

Aesthetics and the Paradox of Educational Relation

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The paper establishes the principle of 'back-formation' of artistic creation, the process by which artists realise in their work a theme or motif that had not been previously intended but is brought into being as the work comes to fruition. The authors suggest that teaching also should be guided by this principle. To solve the inherent problem of power imbalance in teaching, they appeal to Bakhtin's recourse to aesthetical judgment in addressing relational issues. Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudices shows that not only is an ethics of relation worked out as an aesthetic practice, but also that aesthetic practices are worked out within an ethics of relation.

In his poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* John Ashbery comments on the artistic process, likening it to 'the game where a whispered phrase passed around the room ends up as something completely different. It is the principle', writes Ashbery,

. . . that makes works of art so unlike
What the artist intended. Often he finds
He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place . . .
. . . that there is no other way,
That the history of creation proceeds according to
Stringent laws, and that things
Do get done in this way, but never the things
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately
To see come into being.

What Ashbery highlights in these lines is what might be called the 'back-formation' of artistic creation, the reverse process by which an artist realises, in her work, a theme or motif that had not been previously intended but is brought into being as the work comes to fruition, or as it is received by the other. In the artistic process, back-formation creates an unexpected autonomy in the life of the work.

While education has long been described by some as an endeavour that is more art than science, educators have not yet taken to heart the

specific implications of aesthetic back-formation. The sorts of back-formations that comprise what it means to practise art should be attended to more often if we want to describe education more fully. In fact, educators and students are often engaged in a game of whispers, not knowing what the outcome of their interactions will be. Is there, for instance, any teacher who, at many moments in her career, is not taken by surprise by some unexpected accomplishment or insight on the part of a student? After having taught for years, have we not been surprised on the street by a former student, one we barely remember, who tells us the great impact we had on his life? Just as when the artist is prepared to withstand a loss of control over his or her own work, the process of education requires a similar ability to sustain a loss of control over what is known so that growth may occur even when it was not expected. The aesthetic principle of back-formation requires that growth will often be realised only after the fact. The principle of back-formation can reconcile the fact that teaching is a purposeful and planned activity with the fundamental unpredictability of its results.

Under this general rubric of education as artistic back-formation, this essay will examine the implications for an aesthetic perspective on pedagogical relationships, asking such questions as, what does it mean to apply aesthetic criteria to teacher–student relationships? Why would such a view be beneficial? Should there even be a distinction between the aesthetic and the egalitarian? To pursue these questions, we will rely on the dialogic philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin and the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Using the work of Bakhtin and of Gadamer, we conclude that it *is* beneficial to consider teacher–student relationships as an aesthetic practice. A pedagogy of relation benefits from oscillating between aesthetic endeavour and egalitarian power-sharing.

THE AESTHETICS OF RELATION

To begin to address these questions about the aesthetics of relational pedagogy, it is useful to begin with its most vexing virus: the problem of domination. This problem is most usefully understood in phenomenological terms. Teaching can be defined as an activity of changing the Other, of shaping the Other just as one shapes a piece of art. But this requirement to change the Other entails a certain paradox. If one does not intend to change the Other, then this is not teaching. But when one attempts to change the Other, the whole project of teaching is put into ethical question. For how does one change the Other without manipulation, without domination, without denying the Other's humanity?

One way to address this paradox is simply to adjust what one means by 'the Other'. The problem of domination described above derives in part from a unitary, modernist notion of subjectivity that baulks at being forced to change. If the self is a self-same self, if the formula for identity is '*A is A*', then being forced to change is always a matter of domination. But the problem of domination looks different if selfhood is

defined more intersubjectively. If one is *A* only as one encounters the Other, then the encounter, and even the possibility that one is changed into *A* only after the encounter, eliminates some of these worries about identity. The leap to a postmodern, intersubjective understanding of selfhood adds nuance to (but does not automatically eliminate) the paradox of aesthetic domination.

