The Teacher's Vocation: Ontology of Response

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Abstract

We argue that pedagogic authority relies on love, which is misunderstood if seen as a matter of actions and subjects. Love is based not on finite subjects and objects existing in Euclidean space and linear time, but, rather, on the non-finite ontology, space and time of relations. Loving authority is a matter of calling and vocation, arising from the spontaneous and simultaneous call-and-response of a lively relation. We make this argument through a reading of Buber's I-You relation and Murdoch' s account of the responsiveness of ascetic discipline. In presenting this analysis, we draw upon a case study from a research project on Australian teachers and students.

Key words

authority, vocation, subjectivity, ontology, love, I-Thou, responsibility

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Love and authority

In his book *Authority*, Richard Sennett (1980) makes a distinction between 'authority without love', which is externally imposed by one upon another, and 'authority with love', which is a relation through which people give and receive the support they need to live creatively. We will argue that there are distinct social logics and ontologies in these two forms of authority. The former is based on finite subjects and objects existing in Euclidean space and linear time; the latter has neither subjects nor objects, but is based, instead, on the non-finite ontology, space and time of relations. Loving authority is a matter of calling and vocation, arising from the spontaneous and simultaneous call-and-response of a lively relation. We will show that this pattern, and therefore pedagogic authority, is misunderstood if seen as the responsibility of subjects.

Love is a concept rarely used in social philosophy and cultural analysis, avoided for fear of sentimentality, but, as Sennett insists, it is crucial to a precise and realistic understanding of different forms of authority. Our understanding of love rests upon Martin Buber's account of ethics. Buber uses the term 'I-It' to describe the

desirous logic of finite subjects and objects, and the term 'I-You' (sometimes translated as 'I-Thou') to describe relations based on the infinitude. He insists that love is not personal, not a feeling or desire of one subject for another, but the quality of the I-You relation that arises without anyone bringing it about:

> Feelings are 'entertained': love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content', its object; but love is *between I* and *Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love… . Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him [who takes his stand in love]; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*. … Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*.' (1958, pp. 14-15)

When in an I-It relation, Buber can see a tree, for example, as picturesque, he can admire its vitality, he can classify it as a species and study it as a type, or see it as an example of a scientific law, or can turn it into a number, but in all of these cases 'the tree remains my object, occupies space and time'.

> *It can, however, also come about* … that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. …
>
> To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.
>
> Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole. (1958, pp. 7-8, emphasis added)

When the I becomes bound up in relation to the tree, a relation that comes about but is not brought about by any one, Buber is talking of an I-You relation. This does not involve the negation of the I-It form, but indicates the necessary relation between I-You and I-It. Thus, for example, in the moment of I-You, the tree is simultaneously locatable and not reducible to location. There is seeing, but no see-er or seen. When the tree is present as a whole, the I-You sees no *thing*, and therefore needs to exclude nothing from what is seen.

This is infinitude, but rather than the poststructuralist sense of infinitude as endless deferral and displacement, as more added on, this is infinitude that is wholly here and now, present in the meeting:

> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object…. *Thou* has no bounds….
>
> The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*…. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*….
>
> (1958, pp. 4, 11)

This passage clarifies what Buber means when he says that love and the I-You relation allow people to be seen in their singleness. He is referring not to individuality but to uniqueness and incomparability, which include but are not exhausted by any classification or accountancy. Incomparability is not finite, or identifiable, or oneness, for these are the products of desire and fancy. Uniqueness, only experienced through direct encounter, is no-thingness or infinitude. Buber puts it this way: 'Inseparable, incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, [my concrete world reality] gazes upon me with an awesome look' (1966, 22). But, of course, this is a non-directional vision, and not the gaze of a subject onto an external world.

If the You is no-thing, Buber's I-You cannot be intersubjective, a meeting of subjects, or the space *between* subjects, as modern commentators often assume (eg. Sidorkin, 1996). When the speaker 'has no thing for their object', they cannot be a subject, because they lack the mirroring that would turn them into one. They too are no-thing, open in an accepting unintegrated state where there is both difference and stillness. In the meeting, participants have found *being* in losing their *selves*. Participants, it follows, are not subjects, but parts of a whole, where every part is vitally and necessarily different but where each is the germ of the whole. They are, in Merleau-Ponty's phrase, different possibilities in the whole of Being (1968, p. 270).

