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When a Teacher's Love for the World Gets Rejected. A Post-Critical Invitation to Become an Edifying Educator¹

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Abstract:

This article aims at dialoguing with the Arendtian 5th principle of the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*: From education for citizenship to love for the world, where the authors state that this is the time “to acknowledge and to affirm that there is good in the world that is worth preserving” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 19), as a hopeful acknowledgment of the world. This particular dialogue is opened by means of an edifying philosophical theatre piece (based on a pedagogical reading of Alice Munro's short story *Comfort*) that reflects on/with Rorty's pragmatism. It is an attempt at advancing the post-critical approach to education via a twofold strategy that might best be described as edifyingly discomfiting. First, by intentionally choosing an uncomfortable story as the basis for a theatre piece depicting an unsettling pedagogical situation. Second by developing a post-critical educational artefact under the premise that if critical pedagogy had Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, then a post-critical pedagogy may benefit as well from what I would like to call an “edifying theatre”.

Keywords:

Alice Munro; edifying theatre; philosophy as literature; post-critical pedagogy; Richard Rorty

1. Background

In the background of this article is the collective exploration of the Rortyan resonances (Oliverio, 2019a, 2019b; Wortmann, 2019; Thoilliez, 2019a; Schwimmer, 2019)² of post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson et al., 2017, 2018, 2020).

In my contribution to that exploration, I stated that educational research today is “over-diagnosed and over-criticized but lacking in thoughtfulness and imagination” (Thoilliez, 2019a, p. 453). In the first part, I presented what Rorty's hopes consisted of specifically as regards his formula of distancing philosophy from attempts at making it scientific and well grounded. I made the case that Rorty was not so much writing the death of philosophy itself on its own walls, but offering an internal critical challenge to philosophy, a provocation toward a transformation of philosophy itself.³ Thus, in the last section, I transposed Rortyan endeavours to the situation pedagogy finds itself in today as a possibility of knowledge and action. I argued that keeping hope of the potentially liberating and transformative power of education cannot be based on any foundations or ‘evidence’, but rather an attitude by which individuals involved in education processes express their commitment to a better future, as well as their belief in its possibility. Now when “the army of critics has attacked educational promises to the point of collapse, if we want pedagogy to be possible some room needs to be left for reconstructing new educational paths” (Thoilliez, 2019a, p. 462). The point⁴ I was trying to make was that something else needs to be pursued beyond criticism, that is, stepping out, taking a break from, and not solely focusing on the

urge to criticize education practices in order to create new education possibilities. Once the critique is over, there is still a need for educational action, for holding to the promises of education, because these promises are still the best hope we have of making our democracies grow, of working together to have more liveable lives, of developing communities more engaged in practices of solidarity than in practices of cruelty. Progressing towards a pedagogy with a lower case ‘p’, as Rorty does with his post-philosophical culture, embracing the weaknesses and difficulties of education could make the unlikely possible, and give hope that the unforeseen will occur.

2. Invitation

On this occasion I open a dialogue with the Arendtian fifth principle of the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*: “From education for citizenship to love for the world”, where the authors state that this is the time “to acknowledge and to affirm that there is good in the world that is worth preserving” (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 19), as a hopeful acknowledgment of the world. According to Arendt (1961), education consists of an intergenerational passing on of what is worth preserving of our world. The essence of education is thus first and foremost a conservative undertaking.

I will open that dialogue by means of a theatre piece that reflects on/with Rorty's pragmatism. This attempt at advancing the post-critical approach to education progresses via a twofold strategy that might best be described as edifyingly discomfiting. It starts by working with negative materials, failures, and mistakes, foreseeing