Consider, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin's vision of the self:

A human being never coincides with himself. The formula of identity 'A is A' is not applicable to him [. . .] the authentic life of personality happens, so to speak, in this point of non-coinciding of a person with himself; in the point of his egress beyond the limits of what he is as objective being, which could be prised on, defined, and predicted apart from his will, in absentia. The authentic life of personality is accessible only to dialogical penetration, to which it opens reciprocally and freely. (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 79)

According to Bakhtin's dialogic vision, authentic selfhood happens precisely at the point of unpredictability. Furthermore, such unpredictability is not a psychological description of one self-same person who is autonomous and can thus surprise us by revealing her own distinctive selfhood. Unpredictability is rather part of a stance toward the Other. It is revealed within the encounter.

As a guiding principle, Bakhtin's notion of dialogic authenticity (of the unpredictability of the self) is excellent. It goes part of the way toward addressing the modern uneasiness over pedagogical domination as it is expressed, for example, in progressive models that are extremely student-centred. For if the self is meant to be changed by means of the encounter, then at least change brought on by the Other is not *automatically* domination. However, as a principle for pedagogy it is still inadequate. Because teaching is inherently an asymmetrical relation, one imbued with power imbalances, dialogic pedagogy is not the same as just any dialogic encounter. Void of power imbalance, teaching ceases to be teaching; left with such an imbalance unquestioned (and treated as just any dialogic encounter), it easily degenerates into domination.

This is where Bakhtin's recourse to aesthetics is crucial, and where the 'art of teaching' can be given more nuance and applied to the dynamics of relational pedagogy. Bakhtin offers a glimpse of how the paradox of the asymmetrical relation could be solved in a general way by describing the author–hero relation in Dostoyevsky's polyphonic novel. According to Bakhtin, the author of a polyphonic novel creates heroes that are totally independent of their creator. 'The main heroes of Dostoyevsky are not only objects of the author's word, but also subjects of their own immediately signifying word' (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 7). The essential tension here is between the imbalance of authority (the author *creates* the hero) and the autonomous life that must animate the character in a novel. Such an aesthetic tension also describes the relational project in education. Teachers indeed 'create' their students, and exercise a great

deal of authority over them. Yet at the same time education is only meaningful and successful when students and teachers are in a mutual relation with each other, only when each is autonomous.

How does Bakhtin envision such a relation? 'Here we have to avoid one misunderstanding', he writes:

It may seem that the hero's autonomy contradicts to the fact that he is fully given as only an element of an artistic composition, and therefore, from the beginning to the end wholly created by the author. In reality there is no such contradiction. We assert the freedom of heroes within the limits of the artistic idea, and in this sense the freedom is created as much as the non-freedom of the objectified hero is created. To create, however, is not to make up. (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 87)

Bakhtin goes on to explain that creativity itself is limited by its own laws and by the laws of the material with which it works. Once the author chooses a hero and a certain way (the dominant) of his depiction, the author's hands are tied by the 'intrinsic logic' of what is chosen. What Bakhtin calls 'the logic of self-consciousness' allows only certain artistic methods of depiction, namely dialogical questioning and provoking. In other words, once the author chooses to write a polyphonic novel and to create heroes for it, the heroes then become autonomous of the author.

This means that the weight of the author's authority is shifted heavily towards the beginning of the process. It is an existential 'big bang' theory—once the world of the novel is created, it takes on a life of its own. The beginning will affect what sort of heroes the students will be—heroes of an objective (pre-Dostoyevskian) novel, or of a polyphonic novel: heroes with or without agency equal to the teacher's. In the Bakhtinian world there is a creator, but her powers are limited, for she tends to lose authority over her creations. Similarly, a teacher may use such a specific form of authority that will lead to the affirmation of the students as Others.

THE ETHICS OF AESTHETIC RELATIONS

We began with the ethical problem of the domination of the Other in the student–teacher relationship, and have made a detour through an aesthetic understanding of relation. In fact, Bakhtin's novelistic understanding of relation seems to indicate that such an ethical problem is best worked out on the aesthetic plane. The aesthetic attitude, for Bakhtin, is the only reliable tool to allow for the unpredictability of the relation. And the artistic model of authorship is a model that negotiates the poles of mutual relation versus domination. Teachers need to become attuned to artistic back-formation not only for aesthetic reasons, but also out of deep moral commitment. To prepare, like the artist, for the autonomy of the Other, is a moral matter of preventing domination. This means starting the novel (the student–teacher relationship) outright,

with an expectation of autonomy on the student's part after authorship is complete.