The subjectlessness of Buber's I-You relation is based on its desirelessness ('no aim, no lust, and no anticipation'). Meeting is an acceptance of *whatever* is given by the world in the particularity of an encounter. As Buber says 'The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking' (1958, p. 11). Unlike the world projected by desire, the relational world of acceptance has 'the simplicity of fullness' (2002, pp. 34-5). This fullness isn't a oneness or satiation, but is an emptiness; it is a sense of acceptance and connection, of gift and grace, that suspends the restless time of desire. From the perspective of a desire-based logic, love is the source of subjective bias. But from Buber's perspective, love

suspends the sentimentality of personal attachments and allows us to meet the world as it is, unique, irreducible, here, now. Wholeness is not unity, abstraction, totalisation or generality, but is the shock, and presence, of infinitude, particularity and gratuity.

Whereas desire seeks an object that will mirror the subject, true love, then, inclines us to truth; it reveals the possibilities of the world as it really is, by allowing us to meet difference. Learning based on love, unlike learning based on desire, can never be an appropriation. Echoing Buber's claim that love allows acceptance of the whole, Raimond Gaita says:

> Iris Murdoch said that understanding the reality of another person is a work of love, justice and pity. She meant, I think, that love, justice and pity are *forms* of understanding, rather than merely conditions which facilitate understanding - conditions like a clear head, a good night's sleep, an alcohol-free brain. Real love is hardheaded and unsentimental. When one rids oneself of sentimentality, pathos and similar failings, one allows justice, love and pity to do their *cognitive* work, their work of disclosing reality. Sometimes the full reality of another human being is visible only to love (2001).

Also drawing on Murdoch, Liston argues that the teacher's love is one that 'takes the individual beyond his or her personal concerns to a clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty … and on the world around and beyond us' (2000, p. 95). It allows teachers to accept uncertainty with humility and to attend to the reality of the learning situation before them, in the here and now, without anticipation. This patient and attentive state is essential if teachers are to play their part in helping students engage with the larger world and find those connections with their lives that show 'that significance exists' (Liston, 2000, p. 81). It is the teacher's non-subjective love that allows students to trust them: the teacher's authority *is* love.

It is interesting that Murdoch helps both Gaita and Liston reflect on teaching, for she is directly writing of morality and art. This highlights the ethical and creative nature of good teaching. Teaching requires the non-subjective ontological state required by all creative work (see Williams, 2005). Borrowing from Simone Weil, Murdoch calls this state 'attention', claiming that it is the basis of a moral life and pointing out that its ontology undermines the dichotomy of freedom *or* determinism (1970, pp. 34-7): 'If I attend properly I will have no choices…. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a

person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like "obedience"' (1970, p. 40; c.f. Arendt, 1970, p. 45). Although Murdoch is directed, by grammatical conventions, into the language of the I and the thing, these are no longer conceptually appropriate. Attention is a matter of ontological, spatial and temporal shift.

Murdoch describes attention as a state where choices (and therefore subjects) do not arise. This is not a model of a moral life, any more than Liston is offering a model of the good teacher, because the point both writers make is that there is no abstract model to follow, and no state that can be achieved by a worthy subject (see also Noddings, 1984). Goodness which, Murdoch says, has the quality of 'naked' 'for-nothingness' (1970, p. 92), is not produced by a willfully virtuous subject but by response to the particularities of a given, and therefore gratuitous, situation:

> The chief enemy of excellence… is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is'. This is not easy and requires… a

> discipline.… We cease to be in order to attend to the order of something else. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59)

What this brief discussion suggests, therefore, is the claim that love is authoritative. Love is not a desire or personal feeling that we entertain, not something we find through seeking, but is a relational form through which particularity, vitality and significance emerge. Because of its sense of wholeness, this form commands -- requiring attention, the setting aside of self-centred fantasies, acceptance of the world as it truly is, acceptance of a humble yet meaningful part -- but this is not a demand coming from a Euclidean outside and it is not received by a subject that can use the word I as either representation or performance. It is a command which comes from no identifiable one, and no identifiable location, and which travels no where and to on one. Nevertheless, it is a command in which previously unrecognised needs are immediately recognized.

