

Pre- and post-modern voices: the Dream song of Olav Åsteson in dialog with Jacques Derrida

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Olav down on the porch he sits
And tells his dreams out there.

The Dreamsong of Olav Åsteson

There is no neutral or natural place in teaching
Here, for example, is not an indifferent place

Who's afraid of Philosophy?

Jacques Derrida

This paper will circle around some questions on teaching, but that is teaching which in more than one way will challenge both the more traditional understanding of educational institutions, schools and universities – and a principle of institutionalization. And I am claiming that this challenge is an old one, one that can be detected in cultural expressions hundred of years old. Between the pre and the post, between the before and the after, these concepts that I have used for a title in this paper, we find the word “modern” – and the modernity. Schools, as we know them, have been some of the most grounding elements in this modern modernity, a modernity which has made them into elements for education as building of nations, for educating a working force and, more recently, for a global market. Modernity is the idea of a well-regulated society based on quality secured univocal scientific knowledge, an idea that on more than one occasion in history has shown its dark consequences. Today, knowledge, and human beings, are viewed as *means* for a global market. Even left wing ministers of education proclaim economic growth as motivation, and knowledge and human competence as *means* for this. We all seem to be caught in a strange kind of paralysing hysteria.

I am proposing the teacher as rebel against some sides of this modernity, and propose us, every one of us, to be teachers. Because we are, aren't we? We are teachers as we stand and sit here, and anytime and anywhere, as we seek and find expressions for what, to us, is felt urgent to utter, in everyday life as well as on the occasions where we professionally or otherwise enters the different stages to proclaim our messages to the world. We are all

teachers, and we cannot escape it. The imperialistic, dogmatic and totalitarian sides of modernity might provoke us into becoming some, maybe strange, kind of conservative rebels. Challenging both from the pre- and from the postpositions. But, the language of this rebel is not a war cry, a shouting from barricades, this because our agenda is not victory. Instead our rebellion has to do with life, and death – with hospitality, and is far from being motivated by the idea of an imperialistic takeover.

Hospitality and the poetic

Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, who died recently, in 2004, has told us that an act of hospitality can only be poetic. This, because, in his understanding, the essence of the poetic is an opening gesture, a gesture that has the courage to challenge, not only some life threatening structures which might surrounds us, but even more so to challenge those within ourselves, those structures that makes barricades from within. Quite a few have identified Derrida's writings as a kind of poetic pedagogy more than as a traditional philosophy. I think he would agree, but, at the same time he insists on being a philosopher, taking the responsibility as such extremely seriously. ¹ This connection between the teacher and poetry is not a newly made connection.

William Wordsworth has put it like this:

*Every great poet is a teacher,
Every great teacher is a poet.
I wish to be considered as a Teacher.*

And Joseph Beuys has proclaimed:

Being a teacher is my most important piece of art.

So we are talking of teaching, the poetic, and the pre and post of an era, or an epoch, which has to be challenged. As Derrida puts it: "...a historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon." This because: "language itself is threatened in its very life." (Of grammatology p. 6) It is a question of life and death, of the

¹ "I take extremely seriously the issue of philosophical responsibility. I maintain that I am a philosopher and that I want to remain a philosopher, and this philosophical responsibility is something that commands me. (...) and thus (...) in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism (...) it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning." Derrida in Mouffe (ed) Deconstruction and pragmatism (1996) London: Routledge p 81.

living dead or the dead living, of life by death, of dreaming and being awake, of forgetting and bringing to mind.

I am staging to voices; one from the Middle Ages, from the pre-modern, and one from our times, which might, in some aspects be viewed as post-modern. On this stage Olav Åsteson meets Jacques Derrida.

The ancient voice of Olav touches us from centuries past with undiminished force and intensity, in spite of the lack of prominent gestures. The Dream song of Olav Åsteson, a visionary poetic work, has been sung in the mountainous regions of inner Norway, and especially in this area of Fyresdal and Telemark, since the early Middle Ages. With his gilded belt Olav sits down on the porch of the church. He has a message, one that cannot be suppressed, this, in spite of the fact that this message challenges authoritative law and institutions. The message is a silent revolution, no storming of a bastion, no street fights or rising of barricades. He takes the opposite position of the priest. He sits down on the threshold, while the priest stands before the altar with the people's eyes and faces turned towards him. When the priest spots Olav's belt he "no more read nor sung". The institutional "wide learned tongue" had to keep still "till the brave swain Olav Åsteson his dream so strong was told". We are confronted with two kinds of authority. In the front of the church, with his canonised text, we can see the priest. Olav is behind us on the porch, with his self-experienced message.

Derrida, in a text titled "Where a teaching body begins and how it end", is standing in front of his audience in a room, which he associates with "a theatre or a cinema, a reception hall". He says that he here and now, at last, after *"fifteen years of experience called teaching and twenty-three years as a civil servant, (...) I am beginning, then, this late, to question, exhibit, and critique systematically – in view of a transformation – the borders of that within which I have given more than one talk."* (02:70)

Deconstruction, awakening – and a journey.

What are at stake here, what is questioned, are the teaching bodies, in all their expressions and disguises - the educational institutions, the subjects taught, language as such and the individual teaching bodies, the pedagogues, the teachers. Olav sits in the porch, Derrida stands in front of his audience, but they perform a similar message.

