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ABSTRACT

An educator recently contributed a statement concerning some of the difficulties in teaching critical theory to undergraduates, particularly works translated from the French poststructuralists, to the newly published collection "Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition and English Studies." As a postscript, the educator would like to balance the discussion of Michel Foucault's ethics with a feminist perspective from which she hopes to draw attention to additional problems in the relation between teacher, student, and material. In writing pedagogy, the focus of the self's expressivist work is to authorize the writer as an agent. Writing constitutes a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and others. Women are engaged in living, learning, teaching, reading, and writing that takes place in their existence as daughters, mothers, sisters, teachers, and colleagues--mirroring the "others" in their own lives, bringing themselves into congruence with the gaze of the other. Donna Haraway and Carmen Luke urge women to distrust Foucault's removed asceticism, suggesting that the nature of existence, especially feminine existence, is plural and dialogically responsive to the world. Where Foucault prescribes a turning away from the world, Luke finds power in the everyday business of living. Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor for defining existence without difference. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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Gender / Authority, Teacher / Critic [1]

Recently, in the newly published collection *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition and English Studies*, I contributed a statement about some of the difficulties in teaching critical theory to undergraduates, particularly works translated from the French poststructuralists. In that piece, I explored the tensions between the resistant classroom environment that can develop after a few weeks of struggling with the material and the possible "transformative" potential of critical theory (you may recognize that language adopted from proponents of theory, from feminist consciousness-raising groups, and from the promises implicit in the type of pedagogical "testimonials" that I examined in *Writing Students*). Using Michel Foucault's recurring studies of the Greek ascetics and the Stoics as a lens for understanding the process of fortifying the self that seems to be necessary in studying the statements on literary form, discourse, and philosophy that has loosely been called theory, I concluded that the difficulties with theory may be less with the material itself than in the demands it places on readers to withdraw for prolonged periods of solitary study "between the book and the lamp," as Foucault put it.

In this discussion, I would like to return to this earlier statement in order to develop answers to questions I raised in the article. Consider this talk a postscript. In particular, I would like to balance the discussion of Foucault's ethics with a feminist perspective from which I hope

to draw attention to additional problematics in the relation between teacher, student, and material. It is evident by the title of my talk that I am working through a relationship between outside and inside, discipline and individual. Foucault posits that an ethics of self -- or *ethos* (carrying much the same connotation as the rhetorical) -- is developed through the cultivation of an "aesthetic of self," which is described in the *History of Sexuality* as "care of the self." Such an ethic, "training of self by oneself" ("Self" 208), ultimately raises ontological questions about the nature of being when teaching and studying criticism. For if the goal is transformation, then the self is being posited as malleable, or at least subject to disciplinary action. Let me say, too, that Foucault's late work on the aesthetics of existence are less than clear on his position. While traces of Foucault's earlier archaeologies (such as *Discipline and Punish* or *Madness and Civilization)* are evident in his latter speculations, Foucault approached his own *askesis* (an aesthetics of self) after a trip to San Francisco in the early 1980s, a time that was marked for him by a radical change in his own ethos and around which several semi-fabulous stories of Foucault's own "limit-experiments" with sex in bath houses arose (readers may want to consult James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*).

To summarize *The Use of Pleasure* as it relates to Foucault's oeuvre, Foucault's work on ontology (the study of the nature of being) and ethics (the study of the ways that the self interacts with others) can be paralleled with the compositionist categories of expressivism and social construction. In our writing pedagogy, the focus of the self's expressivist work is to authorize the writer as an agent, whereas the social constructivist project critiques the general cultural ideology that influences identity. In short, the self of expressivism becomes an identity category in social

constructionism. In Terry Threadgold's words, Foucault's "agenda was arguable one which emerged from the early structuralist arguments that cultural products were constructions of meaning, not the sources of them" (60).

My discussion of ethics concludes with a section that I enigmatically subtitled "Dead Letter?," and which responded to the overpowering sense of alienation and distress that students studying French theory were feeling in my classes. I introduced a student who I characterized as existing in a borderland between authenticity and "altarity," in which her former "ways of reading" traditional Western European literature according to traditional paradigms were challenged and dislocated by new languages and new paradigms, the "labyrinths of the bibliography," to paraphrase Foucault. In an autobiographical sequence, I characterized the writings of Foucault as somehow "dangerous." Philosophy becomes in Foucault's work a limit-experience so seductive that at a particular moment in Foucault's life and a particular moment in history (the time of Vietnam and Cambodia) his relationship to questions of morality and ethics became estranged from public notions of right. Limit experiences define what is societally acceptable, but Miller notes that when the limit is marked it creates "the space of a possible transgression" (Foucault qtd. in Miller 115). The "phenomena of the library" connect the ascetic with a fantastic and "imaginative space":

> To dream it is no longer necessary to close our eyes--only to read. The true image springs from knowledge: that of words spoken in the past, of exact recensions, of masses of detailed information, of infinitesimal fragments of monuments, of reproductions of reproductions. (Foucault qtd. in Miller 109)