Accordingly, this discussion suggests that the call is not *prior* to the response, for this is still to presume the existence of subjects, Euclidean space and linear time. To hear is to respond; there is no hearing if there is not the openness to

respond. This is the logic of vocation, a authoritative calling that is itself a response, a simultaneous speaking and listening.

This understanding of responsibility, as infinite call-and-response, is unlike the masterful notion of responsibility as control on behalf of some one or some thing else. But it is this understanding, we will argue, that makes sense of Sennett's loving authority, and it is this authority that underlies good teaching.

Teacher and student

To develop an understanding of love and authority in the classroom, we will draw material from a case study. This comes from a research project on 'teachers who change lives', for which we interviewed 13 well-known Australians and 22 teachers, the latter coming from all levels of formal education and a diversity of disciplines. In semi-structured interviews, we invited all interviewees to talk about their experiences of life-changing teachers, and the teachers to talk about their own teaching practices and experiences.

When we interviewed Nick Jose, writer, critic and Professor of Creative Writing, he nominated Mr Schubert as the teacher who changed his life. Mr

Schubert had died before our study, but we were shown letters that he wrote to Nick and to another student from the same time. The teaching-learning relation described in this material resonates with accounts from most of our interviews, but we will focus on this single example to provide the particularities that readers need in order to literally get a feel for the conceptual issues involved. Our methodology, in other words, is phenomenological, involving the participatory logic that Buber described as I-You.

Here, first, is Nick's description of Mr Schubert.

> What the teacher does is in the here and now, that's where it happens, and then there is this distant harvest, which they have to just trust in. Teachers can't predict exactly what will happen. Their work is an act of faith. Even if the teacher knows what students become, they know always another part of them. So they have quite a rounded sense of what people are, that there are always going to be other aspects to them. They know that, despite social standing and success, there are always other measures of value. Being an outsider himself [a German in Australia, twenty years after the second world war] helped Mr Schubert see that.

I learned to read literature from Mr Schubert. Although my practice has changed, that chord is still there. I think I'm incredibly lucky to have had such a good teacher. He was quite an imposing figure, partly because he was such a senior teacher, partly because he had the English and the German, that was another layer of learning. He was sort of upright and solid, and he was quite sharp in his rebukes of people who were not taking their work seriously. He also had a very distinctive croaky voice -- we called him Frog Schubert -- and a very big nose. He was almost a Gothic figure; one had a lot of respect for him, combined with a certain fear. He was quite a tough teacher, but very, very good.

Mr Schubert had a really deep love of literature. The texts he chose for us were fantastic texts he had a passion for, and, however strange his manner, he was able to convey that passion. He was very sensitive to literature and was always challenging us boys to be responsive as well. He was challenging us to tap into quite powerful forces in our lives, and that was a way of letting us be ourselves.

He seemed blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on us. He would be there, he would rub his nose a lot and he'd read out these bits, like the quote from *Othello* - 'an old black ram … tupping your white

ewe'. It was electrifying! Because he was blissfully unaware, we thought it was okay too. He treated us absolutely as if we were mature people intellectually. There was no talking down, and so that does lead to a kind of mutual respect.

As 16 year old boys, we found it incredibly difficult to express what we had inside. If Mr Schubert had been too intimate with us or too informal, I think we would have found it crippling. But by having this formal structure, it allowed us to get past our reserve; if we thought we were doing academic work, we could write about a love poem without becoming paralysed.

I learned [from Mr Schubert] a way of reading that was close, sensuous, and very precise. This subtle way of responding is what I still use when reviewing something or writing something myself. I feel quite confident in my method; I can trust my responses and I can articulate them. I don't need to try too hard, but just do it naturally as I've been taught. I know it will work: I proved that to myself with Mr Schubert, who wouldn't let me get away with showing off. When showing off, you're interposing your own bright ideas, rather than letting your responses come from the text.

