

Lost Times/Recovered Times

*The following is a response to Bellous' and Morehouse's comments on **Children, Philosophy and Democracy**. This article was originally a panel presentation at the Learned's Congress held at Brock University in Ontario in June of 1996.*

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This is an exercise in memory, of the re-construction of experience, filtered, changed as it must be, by a consciousness that is the result of that experience and all the ones that preceded and followed, reconstructed, all, in their turn. Complex, but like all experiences, at once, noble and farcical. Of another exercise in memory, currently spanning two volumes, soon to be six, the late novelist Henry Roth wrote,

One thinks that all this must vanish, the good and the bad, the treasured and detested, my heritage, my identity, must vanish with me, save for slight evocations, occasional distillation of eloquence preserved in print; all else must vanish, and eventually, even that too. From time immemorial, nay, ever since the universe became conscious of itself, in the form of Homo sapiens, the toll for that supreme privilege' has been consciousness of mortality - the toll, with all its overtures. The cry of every human has been, 'And when I crumble, who will remember?!' Often have I imagined the rain leaching out memory, the wind making sport of it. «¹

A Heraclitean river that only a person, and not some other animal, would want to step into, that only a person, Sisyphus incarnate, would be condemned to wade. And then, throw into the mixture, the politics of memory. To remember the other's past is to gore the other's ox. Tricky business. Thomas Wolfe's «The Story of a Novel» (an essay about the writing, publication, and reaction to *Look Homeward Angel*) describes the outrage locals in his hometown of Asheville felt regarding Wolfe's description of the stone angel who stands guard over the grave of a fallen woman. According to Wolfe it was historical fact in the service of fiction. For the locals, it was slander of a good woman's name. ²

The past remembered fondly must be the past remembered romantically, a patina bestowed on events as they are recalled, reinvented, a patina placed on them by memory, a way of holding them, a way of recovering them. So. What was the original impulse, and how describe it? Generically, one says that philosophy begins in wonder and, individually, there is a large element of truth to the claim. I was attracted to the grand philosophical questions, questions of goodness, truth, and

beauty, but the context was always a narrative, and a narrative more appropriately called literary: St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Sartre's *Nausea* were early texts (texts prior to any philosophic training) but the more significant ones, for this young reader, were those of novelists and poets. Rimbaud and Verlaine, Poe, Dostoyevsky, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore, William Saroyan, but most of all Thomas Wolfe and Walt Whitman were the people who captured my imagination and led me to the wonder, in retrospect, I would call philosophical.

The wonder itself, then, deeply contextualized, a wonder that poked a hole in what in theatre is called the fourth wall, the «wall» that separates players from audience. The novelists and poets invited the reader into an alternate world, alternate worlds, in which the grand themes were played out. Remember the deep beauty of reading as a youth, the feeling of discovery and joy and tragedy explicit in the turning of a page, the blurring of boundaries between the reader, the text, and the author. Walt Whitman had a habit of addressing the reader directly («We understand each other. Why would you think I am not thinking of you?») But for that youthful reader, as thrilling as the address was, it was not needed. The text itself a sharing between author and reader. In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield talks of wanting to meet the writer after reading the text. For me, that want was redundant; the writer, in fact, was the text.

The point, then, and how hard to recall without reinterpreting, without reinterpreting too much, is that the wondering and dreaming that I did as an adolescent was itself highly social. Alone in a kitchen on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, or a block further to the north, in a library on Rogers Avenue, I was surrounded by Aristotelian friends, poets and novelists and characters in poems and novels, who wished me well, who invited me into their world. And, how to say this without offending ghosts of relatives and friends, that world was a better one. It was the intelligible world Plato describes in *The Republic*. Closing *Leaves of Grass* was like going back into the cave.

But then came formal training in philosophy. The urge (twenty-five, thirty years after the fact) is, if not to lambast, at least regret. The sense of wonder contextualized in a community of friends, a community that, today, I would describe as Peircean and Deweyian and Vygotskian, the sense of wonder and community a young reader finds in a book, was, clearly, irrelevant.

Not of course that the sense of wonder and community was extinguished. Mark Twain said he never let schooling get in the way of his education. Analogously, training in philosophy never got in the way of that generic sense of wonder. It just became transferred to other things. At that age, if asked, I would have made a sharp separation between the philosophical and the literary. The former had something to do with patterns of argumentation and criticism. The latter with, I guess, matters that touched one as a person.

Those patterns of argumentation and criticism, the way they were implemented in classrooms, and graduate lounges and parties today seem arch and callous, memory with a wince, but the benefits were not just in job training, in preparation for a profession, but also in an attack on the dichotomy that existed between books and the ordinary world. To read Marianne Moore, as much of a Brooklynite as she was, was to leave quotidian Brooklyn. There was a disorientation that occurred when the poet spoke and a similar one when she ceased speaking. Entering the book was

coming into a darkened theatre from bright sunshine. Leaving was going back into the sunshine after the movie was over. Either way, stumbling was the norm.

Training in the profession, however, was different. It did not involve that dichotomy. Indeed, the classroom was an extension of the streetcorner. The same qualities that were prized in the street were present in my graduate classrooms. One had to be tough and quick and verbal. One had to be able to spot flaws and weaknesses in one's opponent and his argument, and one had to learn how to exploit them to one's advantage. The thrusting and parrying that took place on Brooklyn streetcorners were transported to the classroom with just a small hint less of physical violence.

