

Knowledge Evanescent

Every child should stand before the soul of the teacher as a question posed by the supersensible world to the sense world.

This quote is taken from Rudolf Steiner's *Education as a Social Problem*, a collection of his speeches given in 1919. Ever since I saw an exhibition of his chalkboard drawings I have been meaning to search out my local Anthroposophical Society. Finally I did, and it turned out to be only a hop, skip and a jump from Art Center where I got (and bought) an M.F.A. degree. That degree certifies me to be a teacher, something I have a lot of trouble with. I deem my newfound teacher status responsible for my choosing a book with the words 'Problem' and 'Education' in the title rather than, say, a book which would ordinarily demand my attention, like the one my boyfriend checked-out, *Friedrich Nietzsche, Fighter for Freedom*. Here's an example of one of my problems: a few students defiantly announced to me recently, 'I just don't buy it'. The 'it' they don't buy is the so-called 'culture industry' as outlined by Adorno & Horkheimer in 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'¹. There is a huge difference between teaching and selling, right? I know 'buying it' is just a figure of speech, but I can't help but ask what it is art students *are* buying, I mean really, what are they paying for? Is this a question my soul can handle? *Education as a Social Problem* is a pretty weird book and I don't really recommend it because it strays a lot from the problem, the problem being – God, man, teaching people. Initially I only typed 'God, man' as colloquial filler but no sooner realized that it unconsciously announces a subject almost too ridiculous to bring up in an art magazine – that is, specifically the relationship between Man (here you can substitute 'art student') and God.

After having delivered the culture industry material in such a way that utterly lacked any of the finesse and efficacy of some of my seasoned history professors back at State University, a defeatist mood swept over me. Then came this weird urge just to ask my class to read J.D. Salinger's short novel *Franny and Zooey* (1955). I was afraid, however, that they wouldn't be able to see past the Ivy League setting, the raccoon coats and all that. As I reread the part where

Franny, a young college student on the verge of some kind of breakdown (or break through), sits with her beaux in a swanky, trendy restaurant, I pictured my class disgusted by the overall prepiness. I imagined them alienated from a scene they couldn't picture or identify with (the frogs' legs, the many references to Flaubert²). That I would abandon critical theory and go for Salinger is, I admit, a bit peculiar, but that I would assume any students' inability to read a text they could not immediately sympathize with is extremely problematic, a disconcerting confession. An article by Francine Prose in *Harper's* last September confirmed that my assumption may not be unfounded. The article's title, 'Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read', plays off the title of the Maya Angelou book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) a not so subtle indictment of crappy moral-of-the-story writing for the current crappiness of America's literacy standards. The author addresses several texts, including a handful of books written for teachers, like *Teaching Values Through Teaching Literature*. It seems students aren't learning how to do 'close line-by-line readings' and instead are simply offered a forum to discuss their feelings towards the good guys and the bad guys. Ok, enough of that social problem; let's get back to Franny, because that's where God comes in.

Franny is a student who is starting to see the world differently and her boyfriend's attitude toward learning is starting to seriously get on her nerves. Franny: 'I'm just so sick of pedants and conceited little tearer-downers I could scream.' It turns out she's taken up praying instead of screaming. It gets a little awkward when she begins describing *The Way of the Pilgrim* (the book that taught her about prayer) to her boyfriend – who is in the habit of prefacing almost every noun he utters with 'goddam'. She tells him how you just say the name of God over and over and how at first you just need quantity and then quality follows. To him, it's just 'mumbo-jumbo.'

Doing studio visits with graduate students is a breezy experience compared to standing up in front of a room full of twenty-somethings next to an empty chalkboard. Jennifer Moon, the last

¹ Adorno & Horkheimer 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1969.

² Note to self: Next time why not try Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*?

graduate student I met with, gave me a poster to take home with me. It's hanging in my house today. It's a new-age looking flyer, a psychedelic rainbow spectrum of dark *don'ts* that graduate into bright *dos*. Some of the many *don'ts* include 'Lack of Criticality', and 'Dependency on Oppressive Systems'. Up high in the *dos*-zone along with 'Redistribute Wealth,' you will find 'Start a free, private, accredited school' – a suggestion elaborated upon by the following: 'continuous exploration into the multitude of unconventional forms of learning, especially those which can lead to a superhuman existence.' Recently Jennifer Moon, now graduated, was doing a piece where she was giving 'free advice'. I couldn't partake in the free advice (a form of Deleuzian 'mutual self-help?'), because I promised my mother I would participate in a workshop she was giving called 'Thinking about Thinking'. It turns out that my mother's 'Thinking about Thinking' was precisely such an attempt to 'explore the multitude of unconventional forms of learning, especially those which can lead to a superhuman existence'. All her workshop material was based on the teachings of Gurdjieff, the Russian philosopher and guru.³ After the workshop I was checking out some of her books and picked up Michel Waldberg's *Gurdjieff: An Approach to his Ideas* (1981). I opened to a chapter called 'The Terror-of-the-situation' and started reading: 'It is scandalous that all weaknesses are permitted in the realm of 'private life', and that our system of education teaches everything except self-knowledge and self-mastery.' In describing his teaching, Gurdjieff, in his own words, writes '...a man must do nothing that he does not understand, except as an experiment under the supervision and direction of his teacher. The more a man understands what he is doing the greater will be the results of his efforts....The results of work are in proportion to the consciousness of the work.' (Waldberg, p. 14) This sounds an awful lot like an M.F.A studio program, where the boundary between work and self is increasingly difficult to determine.⁴

The other night I was talking on the phone to my gallerist and in the background was the relatively new hit TV show (read: culture-industry product) *Felicity* and he was like 'hold on I have

to hear this...' Felicity was in a crit and the teacher and/or students were being mean, so mean in fact that she got really upset and decided to quit the class altogether. He held the phone up to his TV so that I could hear the part where she speaks her mind. I cringed listening to the disembodied female teenage voice over of self-conscious Reason. I can't remember anything she said, it was a little trite. However, it reminded me of a rant that Franny launches after her boyfriend accuses her of quitting her theatre class because she fears competition. 'I'm sick of ego, ego, ego! I'm not afraid to compete...I'm afraid I *will* compete! I'm so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values! I'm ashamed of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I'm sick of myself and everybody else that wants to make some kind of a splash.' Now there's a memorable excuse for quitting class. Incidentally, some of my students informed me that Felicity is back in her art class, and I think she's even majoring in it.

3 Gurdjieff's well-known disciple is P.D. Ouspensky who wrote the book *In Search of the Miraculous*, – where Bas Jan Ader got his title although it is said that he never actually read the book.

4 Maybe this explanation about 'man's physical configuration' can come in handy if you're really trying to map yourself out: 'one can say, the human head is chiefly head. The chest is less head but still somewhat head. The limbs and everything belonging to the metabolic system are still less head, but nevertheless, head. One really has to say that the whole human being is head, but only the head is chiefly head.' (Steiner, p.68)