Mr Schubert gave an idea of his pedagogy in a reply to a letter from a grateful student:

> How thoughtful of you to guess what a letter like yours, coming out of the blue as it did, would mean to a teacher like me. A teacher's work can properly be judged only by its long-term outcome, of which, in the nature of things, he can normally expect to know little or nothing: he works, as it were, largely in the dark.
>
> Additionally, there is the question of what criterion it is appropriate to use. Recently, at a dinner at the School, I sat between [A], who was still plainly excited by being newly appointed a judge of the Supreme Court, and [B], who makes no bones about his satisfaction with his role in shaping the policies of the Reserve Bank. But, perversely perhaps, I am even more impressed by [C], who tells me he still always has his Donne on his bedside table, or [D], who claims that he reads more poetry than anything else.

In a letter to Nick, Mr Schubert wrote:

No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value. To me teaching something was by far the best way of learning it. Now often I found that my knowledge of a work – an ode of Keats, a play of Shakespeare – which I had long been familiar with was only a glib one. And certainly a class would find you out. No amount of study, of course would unravel *Lycidas* or *The Ancient Mariner*, but all that was essential was the plain evidence that you had grappled with it. I also fancy a teacher is fortunate above most because he has the privilege of encountering so many minds vastly superior to his own. Together they can engage in that one essential pursuit of man – endlessly to seek out the truth. As Donne puts it *On a huge hill, Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will Reach her, about must, and about must goe.* Except for those blinding moments which fire you to continue the search, there is, of course, no hope of ever attaining your goal. And beware of that man who claims he has done so. But, as I see it, nothing exonerates one from this unrelenting task.

And now you have become a writer – lucky you. I suppose the problem is how to make the language of the tribe, which is the only one available to you ('What no-one with us shares, scarce seems our own'), the

medium of your own unique individuality. What fascinates me are the interstices of language, the meaning that pulsates between the words, the saying of what is not being said, of what cannot be said, of what is unsayable.

We'll have to forgive you what is surely only a momentary heresy – 'The world may not need another book' you say. But, as you well know, of course it does – if for no other reason than because it's a different world from what it was a moment ago, and with the passing of that moment, the whole past has shifted, so that Dante, for example, now means something else than he did before.

Teaching in the dark

Nick describes Mr. Schubert as passionate, but this should not be taken as a desirous state. Passion is something that people suffer; it is a condition that requires acceptance. The classroom was inspiring, but Mr. Schubert didn't act to bring about this effect. It was a classroom characterized by love, but this was not a love of any thing or any one. It was inclusive: Nick seems to have loved his classes, to have loved learning, to have loved Mr Schubert, to have loved

Othello, but love didn't settle on any one of these. Each part held the whole. If there was no object of love, there was also no subject: in such a state, Nick would not have said 'I want' or 'I am right', but rather, '*this* is right'.

In her article on Derrida and Arendt, O'Byrne advocates a 'pedagogy without a project' (2005, p. 406). In philosophical terms, she says, 'this is a demand for the displacement of the subject' (2005, p. 406). 'We rebuild the world by acting, but, because acting is always acting with or in the midst of others, we have no control over what becomes of our action' (O'Byrne, 2005, p. 393). Our reading of Buber and Murdoch, and Nick and Mr. Schubert, suggests that this formulation does not go far enough. O'Byrne displaces the centred subject, but does not recognize the significance of classroom situations that do not involve 'acting with or in the midst of others'. A pedagogy without project implies the possibility of learning and teaching relations without subjects, and it is from this suspension of subjecthood that loving authority emerges.

Mr. Schubert's authority arose from vocation, which was based not on his decisions or desires, but on faith in the significance of this class, this day. Nick is alluding to this when he says that the teacher's work is an act of faith in the here and now. Although Nick imagines that there is a 'distant harvest', Mr Schubert insists that teachers remain in the dark. There is no future which will

vindicate his worth. Vocation is an ascetic discipline that makes teachers aware of the vanity and 'fakeness' of consolation (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59).

