Guru Style Teaching

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My paper at this conference last year used an article by Richard Klein to resist Harold Bloom’s view that being influenced is a sign of weakness. I was also endorsing Klein’s view that Richard Alpert’s act of becoming a follower of an Indian Swami was not just a good example of the opposite extreme but something to be laughed at. Fresh from me endorsing this mockery of people who have gurus, it comes as a surprise to find a highly regarded representative of French Critical Theory, Maurice Blanchot, taking a far more favourable attitude toward gurus. He says that it is important for a good teacher ‘not to smooth out the field of relations but to upset it, not to facilitate the paths to knowledge but above all to render them not only more difficult but truly impractical.’ And then he says this is ‘something that the oriental tradition of the master shows rather well.’ There is a problem with conventional teaching that has led Blanchot to try to rehabilitate a form of teaching that, according to Klein, quoting Hegel ‘represents the anachronistic remnants of the earliest moment of philosophical history.’

The problem Blanchot is alluding to is that conventional teachers do the one thing that an Oriental master would never do with his or her disciples. Conventional teachers do ‘exposition.’ Blanchot identifies this practice with how philosophy has come to be taught in the university and he is surely right that refusing to do exposition sits uneasily with the formal role of the university professor. As the paradigmatic example of exposition, Blanchot cites Hegel, speaking ‘from the heights of a university chair.’ While he concedes that Hegel has disciples, he insists that, as products of exposition, they are only a feeble case of the recipients of good teaching.

But what is wrong with teaching by exposition? Blanchot suggests there is a problem with: ‘a language of assertion and answer, for example, or a language of linear development, that is to say a language where language itself would not be at stake.’

The problem then is that what must be learned is something about language. Teachers who merely speak in a linear way or merely make
statements and answer questions are relying on the very form of language that must be questioned. But what is it about language that needs to be taught and how might the Oriental tradition of master-disciple relations facilitate it? In an admittedly difficult short passage, Blanchot alludes to both what is distinctive about the Oriental form of teaching and why it is an appropriate response to the problem. Their tactic of relating to everything by way of an experience of the very interruption of relations is nothing other than hearing speech and learning to speak.

To help us begin to grasp what this could mean, here are two examples of Oriental style teaching. 1. A martial arts student went to a teacher and declared he wanted to learn the system. He was devoted and ready. How long would it take? The teacher replied: “Ten years.” The student, not satisfied with the answer, went ahead and said: But I want to master it faster than that, I will work very hard, practice 10 or more hours a day if necessary. How long would it THEN take? The teacher replied: “Twenty years.”

2. I Left Her At The River
A senior and junior monk are walking down a path together and they come to a river with a strong current. As they prepare to cross, they see a young, beautiful woman in need of help to brave the waters. She notices the monks and asks for help. The senior monk carries the woman on his shoulder and lets her gently down on the other bank. They part ways. The junior monk is upset.

Hours go by and the senior monk, noticing the discomfort on the younger monk asks: “Is something in your mind?” The junior monk says: “As monks we are not permitted to touch a woman, how could you carry her across the river?” – The senior monk replies: “I left the woman hours ago at the bank, however, you seem to still be carrying her”.

Although it cannot be said that these questioners are not getting a kind of answer, what is most noticeable is that the ‘answers’ do not really address their supposed concerns. In the first case, what the disciple is hoping to learn is how much closer, by a measurable increase in effort, he could be to attaining his goal. In the second, he wants to know how he can justify the master’s rule violation.

But, in each case, it is the previously unquestioned value of what they are asking for, whether a measurable recipe for success or a clear explanation of why the master has violated a rule, that is made into
the topic. Hence, as Blanchot puts it, the master offers no smooth path to follow. And in that the questioners are referred back to consider whether they are asking the right question, it does feel that, where they wanted linear development, they are instead faced with interruptions.

The disciples in both these cases can be formulated as not hearing their own speech, in the second case not hearing how their question reveals they have let something fester, in the first case, not hearing that the question reveals they are suffering from impatience. But can learning to hear one’s own speech and learning how to speak really be seen to be a general problem, given, that of course, in the normal senses of the word, we already know how to speak and are quite capable of hearing what we say?

Helpful in addressing this question is the work of Alan Blum and Peter McHugh. In all of their work, they make a radical distinction between what it is to be a member and what it is to be a theorist but most relevant is the way they discuss speaking and listening in an early work. Here they develop the concept of the ‘ideal speaker.’ Four passages are particularly salient:

The interlocutor or ideal speaker is one who shows self-maintenance through composing and gathering...

The interlocutor is ‘ideal’...as representative of the kind of hearing which we have depicted as thoughtful and composed self-maintenance and hearing attunement.

The ideal speaker collects, as a form, the course of action named by the practice as if it were the action described by a self-conscious practitioner.

The ideal speaker needs to be conceived as directed by a passion to signify Desire in the usage.