However, the problem of domination in teacher–student relations is not to be solved by concentrating on the ‘right’ beginning. Teachers do not simply ‘wash their hands’, but continue to play a very active role in the drama of their relations with students. What Bakhtin can offer is a metaphor of an author who keeps challenging his heroes—arguing with them, getting angry with them, becoming bewildered by them. Yet let us remember that this is only a metaphor. It is very unclear how a teacher is to avoid slipping into a dominating position. After all, contrary to what Bakhtin may have believed, challenging, questioning and arguing—when applied to real people rather than imagined characters—can also be dominating. Each of Dostoyevsky's main heroes possessed the intellect, the sensibility and the will-power of their creator. They argued with the author because they were as strong as he. Moreover, his heroes shared many of his own cultural assumptions. In many cases, we cannot expect such conditions to be present in real-life classrooms. To work our way beyond Bakhtin's useful but general metaphor, we can go to the arena of interpretation—also originally a literary concept, but one suited for a much more detailed examination of processes of human relation.

Here we can follow the hermeneutic project of Hans-Georg Gadamer, keeping in mind our three-part goal of relation, aesthetics, and non-dominance (or, more simply put, ‘equality’). Gadamer's work on the hermeneutic significance of prejudices rests at the intersection of these three matters. Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudices shows that not only is an ethics of relation worked out as an aesthetic practice, but that aesthetic practices are also worked out within an ethics of relation. The interpretive to-and-fro between self and Other is part of the aesthetic process by which domination over the other can be diminished.

According to Gadamer, the reader interacts with a text by virtue of the cultural horizons that inform his or her position in the world. These horizons, or ‘prejudices’ as Gadamer calls them, are both limiting and productive. Biases are limited in the sense that they are circumscribed by our own human finitude. When we read a text, we have only a limited set of cultural tools at our disposal by which we can interpret it. At the same time, though, our prejudices are productive insofar as they enable our interpretation of a text in the first place. Only by virtue of our prejudices do we have any cultural tools at all by which to interpret a text.

About prejudices, Gadamer notes:

The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are our biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 6)

When we come into contact with a text, when we attempt to interpret it, our prejudices both circumvent and make possible the interpretations

that are available to us. Prejudices are both wanted and unwanted. They are wanted because of the sorts of experiences they make available to us. They are also unwanted, just as the common connotation (that a person is not prepared to act ethically if he or she is prejudiced) reminds us, because they are stuck within the singular perspective of one person's cultural horizon.

Thus, prejudices are the property of one person's cultural biases before he has an encounter with a text. Prejudices that rest in monological consciousness are enabling and restricting in ways that are not obvious to me, the interpreter, until I actually encounter a text. Prejudices exist before the to-and-fro of the interpretive encounter, but they are largely unavailable to consciousness. Thus, without interaction with a text, one cannot know which prejudices are harmful and which are good. As Gadamer puts it:

The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from prejudices that hinder and lead to misunderstandings... Rather, this separation must take place in the process of understanding itself... (Gadamer, 1994, pp. 295–296)

It is only in the to-and-fro process of interaction between self and text that we can examine and adjudicate between the prejudices that are harmful and those that are helpful, between those that lend themselves to domination and those that lend themselves to nurturance.

To put the above in terms more relevant to pedagogy, teachers need to be the authors of their classrooms, and there need to be events that create a space for the autonomous characters of the polyphonic novel to flourish. But more than that, teachers need to become involved in an interpretive to-and-fro with their students as text. In the to-and-fro movement between self and Other, not only can teachers practise creating polyphonic spaces, but they can also learn to uncover, identify and try to decrease the instances where we tend to dominate the Other. The students need to do the same, for imbalanced relations are as common among students as they are between students and teachers. Excavating our own pre-conscious prejudices by interacting with the very students we have had a hand in creating, we can learn how not to be dominating. The problem of power imbalance between teacher and student—the very imbalance that leads to a paradox within pedagogies of relation—needs to be addressed as an intersubjective, and aesthetic, practice.