It is likely that, in I-It mode, Mr Schubert 'entertained' a range of hopes for his students (c.f. Buber, 1958, p. 14). He might have hoped that they would be successful in their careers, that they would serve others, that they would be sustained by their relationships with books. Nevertheless, he seems to have bemusedly recognized that these hopes were fantastic projections that would take him away from the reality that mattered, in the present ('there is the question of what criterion it is appropriate to use'). Accordingly, hopes did not settle into finite desires that would allow him to appraise his success with each student (see Hillman, 1978; Metcalfe and Game, 2007). In Nick's experience, Mr Schubert's authority protected the classroom from the desirous preoccupation with outcomes characteristic of a mass education system. Speaking of the practice he learned from Mr. Schubert, he said 'I feel quite confident in my method; I don't need to try too hard'.

We imagine that Mr Schubert was, in a sense, hopelessly in love with his poets, his students, his work, and his world, all of which were part of a whole. There was no choice in this love. Accordingly, his vocation inclined his classes to a

hopeless hope, which accepts tomorrow as the unfolding of today, having faith that tomorrow will fulfill today in a way that no one today could expect. This is not a hope for but an acceptance of the creativity of relations which lead us to become what we (don't yet quite know we) are. It is interesting in this regard that Nick characterised Mr Schubert as a life-changing teacher *because* he 'was always challenging us to… and letting us be ourselves' (c.f. Williams, 2005, p. 18). More accurately, Mr. Schubert allowed students to be without being a self. Nick reports, for example, that Mr Schubert encouraged honest response while discouraging the vanity of cleverness: 'When showing off, you're interposing your own bright ideas, rather than letting your responses come from the text.'

The sense of potential found in hopeless hope is not to be confused with an innate talent that could be realized in the future. When Mr Schubert saw his students' potential, it was not a foreknowledge of what the student could or should do, but the openness and vitality that revealed the student's whole-hearted and therefore unique engagement. Potential is the infinitude of open relation. As Nick said 'Even if the teacher knows what students become, they know always another part of them. So they have quite a rounded sense of what people are, that there are always going to be other aspects to them' .

This sense of potential allows us to clarify the difference between Buber's infinitude and O'Byrne's endlessly displaced subjectivity. O'Bryne sees in this displacement the opportunity to defer any identification that would forestall 'the natal's capacity for newness' (2005, p. 393). In other words, she assumes that difference is novelty and is only safe if there is no meeting. Buber's point is that meetings don't involve identification and objectification because they do not involve subjects. The infinitude of I-You is the meeting of difference here, now.

The ontology of I-You also helps us understand the basis of Mr Schubert's 'imposing' presence. We do not think that Nick is suggesting that Mr Schubert is an external interference or that the classroom is a Euclidean space. He does seem to suggest, though, that Mr Schubert's sense of vocation required that he attend seriously if students were not responding openly to their work, their lives, the world. 'He was sort of upright and solid, and he was quite sharp in his rebukes of people who were not taking their work seriously.' His toughness does not measure students against an objective standard, but it does ask them if they are responding, whole-heartedly and without defence, to the challenges they face.

It was, indeed, Mr Schubert's open defencelessness that contributed to his authority. When Nick described Mr Schubert as 'blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on us', he was highlighting the unselfconsciousness of Mr Schubert's engagement in the classroom. It was this authenticity, and the lack of the ulterior motive of a project, which made Mr Schubert trustworthy. Mr. Schubert taught, not by saying what he knew, but by manifesting his love of learning. ('No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value. To me teaching something was by far the best way of learning it.') There was teaching and learning in this classroom but no-one could have said who was doing what.

An authority based on the open vulnerability of authentic presence is not an authority that a subject can possess. Mr Schubert could not have carried the class himself, for his authority came from the *relationship* between students and teacher. Mr Schubert's undefended lack of certain forms of power called for the students' participation, thereby allowing them to participate in authority rather than feeling subject to it. Mr Schubert and the students were both carriers of the love of learning and literature.

