in any straightforward way. And whatever way it does happen, it owes this happening to the intervention of signs. Pedagogy is indebted to the paradoxical sacredness of language whatever that sacredness might be. Indeed, the notion of knowledge transference is only a manner of speech. It is a *façon de parler*. But we continue to speak this way, as if knowledge gets transferred through language. In short, we continue to speak of teaching as if there were such a thing. The sacred language of teaching — whatever that sacred language might be — thus has the paradoxical ability to call *itself* out of its own sacredness. Through the mystery of teaching, teaching’s mystery is continually debunked. Indeed, when it comes to teaching, we are in the exact same sort of circumstance that Derrida has noticed with regard to the alleged secularization of religious language. It is, in fact, the instrumental use of language that allows us to speak of a teaching that does not take actually place. We teach of teaching even though there is no such thing as teaching. We teach of teaching even though there is no proof that there is teaching. Teaching speaks of itself, but there is nothing else. There is actually no such thing as teaching, but because we presume that there can be such a thing, it is by virtue of such a teacherly presumption that teaching does have a life (even if that life is not really a life). Teaching itself is taught into existence.

In this regard, it might not be surprising that there could come a time not too unlike the one Scholem predicted, only in our case it will be the return of the mystery of teaching against the instrumentalization of teaching. Scholem predicted the wrath of sacred language on the speakers of the banal. Could it happen that the wrath of the mystery of teaching could be unleashed on the instrumentalizers of teaching?

Perhaps such a time is already upon us. This is a frantic time, historically, to be a teacher. We are at a juncture like no other. As we speak, we can experience a classroom like a classroom has never before been experienced. If I am a teacher, I can stand in front of a group of students, and most of those students have laptop computers in front of them. The screen of each laptop computer faces away from me. I know not what each screen projects. The screen may be playing a film. It may display email messages from friends. It may display a page such as facebook, a site devoted to social networking. The screen may be used for taking notes on what has been discussed in class. It may be used as a text in lieu of paper, that is, a student may be referring to a downloaded page screen while the rest of us are referring to the paper

page of books in front of us. But perhaps most significantly of all, the screen of this laptop may be used to find other teachings about whatever topic I am in the process of teaching. Whether I am teaching a foreign language, or mathematics, or history, or literature, or science, or philosophy, this screen may be used as a measure for comparing the words of the teacher with the words of others, the thinking of a teacher with the thinking of others, the accuracy of the teacher with the accuracy of others. In short, the very *teaching* of the teacher is now, more than ever, in question. Just now, the wrath of teaching points to its own impossibility. The sacred mystery of knowledge transmission is a bit more mysterious these days as signs are loosened from the grasp of teachers, as the reign of what Michel Foucault called the “sovereignty of the signifier,” together with power of the “founding subject” — that is, the assumed power of the speaker over his or her words — as these presumed links become more tenuous.⁴ Signs are floating out of control these days, and especially out of control of teachers.

Yet, I suspect this juncture is an aberration. Not because knowledge really *can* be conveyed, but because teaching is such a powerful *façon de parler*. Teaching will no doubt regain control of its signs in the near future even while such control is just a manner of speaking. What could be an explosion of learning will no doubt come once again to be described as the success of teaching. There seems to be an ineluctable appeal to “one language, one world” among educators. One can always find ways to speak of teaching as if it were happening.

1. Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

2. Derrida, “The Eyes of Language,” 214.

3. *Ibid.*, 216.

4. Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 215–37.