This is not to argue that institutional power imbalances can be eradicated just because one self comes into contact with another. On the contrary, institutionally positioned relations are marred by the very same ambivalence that structures prejudices. As in the predicament of prejudices, institutional power is both enabling and limiting, both constructive and destructive. To be a teacher is both to be in a position

to help the student by virtue of one's role as an authority and to be in a position to dominate a student without even meaning to do so. Each of these possibilities, good and bad, may be brought about by means of the intersubjective relation. Yet, as in the case of the working out of prejudices, the effects of one's institutional power remain largely unavailable to consciousness until one encounters another with interpretive openness. At the point of interpretive interaction, institutional power becomes available for scrutiny and for amelioration. As in the case of the poet who must be willing to be surprised by the unpredictability of her art, the teacher must be ready to become conscious of the insidious workings of relational power.

The practice of interpretation strips the imbalance of power of its invisibility by exposing the fine mechanisms of institutional domination. In a certain sense, the interpretation of power imbalances constitutes the plot of the classroom novel; it makes the intrigue of teacher–student relation. The prejudices are not worth discovering just for oneself; they are to be discovered together in the course of developing relations. Like a love story, a classroom novel is a novel about relations, whose storyline is fed by continuous interpretations of relations.

THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

Recourse to the image of the hermeneutic circle sheds more light on the paradox of pedagogical relation. In Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle, a text is always situated within the larger arena of its cultural/historical horizon; the part is always dependent upon the whole. Conversely, the larger horizon only exists by virtue of being instantiated through the text; the whole depends upon each part. The part both depends upon and creates the whole insofar as the whole provides a backdrop for, yet at the same time cannot exist without, each of its parts.

This relation of the part to the whole is no less true for the student who is 'authored' by the teacher, and who also must be recognised as an autonomous character within the pedagogical relation. When one encounters an Other as an autonomous character such an encounter is more than the psychological meeting of two individual beings. Rather, the teacher and student encounter each other informed by the larger cultural 'wholes' that give meaning to their particular interaction. The cultural and institutional situation of the teacher is only one part of a larger whole that includes the student; conversely, the cultural and institutional situation of the student is only one part of a larger whole that includes the teacher. In such a coming together of self and other, the teacher's very identity as one who is in a position to dominate is part of a larger whole that consists also of the student. And on the other side of the pedagogical relation, the student's educational autonomy is necessarily part of a larger whole that consists also of the teacher. There is thus a symbiotic relation between teacher and student that depends not primarily on their individual attitudes, but on the fact that they are part of a larger cultural event—the event of teacher–student

interaction that has been set up long before any particular teacher interacts with any particular student. Such an event is a part of a larger whole and not an event that is located solely in the consciousnesses of two individuals.

Gadamer's thoughts on authorship speak to the interaction between teacher and student:

For the writer, free invention is always only one side of a mediation conditioned by the values already given. He does not freely invent his plot [and here we might substitute one's student], however much he imagines that he does . . . The writer's free invention is the presentation of a common truth that is binding on the writer also . . . the artist addresses people whose minds are prepared and chooses what promises to have an effect on them. He himself stands in the same tradition as the public that he is addressing and which he gathers around him. (Gadamer, 1994, p. 133)

A teacher's dependency on the existing cultural context has two distinctive sides. We pointed out how the teacher's prejudices may hinder mutuality in her relations with students. However, Gadamer also suggests a way of embracing the contextuality of teaching. Many educators believe that more power means more freedom, that, for example, students should be granted power to avoid the pitfalls of relation. But it is also possible that we are bound not because we lack power; we may be bound by 'common truths', by shared 'horizons' to borrow another image from Gadamer, regardless of specific power imbalances in our mutual relations. The very power imbalance in student-teacher relations makes sense only if we abstract from the larger contexts of hermeneutical field of dependencies.