Sennett's account of the association of dread with honesty helps us understand the awe that Nick felt in the presence of Mr Schubert. Sennett distinguishes between the terror associated with an authoritarian leader and the awe and dread associated with loving authority. A conductor like Arturo Toscanini, Sennett says, would try to control his orchestra by screaming and stamping his feet and venting his wrath at any player who did not do as he said. With Pierre Monteux, by contrast, there were no coercions, no threats; he was simply trying to help his players improve: 'Are you sure, cellos, you would like to be so loud?' As part of his kindly and avuncular air, however, Monteux offered the searching honesty of love:

> A moment in the slow movement of the Second Piano Concerto of Brahms when the solo cello is hideously out of tune; Monteux stops the orchestra and looks at the cellist in total silence. What makes it awful is, you know he would never have done this to the last cello in the section; you failed to live up to what *you* should be, and he is calling you to account. And this is again an element in what made Monteux an authority: he had the strength to see through you, to refuse what your peers accepted. (Sennett, 1980, p. 17)

The authoritarian teacher misleads students by encouraging fantasies of self. In some cases, like Toscanini's, this can be terrifying, but, in the case of a teacher who plays favourites, it can be seductive. The loving teacher is dreadful, however, because their openness sees through the students' defences. Teachers change students' lives by keeping the students real. Such teachers are not super-egos, identifying the students' characteristics and judging them against external or abstract standards. Instead, they are loving and faithful witnesses. Whenever students are inclined to lie to themselves, to withdraw from the world and their own potential, the teachers are there, to help them become aware of what they are doing. A loving authority teaches students how to stay in relation with the world, how to live with the apparent uncertainty of openness, how to develop the awareness that will continue to teach them after their school years.

Ascetic discipline

A classroom characterized by the passion and responsiveness of which Nick speaks is a classroom without subjects. How, it might be asked, is a subjectless classrooom produced if not by subjects? At this point, pedagogy takes up a question that has been perhaps the central preoccupation of all devotional and theological literatures. A cynicism about this issue leads modern social, cultural

and educational theory to its assumption that there is *always* a subject, always the action of an actor. To change this assumption, we need faith, but not faith as it is imagined by most theory, not faith as hope, not faith that takes us away from the realities of the world; we need faith as acceptance of the everyday reality of difference beyond our desires. No subject, and therefore no teacher can *produce* a subjectless condition, but such conditions can nevertheless come about if people do not stand in their way.

The clue to Mr Schubert's teacherly practice is evident in the lesson Nick learned from them: don't trust your self and your desires, don't 'show off' or 'interpose your own bright ideas'; rather, let your responses arise from your reading practice. This was not just a lesson in literary criticism; it was a lesson in how to live with faith in the world. Mr Schubert applied this lesson by forgoing his own desires and trusting in his own pedagogic practices. He would have known that he could not bring about the subjectlessness of the I-You relation, but by relinquishing his ambitions and serving the needs of his practice, he got out of the way and allowed relations to form. He knew that these relations would take him where he would not have thought to go ('No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value'), and that this shared place of meeting would provide the unique answers that he did not know he needed ('What no-one with us shares, scarce seems our own').

The discipline of practice is not a restriction of creativity, but, in its asceticism, allows open and honest responses to the 'world as it really is' (Murdoch, 1970, p. 93; see also Williams, 2005 pp. 15-18). As Murdoch implies, it involves the sacrifice or surrender of our narrow self-concerns:

> Good art, unlike bad art,… [is]resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 88; see also Weil, 2002, Aitken and Steindl-Rast, 1996, pp. 172-3)

But this process of surrender is misunderstood when turned, itself, into a heroic achievement. It is not that good teachers are selfless, but rather that they have an awareness of their vulnerabilities and 'consoling wishes', and of the way these distract them from what is at hand (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59). By recognizing their selfish desires for what they are, teachers can put these desires back into context and discredit the totalisations they project. The desires do not have to be denied or overcome, for to accept them for what they really are is to deflate their fantastic power and remove the need for a victory over them.