Vil du meg lye, eg kveda full kan
om einkvan nytan drengjen,
alt om han Olav Åsteson
som heve sovi so lengje

Come listen to me, and I will tell
of a lad so brave and strong;
I'll tell you of Olav Åsteson
who slept a sleep so long

It is time now, to tell, to question, to exhibit and to critique systematically the borders of teaching. Derrida has proposed a concept for this action:

Deconstruction – or at least what I have proposed under this name, which indeed is as good as any other, but no better – has therefore in principle always concerned the apparatus and function of teaching in general, the apparatus and function of philosophy in particular and par excellence. Without reducing its specificity, I will say that what is underway now is but a stage to be crossed in a systematic journey. A stage, no doubt. But it encounters a naked (...) and formidable difficulty, a historical and political test whose principle scheme I would like to draw attention to. (02: 73)

Fyrste eg var i uteksti
Eg fór ivi tynnurmog
Sund'e reiv eg mi skarlakskåpa
Og neglan av kvor min fot.
For månen skine
Og vegjine falle så vide.

First I was in utexti
I went through briar and thorn,
And torn was then my scarlet cloak
And the nails from my feet were torn
The moon it shines,
And the roads do stretch so wide

Vai so hev eg Våsemyran
det hev inkje stai meg grunn
No hev eg gjenge Gjallarbrui
med rapa mold i munn
For månen skine
og vegjine falle so vide.

Waded have I the miry marsh,
where never a foot finds hold.
Crossed have I also Gjallar Bridge
my mouth filled with grave-mould
The moon it shines
And the roads do stretch so wide

It is a naked and formidable difficult journey that lies ahead. My ability, as a human, as a teacher, to write, to construct meaning, and to deconstruct, will have to include a crossing of

the Gjallar Bridge, and, a wading of the miry marsh, where my identity, at least the idea of a fixed or authentic identity at one with itself is sacrificed along with the idea of secure scientific univocal knowledge. As if buried in a grave I will have to taste death. The new focus has to be on the *ability*, the action of making meaning. And the ability can only be trained in a courageous journey carried out in solitude, on a pilgrimage fighting and facing my own tendencies towards wishing and wanting secure territories for myself. Such seemingly secure territories will have to close myself off in shelters, creating structures for defence, preventing a necessary death and a possible “resurrection”.

The affirmative, the transformative, the metamorphoses

Consequently, fighting as always on two fronts, on two stages, and in two registers, a rigorous and efficient deconstruction should at once develop the (practical) critique of the philosophical institution as it stands and undertake a positive, or rather affirmative, (...) transformation of a “philosophical” teaching. (02:74)

This affirmation is something Derrida comes back to on several occasions. As you could see from the quotation, he writes the “philosophical” with quotation marks. They signalize that the journey does not lead into a philosophy of secured answers, but instead into a transformation of the act of philosophical teaching.

Det var sankte Såle-Mikkjel	It was St. Michael, lord of souls,
Han vog i skålevekt	He weighed the souls so fair
So vog han alle syndesåline	He weighed in scales the sinful souls
Burt til Jesum Krist	Away to Jesus Christ.

This might even be a challenge to the law of everlasting damnation. But a damnation under the laws of “this world”, of the cultural rooms, cathedrals and academia, of the city of Athens, of the nation – and of the global market. We are challenging the law of everlasting damnation under the laws of dualisms, of a way of thinking which Derrida names logocentrism. This challenge does not have termination of the principle of Law, with a capital L, in mind. Instead the various cultural laws are put under erasure – *and* cherished, at the same time, representing the very possibility of human culture – *and* an inevitable reduction of the multiple faces of Truth. The Law with a capital letter is the Law, which exceeds all laws: the Law, which forever hides its face. In giving it a face in time and space, in making laws for our societies,

we are making laws with a minor I, assuming our responsibilities without trying to secure the structures of law by mooring them to the idea of a univocal godhead – scientific – religious or - political. This will therefore have to be a challenge to any fixed form of institution in every form and expression. There is no escape from this challenge; instead there is a calling to continue the task over and over again in working for an open space for the Law, for the Poetic, for the Hope, for the Promise that eternally is to come.

Jesus Christ and St. Michael? Is it possible to use such names, together with the word messianism, without inscribing religion as a more or less fixed set of creeds?

It is not a question of a messianism that one could easily translate in Judaeo-Christian or Islamic terms, but rather of a messianic structure that belongs to language. There is no language without the performative dimension of the promise, the minute I open my mouth I am in the promise.

(Derrida in Mouffe, *Deconstruction and pragmatism* 96: 82)

Every time I open my mouth, every time I make signs of any kind, I am in the hope, knowing that the structures of language are unable to fulfil this hope, unable to redeem the hope in any expression. And just because of this, the hope is secured. This paradox is an important one. The hope is always to come, and has to be sheltered as an open space not to be filled with any fixed content.

I am accepting an identity as a teacher – *and* putting this identity at stake, every day, in wading the miry marsh and crossing the Gjallar Brigde, where my making of meaning creates daring structures from the potential of political inventiveness. I am putting my signature under my teaching performances and actions, and accepting a responsibility for them, an individual responsibility that does not find shelter under any fixed structure of meaning, any law, any institution.

Olav's porch was richly carved, perhaps like the old stave church in Urnes, Norway, decorated with a mythical beast that manifests itself in several metamorphoses. The principle of metamorphosis might represent a change of form, not in a linear fashion as in development of improvement, but a change of form that in a courageous way dares the point of being without form, of being without recognisable meaning. This is the border to madness, but a point of

poetics, a point of possible transformation - and of hope. Should this “point”, be made to become the very point, non-place *and* place, in a movement of writing and erasure, of preference and of sacrifice, for any act of teaching?

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