It is thus essential within the student-teacher relation to wriggle free from the limitations of subject-to-subject existence and to expand into the complex and pluralistic web of other relations. Unique teaching encounters may arise when teachers and students try to interpret their shared relations with school administration, authority, culture, civilisation—the larger contexts; or with certain thoughts, ideas, anxieties, or moods of one of them—the smaller contexts. It is important for students and teachers to find time and space where they are not students and teachers. While many teachers like seeing their former students when courses are all over, and where the burden of being a teacher is no longer there, there may be a greater wisdom at play in such back-formed meetings than simply the joy of people reunited. In fact, the sloughing off of teacher-student roles is not unlike stepping out of the subjective worry of relation and into a larger horizon of historicity that liberates without simply turning power over to the other. Moreover, perhaps we can learn to slip in and out of such states of non-teaching freedom. Teaching may be discrete and interruptible even within the duration of an academic course.

It is in this vein of recognising the significance of shared relations that we should understand the distinction that Gadamer makes between the

terms ‘authoritative’ and ‘authoritarian’. Gadamer notes that modern sensibilities have too often conflated these two notions. With regard to the negative associations we have with ‘authoritarian’, Gadamer writes, ‘It was Hitler’s seizure of power which first gave the word “authoritarian” its ominous tone’ (Gadamer, 1996, p.118). Someone who is authoritarian, Gadamer argues, invokes institutional or state power. But he proposes that we recover the *positive* notion of ‘authoritative’, which does not rely on institutional power. Being authoritative means having genuine authority:

Genuine authority is recognized as involving superior knowledge, ability and insight. This holds in all those cases where authority possesses a positive meaning, the child in relation to the father, the pupil in relation to the teacher, or the patient in relation to the doctor. (Gadamer, 1996, p.121)

And as we are trying to argue in this paper, the etymological link between these two terms—the author or author-itative and the author or author-itarian—is grounded in aesthetics. An analysis of aesthetic practice offers a way to distinguish genuine authority from authority that draws inappropriately on institutional power, to distinguish the author from the dictator.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Importantly, teaching should be carried on not only in the interest of the student, but also in the interest of the student as she will appear in the future, in the interest of that person who ‘does not coincide with herself’, in Bakhtin’s words. Yet the teacher has no definite knowledge of that person, and only creative imagination can provide some grounding for the student–teacher relation. Thus teaching should be construed as an aesthetic practice that respects the unforeseeable back-formation of persons within the trajectory of historic, cultural, discursive and institutional horizons that are not assimilable to a narrowly defined pedagogy of relation.

Yet we must be cautious. At a certain authorial extreme, one can imagine a teacher working out of sheer aesthetic pleasure—simply playing with students, developing interesting plots and creating beautiful unpredictability without regard for the interest of a student. I can think of a teacher who was just fascinated with ‘what might happen’ to his students, so he created more and more challenges for them. His classroom plot was inexplicably twisted, but lacking real warmth and connection. Students loved him in some special meaning of this word, for he was always interesting and full of interest. It was a rather cold interest, though, a purely aesthetic one. In such an aesthetic limit, the standard objections to aesthetic postmodernisms such as Bakhtin’s and Gadamer’s, the accusations of relativism and non-accountability, are justified. A pedagogical project that is either based solely on ‘*A* is not *A*’,

or on the historical subordination of an author to the larger cultural horizon in which she creates, is incomplete and irresponsible. It is just as half-baked to abandon the human need for nurturance and power at the time of teacher–student meeting as it is to insist that equality is the primary good when it comes to pedagogical relation.

The secret of meaningful classroom relationship rests in blending equality and aesthetics, in going back and forth between these two poles, in an ability to employ both distributive and creative criteria. For in the end, equality and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive; they are rather two modes of thinking through the paradox of relation. The pedagogical relation is vexed by paradox only if educators lack the ability to fluctuate between authorial creativity, with its forward-looking confidence of originary inspiration, and teacherly power-sharing, with its emphasis on non-domination. While this might appear to be a complicated sort of alternation, it seems less daunting when one realises that there are still good books being written even in the most democratic of nations.

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