As an artistic experience, then, the dream is also a site of potential transgression, "a premonition of the other," in which the other discovers an aspect of self "from which he cannot turn away, but near which he cannot linger" (Blanchot qtd. Miller 83). If the imaginary life of the ascetic is located in the library, then the library is reconceived as a space that resists finitude or complete knowledge. The pedagogical danger is that my criticism students dream of a complete bibliography, and this dream has pursued them like a grim specter into despair. The act of reflection upon a text or in the library represents withdrawal to a labyrinth of textual difficulty. Every experience of textual pleasure that arises from reading seductive poststructuralism is equaled by a prolonged moment of pain. And thus, I concluded the essay "Positions" with a series of questions:

> What educational actions do we perform and what consequences do those actions engender? If ethics is about how we ought to live, as a field of inquiry it encompasses utopic visions as well as utilitarian philosophies. What is the best life of the mind?[i] Can we judge that a pedagogical action is right by asking if it increases happiness? Should our pedagogical actions be judged based on their compliance with disciplinary rules? What metaphors describe the processes of reading and assimilating critical discourse? Invitation? Mystification? Seduction? Rape? (Helmers 66)

What is the best life of the mind? Perhaps predictably for someone who has been labeled "amoral," Foucault characterized the process of developing an "aesthetics of existence" as "a way of being whose moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of

behavior," (Foucault, *Use of Pleasure* 89), in other words, the ethics of self exists outside of "codes" or regulations. Yet, elsewhere, Foucault describes the formation of a self-aesthetics that involves others, invoking a principle of self-definition that is similar to Bakhtin's descriptions of the dialogic: "one always needs the help of others in the soul's labor upon itself," writes Foucault ("Self Writing" 215); even an ascetic commits to "living under gaze of others" (Foucault, "Self Writing" 219). Foucault here uses *gaze* in Laura Mulvey's sense, a sustained objectification of the self by the other. Using language familiar from *Discipline and Punish* and his work with Georges Canguilhelm's *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault speaks of "bringing into congruence" everyday actions "according to the rules of a technique of living" ("Self Writing" 220) -- in other words, measuring the self, presumed to be deviant, with the codes of behavior implicit in the gaze of the other, semantically defined as the "norm." If the self were not, in some way, always already corrupted, then there would be no need for the process of self-investigation (or "techniques") that Greek intellectuals (and later, of course, early Christians such as Augustine) proposed, and, of course, we should apply this line of thought to our students and their own writing. Foucault sees writing as an essential element in the development of the self. In both *The Use of Pleasure* and the piece "Self Writing," he investigates the keeping of journals by the Greeks as a defining regime of self-examination. These journals were neither private nor "dialectic" engagements with other writings in the way that they have become today, but they do share a way of thinking about training the self:

> As an element of self-training, writing has . . . an *ethopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*. (Foucault, "Self Writing" 209)

Foucault points out that the development of the ethos defines the need to speak. Writing is representational: it represents a stance on a subject, a developmental level of the writer, even a history, say a history of scholarship (as Foucault's own work does) or a history of life (as the paintings of Frida Kahlo are graphic autobiographies). Writing -- broadly construed as what Derrida terms *graphism*, or an act of inscribing -- "constitutes a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and others" (Foucault, "Self Writing" 216).

We are perhaps limited in describing writing as disciplinary and institutionally based. Rather than the ascetic's ethic of existence that is developed between the book and the lamp, Carmen Luke for example describes a discursive and pedagogical space that can be inscribed somewhere between the frozen foods and the fresh produce section at the Jewel Foods, between the glittering fuschia packaged Barbies and the understated wooden Brio trains at Toys R Us: the point is that women are engaged in living, learning, teaching, reading, and writing that takes place in their existence as daughters, mothers, sisters, teachers, and colleagues. Mirroring the "others" in their own lives, bringing themselves into congruence with the gaze of the other,

> The social relationships generated around children's popular culture are centered on *teaching and learning* skills and values, and larger sociocultural and political lessons about class, gender, ethnicity, social power, family, good vs. evil. (Luke 9)

And thus we return to the ethical. Luke's conclusions don't take anyone by surprise, but they are startlingly different when they are placed side-by-side with Foucault's own explorations into the nature of the self. Where Foucault prescribes a turning away from the world, Luke finds power in the everyday business of living in the world. Where Foucault retreats to the labyrinth of the

library, Luke examines the problematic material conditions of daily life. More concretely, where Foucault discoveries an ethical system in the practices of "self-writing" established by the Greeks, Luke posits that ethical systems derive from the way that children learn to engage with their playthings. Amidst the immensely fruitful ideas of Donna Haraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto," is a response to the dichotomous self / other existence. "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (175). Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor for defining existence without difference, for in addition to being part machine (the **cyb**ernetic construction) and part human (the **org**anism), the cyb/org is a liminal figure, existing as a completely new, late twentieth century construction that exists outside of gender polarities, outside of the nature / culture debate, and outside of Christian mythography that posits Man, Woman, and manmade things as corrupted. Thus the cyborg has the potential to define a new ontology. Haraway and Luke urge us to distrust Foucault's removed asceticism, suggesting that the nature of existence, especially feminine existence, is plural and dialogically responsive to the world. As Haraway says, "We are all cyborgs" (150).

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[i] These questions are based on questions raised in Peter Singer's introduction to the collection entitled *Ethics*.

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