In Mr Schubert's case, for example, had he been tempted to abrogate the students' learning process by giving a conclusive reading of Donne, he would have heard the inauthenticity in his voice. This would have warned him that he was talking to himself rather than listening to the students, and this awareness of his desires and fears would have returned him to where he needed to be, taking him from subjectivity back to relation. Awareness gives patience, openness and faith, that 'clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty …. and on the world around and beyond us' of which Liston speaks.

When a teacher like Mr. Schubert serves an emergent relational order, he finds that the order supports him as well as supporting the students. The order allowed Mr. Schubert to lead by allowing the teaching to be led; it allowed him to teach year after year and class after class without feeling boredom in the repetition (see Bachelard, 1969, pp. xxviii-xxix). Mr Schubert's authority did not arise from his immense erudition alone, but from the unknowing that made manifest his love for learning and his respect for the literature and the students. This unknowing was inspiring but also dreadful for students, for it meant they could not hide behind predictable or blasé answers. They had to be aware of their own consoling desires. This highlights the etymological connection between authority and authenticity: authority removes the bias of subjectivity (Murdoch, 1970).

The students learned from classroom experience that by fully participating in Mr Schubert's learning practices, they would be led to the best work they could do. ('I know it will work: I proved that to myself with Mr Schubert, who wouldn't let me get away with showing off.') This unquestioning confidence in their teacher meant that they were not distracted by future results. Instead, they could focus on the task before them: when they were reading poetry, *that* was what they were doing. The stillness of this discipline made the classroom a sanctuary in students' lives. In this environment, thoughts came to them that would have eluded the thinking of a narrowly desirous mind: because they were open, a vast range of connections opened up.

The logic of this supportive environment is often misunderstood. People assume that creative learning involves personal expression, but this encouragement of subjectivity makes people too self-conscious to learn. On the contrary, it is an interested impersonality that allows students to truthfully explore the aspects of their lives that cannot be contained by identity (see Murdoch, 1970, p.65). By setting aside their desires and serving the needs of the class dialogue, students see the world in new ways. The difference they notice in the world teaches them of their difference to their own identity. They learn about the world as they learn their own potential.

Nick highlighted this point when he insisted that it was the academic rigour and formality of Mr Schubert's classes that allowed the boys to unreservedly engage with the poems. Nick's analyses of love poems resonated with his life, but he was never required to define himself in the writing process. He could hold open possibilities, in himself and in the poetry. Because he and the poem knew each other directly, as *I* knows *You*, they knew more than to reach conclusions about each other. Likewise, although Nick was fully engaged in his work, its formality helped him avoid becoming personally identified with it. Far from enforcing uniformity, classroom formality was a guarantee that Nick's difference would be respected. He could be open without fear that others would be over-familiar.

The disciplinary order of Mr Schubert's way of reading was also the basis of Nick's creative writing practice. Rather than an expression of autonomy or identity, uniqueness is the particularity that comes from participation in a whole. Nick's uniqueness is his living and responsive difference to his self-definition. It derives, not from being a member of a pre-existing thing, but, as Eliot says, from being connected in a web of unfolding community:

> I think of literature … not as a collection of the writings of individuals, but as 'organic wholes'…. There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender … in order to obtain his unique position…. Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community. … The second-rate artist cannot afford to surrender himself to any common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences which are his distinction: only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute. (1951, p. 24)

When critics complain about the stifling orthodoxy of the canon, or of teachers whose authority is based on prior knowledge, they have in mind the dead weight of history, a structural force counterposed to the agency of individuals. They are thinking of things and subjects, of resisting agents and exclusive communities. To understand Eliot's point it is necessary to see that wholistic logic is not based on chronology, Euclidean space or subjects.

Merleau-Ponty's use of the term 'flesh of the world' also describes this experience of organic participation in a whole. Since 'we are in the world', part

of the ‘closely woven fabric’ of ‘reality’, seeing happens within this weave (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. x-xii). ‘Immersed in the visible by his body … the see-er does not appropriate what he sees … he opens himself to the world … my body is caught in the fabric of the world’ (1964: 162-3). Because I am in the world and the world is in me, ‘[t]hings arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence’ (1964: 164; see also Shotter 2003). For Merleau-Ponty, it is only through being of the world that we can know the world, and yet, never know it as a total.