The graduate philosophy classroom, then, congenial, existing on a continuum with the neighborhood, just as John Dewey said that it should. On the street it was called cutting or ranking and the purposes were, first and foremost to survive and then, if you were good and your opponent weak, to win. In the classroom, the labels were different, but the purposes, I say this from a distance of a quarter century, seem the same.

Here, important to contextualize. The happy, if «happy» the appropriate modifier, coincidence between neighborhood and classroom occurred in the context of some of the great political upheavals of this century, upheavals best described as revolutionary - the civil rights struggle and the rise of feminism. Throw in Vietnam and student movements that were sweeping college campuses in the late 1960s, early 1970s and the situation was, at least, volatile. And yet as I remember graduate classes, both in this country and in Canada, what strikes me most forcefully is how like Brooklyn streetcorners of the early 1960s they were. The methodology was the same although there was not necessarily a similarity among method users. The classroom composition was different from what it had been in the previous decades. It was not all white, male, a generation or two removed from ancestral homes in Europe. The social upheaval had brought women and African-Americans to the graduate classrooms. Indeed two of my professors at City University were already establishing reputations as first-rate philosophers with interests in feminism and related issues. But the classroom environment proved intractable. Even when women talked in those classrooms, even when women talked about feminist concerns, the classroom felt the same. The talk was about feminism and one did with that «talk about» what one did with all «talk about» in graduate classrooms. One looked for flaws and weaknesses. Even if one's heart was with the victim, the marginalized, the outcast, one did not bring that into the classroom. To do so would be maudlin, would indicate a lack of rigor.

And again, one steps back. There has been a radical change in philosophy in the past twenty years. Feminist philosophy, African-American philosophy, and all the applied philosophies, involve ways of doing philosophy that were not even thought of, much less condoned, twenty-five years ago that have become commonplace.

It is far beyond me to attempt to explain the change. Better to note it, and then describe where I felt first the implications of feminism for an understanding of philosophy, in fact, of education. To do that, it is helpful to view those graduate classes of the early 1970s as examples of modernism. The promise made to all of those bright young students, male and female, was that a

methodology was available that could be used by anyone to, if not discover the truth then, at least, win an argument. Any individual could use the methodology, and it was the methodology that was dominant. It did not matter, so the liberal promise of the 1970s went, if you were male or female, gay or straight, African-American or white. The only things that mattered were your willingness to submit to the methodology and your ability to use it. The methodology was presented as being, in the words of Jane Roland Martin, «gender-neutral.»³ Perhaps that is why those early lectures by Virginia Held at Hunter College and Linda McAllister at Brooklyn had so little impact on changing the environment that was the classroom, perhaps why the contributions of female graduate students had a negligible impact on those classrooms. The talk, syntax and sentences, the cadences and inflections, the texture of their arguments were identical to those of, say, males talking about «modus ponens.» Quite literally, anyone could have presented the arguments. The argument was distinct from the arguer.

For me, the change in philosophy and the educator became apparent in the early 1980s. The change was complex and it involved feminism, and Philosophy for Children, and teachers and philosophers from different parts of the world - many of those parts non-English speaking - converging on small, residential facilities in Pennsylvania or New Jersey, all trying to figure out how to do philosophy with this new population, i.e., children. The conversations at those workshops was slow, tortuous and halting. It was due, in part, to the multiplicity of languages around the table, of course, but also to the multiplicity of perspectives. No perspective, no language seemed privileged and, this I take to be a part of supreme significance, the methodology of the graduate classroom seemed inappropriate. It did not seem to help if the task was conceived of as something more than development of thinking skills, if the task was conceived of as something, perhaps, more rarefied, namely, Philosophy for Children as the attempt to nurture the (philosophic) wonder which typifies the inquiry of young children.

Stated as such, the task is (was) daunting. Far more daunting, I would argue, than the mere improvement of thinking skills. If the latter was all Philosophy for Children were about, then a variant of the graduate classrooms of the 1970s might be appropriate - it worked, in some sense, then, and if one looks at other thinking skills programs, it is still being used today. But when you connect Philosophy for Children with this nebulous though near tactile thing called «wonder,» you find as those groups of teachers and philosophers did in the early 1980s, that you need either a new methodology or a host of methodologies to deal with the problem. Or put in another way, given the magnitude of the task, one needs all of one's strength to deal with it. Rather than divesting oneself of one's person and becoming the methodology, one uses all that is available. And that, of necessity, brings gender and race, among other factors, to bear on the nature of inquiry.

In retrospect, there was an austere simplicity to the evolution of those Philosophy for Children groups in the early 1980s. Because they were committed to the ideals of Philosophy for Children, they had to evolve together to, as much as possible, find ways to approximate that ideal. To be successful, they had to become little Peircean, Deweyian, Vygotskian communities of inquiry - communities which valued inquiry and which valued differences of perspectives not just for noble, egalitarian reasons but because differences could be, and often were, contributory to the success of ten inquiry. Or, at least in the late 1990s that is how I reconstruct those days, days when philosophy

for children, of necessity became feminism, days when the wonder that drove to philosophy was rekindled in philosophy. Days when, as Grace Paley mentions in her dedication of *The Collected Story*, the «real question» could be asked. «It seems right to dedicate this collection to my friend Sybil Claiborne, my colleague in the Writing and mother trade. I visited her fifth-floor apartment on Barrow Street one day in 1957. There before my eyes were her two husbands disappointed by the eggs. After that we talked and talked for nearly forty years. Then she died. Three days before that, she said slowly, with the delicacy of an unsatisfied person with only a dozen words left, `Grace, the real question is - how are we to live our lives?»⁴

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