wrongs within the possible, instead of doing it with positive motives. It explores what can happen when things go wrong, when thing-centred pedagogy (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019) is challenged to the point of the impossible, when a teacher's love for the world (shaped in curriculum contents) gets rejected, fundamentally questioned; when the passing on momentum does not work out as expected; when it really opens up to whatever the new generation wants to make of it. To transition from Rorty's tendency to favour newness/novelty to depicting images that are ultimately calming (Oliverio, 2020; Del Castillo, 2014), I intentionally chose a less *comforting* story. Munro's "Comfort" is the basis for a theatre piece depicting an unsettling pedagogical situation (Munro, 2001/2011). Problems are part of the realm of the possible and thus need to be affirmed and taken care of as well. If we want to make better use of the pragmatist tradition, a post-critical affirmative pedagogy cannot mean not recognizing the problems we cause or face. Quite the contrary, affirmation must take the form of acts of provision (Thoilliez, in press), foreseen issues, flows, breaks. The second line in this edifyingly discomforting strategy consists of developing a post-critical educational artefact under the premise that if critical pedagogy had the "theatre of the oppressed", then a post-critical pedagogy may benefit as well from what I would like to call an "edifying theatre". This is not, as Augusto Boal (2000) would put it, to rehearse revolutions, but rather in a more Rortyan sense, to redescribe ourselves (Rorty, 1979, 1989). An edifying philosopher is one that redescribes, who takes over the project of redescription in a morally appropriate way, being our capacity to recreate ourselves rather than our ability to reflect our world that makes us creatures of moral worth and dignity. It is what we make of ourselves, not what we may come to know, that requires our attention. It is the elaboration of possibility not the legislation of constraint which should be the basic concern of humanistic reflection. Thus, the proposal would not be to use theatre techniques as a weapon to rehearse revolutionary transformations towards foreseeably better futures freed from present oppressions, but to use the grammar of theatre as a tool for studying our problems, for better comprehending our present circumstances, and creating redescrptions that may help us on the path of inquiry toward overcoming our current difficulties (both in our private and public realms). Under this pragmatist accentuation of the post-critical parameters, an edifying theatrical play is not meant to work as an instrument to transform the world, nor as a device to point at what oppresses the oppressed, but as a tool to study our problems in a much clearer affirmative direction, albeit ironically. This edifying theatre would take inspiration from Rorty's

ironist as a self-creating figure: one that cannot step outside her language and her horizon, but that can set out to expand, refine or modify them in an ongoing effort to compare and contrast, to see herself from other points of view, and thereby change herself. Edification here is the process of learning to do that in a responsible way. Theatre as a means to help us, as historically situated hermeneutic subjects, make sense of our lives and of how should we best organize our society.

In this sense, it goes without saying that none of this post-critical pedagogy should be intellectually experienced by anyone or presented as a 'mission accomplished'. Rather, it should be taken as an attempt at making sense of and acknowledging the world, at living questionable lives, at getting along with one other, and of keeping education as "an autonomous sphere of human life" (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020, p. 864).

The following edifying theatre piece you are to listen is a free adaptation of the short story "Comfort" by Alice Munro (included in her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, originally published in 2001). A first version of this theatre piece was prepared as part of my intervention in the "Tübingen Winter Symposium in Philosophy of Education: Educational Research and the Limits of Critique" in February 2020. The "Tübingen Première cast members" were Piotr Zamojski (as Lewis), Anna Blumsztajn (as Nina), Kai Wortmann (as Principal Gibbins), Pia Rojahn (as Student 1), and Viktor Swillens (as Student 2). In the present recording the online theatre crew was integrated by Piotr Zamojski (as Lewis), Tania Alonso-Sainz (as Nina), Kai Wortmann (as Principal Gibbins), and Esther Díaz-Romanillos (as Student 1 and Student 2). On both occasions I read the script annotations in the form of a narrator voice.

It is expected that questioning and thinking may follow from listening, but nothing else is to be said for now. The intention is for the piece to speak for itself. There are no specific instructions to work with this material, although it comes to its full provocative potential in a collective listening and/or reading, or an actual performance followed by an open discussion (the complete version of the script is linked in the description details of the audio recording).

3. Action

Here you can listen to the theatre piece:

<https://anchor.fm/bianca-thoilliez/episodes/When-a-Teachers-Love-for-the-World-Gets-Rejected--A-Post-Critical-Invitation-to-Become-an-Edifying-Educator-em2aro>

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About the Author

Bianca Thoilliez is lecturer at the Department of Pedagogy at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain. She has conducted and published both empirical and philosophical research in such areas as the study of traditions and vanguards of educational thought (with special focus on American philosophy), teaching and teacher education, international agencies' education agendas, and cross-national curriculum policies.

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² With further developments "in the making": Thoilliez & Wortmann (2020a), Thoilliez & Wortmann (2020b, under review). This issue of *On Education* is an example of the Manifesto's resonance, as well as the monographic section *An Ibero-American Response to the 'Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy'* recently published in the journal *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14201/teri.2020322>.

³ Following Koopman's interpretation (2013).

⁴ As I have aimed to do in previous works (Standish & Thoilliez, 2018; Thoilliez, 2019b).