Clearly, then, though we all have already learned to speak and to hear, we may not yet have learned to speak and listen, whether to ourselves or others in the manner of ideal speakers. That is, we do not yet speak self-consciously, in a way that we are oriented as to
what we are desiring to signify. We do not yet hear in the sense of
listen to what we are saying.

Furthermore, Blum and McHugh insist that one is not likely to
become an ideal speaker by natural means or even just through one’s
own efforts. Instead, one is likely to need a teacher. The teacher is
needed because, what is required is likely, even certain, to at first
appear to one who has not been exposed to this way of speaking and
listening as a very strange demand. A teacher, then, has the task of
‘transforming the demand, i.e. to become an ideal speaker, into
something after which men can quest.’ By so doing ‘in this sense, the
teacher socializes the issues of speaking and hearing.’

At this point, we can say that, given the problem, the strategy for
dealing with it that Blanchot admits the Oriental tradition shows
rather well, does begin to seem a plausible avenue to pursue. The
disciple speaks in a normal way but is then interrupted, the
interruption serving to throw her back to listen to what she could be
saying in the sense of signifying. As some confirmation, I can recall
certain moves by Blum and McHugh that I have personally
experienced that do strike me, at least in retrospect, as rather guru
like.

Here are just three examples, the first two, from my relationship with
McHugh.

I was trying to explain how much of a struggle I was having in trying
to develop a certain idea and I said:

I was actually having to work on that before breakfast. Peter said:
‘Before breakfast, eh?’

I was arriving in London, having taken the train from Edinburgh and
soon after my arrival I said: I was reading Talcott Parsons’ *The Social
System* on the train.’ He said: ‘There is no accounting for taste’.

In the first case, without quite realizing what I was saying I intended
‘before breakfast’ as signifying how much of a struggle I was having
and, instead, I was stimulated to become an ideal speaker for a
struggle with the hint that just working before breakfast was not
likely to adequately signify struggle. In the second case, I was
stimulated to appreciate that what a conscious version of what I was saying would let me appreciate was that I was inappropriately seeking to engage someone in a discussion of Talcott Parsons. In both cases, it did feel like I was going somewhere and expected my interlocutor to follow but instead I was, in Blanchot’s terms, interrupted. And both Peter’s moves did work as helping me learn how to speak and listen to myself, whether about struggle, or about when and where to seek to engage an other in conversation on a topic.

Here is the third example. Very recently, in fact in the run up to this conference, I emailed Alan in an attempt to ascertain if we held the event here in Syros, whether he would attend. Alan wrote back:

“I hereby swear and promise to abide by the....etc”

In this third case, I was invited to consider whether my speech could signify that I was overly concerned with eliminating the grey zone of uncertainty. Also, as this case occurred quite recently, it suggests that there is a perpetual chance of backsliding even among those whose first chances to learn the lesson of how to speak and listen to oneself occurred many many years ago.

What are we to make of the advantages and pitfalls of this method of teaching? It is worth noting that Blanchot is not at all sanguine about its efficacy. There is a major way it can fail to teach the disciple how to speak, namely whenever the lesson gets confused with ‘the person of the master.’ Then it is his own qualities, his value as an example, his virtues as guru or zaddik (his master’s transcendence) and no longer the form of interrelational space of which he is but one of the terms, that becomes the source of wisdom.’

The source of wisdom here is the possibility and desireability of becoming an ideal speaker and both master and disciple are not best seen in terms of their human qualities such as they are, but as participants in this endeavour. It is the possibility and desireablty of being an ideal speaker that is the source of wisdom, this thing the teacher is trying to represent, not their personal qualities.

Either the would be master, presumably by making it too much about him personally or the disciple, by misunderstanding the source or both could be responsible for failing to get the point across. In either
case, one no longer has a form of teaching that represents or conveys what is demanded, namely becoming an ideal speaker.

But what results to the extent that the learning does occur? Blum and McHugh would say a kind of community and we can add that it would be a community composed of ideal speakers.

However, it would be disturbing if this piece, published back in 1979, would be the last word on what a community that is lucky enough to have been exposed to this form of teaching and assimilated the lesson could look like. I think we get an improved version of the hoped for outcome just a few years later in the book *Self Reflection in the Arts and Sciences*.

Clearly this term, self reflection, is another way of articulating the notion that a speaker needs to become conscious or listen to herself but more precisely, in this book we get an argument as to the form of self reflection that is to be recommended. Now it is said that we need to use our speech to signify or represent what our community needs and desires.

With this revision, is guru style teaching still necessary? Recall that our two ways of seeing when something like a guru might be required were when the lesson is truly impractical and when what is problematized is how to speak. We can see that both these still apply if we understand two things that are still true of using speech to represent community needs and desires. First, we see this is not practical in that, in their book, it is differentiated from two much more practical demands that could be put on the student, namely that he or she do what is expected or that he or she at least do what is reasonable. Both these are far more practical demands than working out on every occasion what might currently be needed or desirable in one’s community. Second, this new demand still does problematize how one should speak. For example, doing an exposition is clearly not necessarily the kind of speech that would manage to signify what, at any given time and place, one’s community needs or what would be desirable for it.