If people participate unselfconsciously in the literary tradition, for example, it lives in their flesh and bones. No longer writing or reading as distinct individuals, they are creating more than they could have done on their own. The past is vividly alive, known through their part in its unfolding. When Mr Schubert taught the canon, for example, he was teaching students to trust that an open encounter with these works would simultaneously bring to new life the canonical texts and the students’ ideas. This originality ‘takes us back’ to origins by giving us the sense of ‘for the first time’. As Mr Schubert reassured Nick, ‘it’s a different world from what it was a moment ago, and with the passing of that moment, the whole past has shifted, so that Dante, for example, now means something else than he did before.’

Students who treat schoolwork as self-expression are forced into disrespectful and ungrateful relations, both with themselves and the world. Either they feel the trifling grandiosity of which Eliot warns, or they feel overwhelmed and inadequate, since tradition has already claimed the best lines. The teacher's task is to help them see that the tradition, as a living presence, will enable them to say what they need to say.

The phrase 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1986) is often shallowly understood, as the escape by the subjective reader of today from the dead hand of the authors-of-the-past, but in fact, the death of the subjective author and reader is the birth of the creative author and reader who, through their unique and unselfconscious work, augment the unfolding of community. As Aitken and Steindl-Rast say:

> A true and legitimate authority builds us up. In fact, the words 'authority and 'augmentation' both come from the Latin word *augere*, to increase. A true authority augments our knowing, augments our ability to act rightly. (1996, p. 156; see also Arendt, 1961, pp. 121-122, Serres, 1995, pp. 270ff)

Conclusion

In this article we have been arguing that loving authority is fundamental to a creative and ethical way of life. This authority only exists if it is not the authority of a subject, a teacher, for the desires and projects of a subject are based on personal fantasy rather than the awesome reality of the whole (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59). Authority is embedded in ascetic disciplines of practice. These encourage authenticity, not by denying the self, but, rather, by allowing awareness of the self illusions that get in the way of a response to reality (Murdoch, 1970, p.93). Loving authority allows a service of the world that is not a service of a past or an elsewhere, but a service that recreates and augments this world (see Gordon, 1999, p. 175). It is through their vocation that teachers teach the importance of this responsibility to the world.

We have been arguing that this understanding requires a non subject-based ontology. Writers like O'Byrne have many of the same concerns, but are constrained by the presumption of subjectivity. She says, for example, that 'the world continues to issue its demands, and we must still respond, still take responsibility, make that decision in the face of undecidability (2005, p.402). Buber's and Murdoch's relational ontology and ethics, on the other hand, suggest that there are no decisions, to hear the call is to have responded: 'the

relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one' (Buber, 1958, p.11). O'Byrne is right that responsibility based on decision is impossible, but she cannot recognise that response *is* possible from the perspective of a different ontology.

As 'suffering and action in one', calling transforms alienated subjects into participants in the world. This involves a shift from the world of finite space, time and being, to a new and infinite world. When teachers transform into no-one in the classroom they offer themselves as a bridge for students, an interchanger, living between two worlds. As Michel Serres says:

> I love that bird who put wings on my feet. I didn't become a flying creature by my own efforts - far from it – it was thanks to him that I was able to pass … into this vast new world.
>
> So we feel a special gratitude to these extraordinary pedagogues who make it possible for us to enter new worlds. (Serres, 1995, p. 162; see also O'Byrne, 2005, p. 398)

In leading students into the world, teachers allow them to change form: students leave the defences of their subjecthood and find potential and wholeness in the world. What students often do not realize is that it is the

teaching and learning relation that allows teachers to lead: teachers lead by following the relation with students.

Nick speaks of Mr. Schubert remaining 'very vivid': because it is not locatable or subjective, his authority is enmeshed in the world. Nick finds his way by attending to Mr Schubert's questions which help him respond to what matters. Mr Schubert insists 'This is our world.' (Arendt, 1961, p. 189), a demand that allows Nick no consoling fantasies. It is this responsibility that gives Nick's life fullness: 'I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility (Buber, 2002, p. 16).

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