

OPINION: Mycopedagogy

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Radical theory's forte is its ability to postpone an action begun by creative spontaneity without mitigating it or redirecting its thrust.

—Raoul Vaneigem (*Traité* 280)

If we could change our language, that's to say the way we think, we'd probably be able to swing the revolution.

—John Cage (*M* 210)

Isn't the avant-garde always pedagogical?

—Lyn Hejinian (*My Life* 92)

Experimental, innovative, postmodern, avant-garde—whatever the label (each of which is problematic and none of which is interchangeable with the others), a number of associated literary traditions have been finding their way into the college classroom. For just one concrete indicator, we need only look to recent changes in anthologies intended for the college textbook market. *Postmodern Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, for instance, prefigured the eclectic inclusiveness that characterized the American poetry scene at the turn of the twenty-first century, presenting Denise Levertov and Maxine Chernoff together with Lyn Hejinian and John Cage. The newly revised edition of the *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (like the equally syncretic *Oxford Anthology of Modern American Poetry*) has followed suit; the “modern” volume of the new *Norton* restores and expands the Objectivists, who had been dropped after the first edition, and the

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“contemporary” volume makes a nod toward the fringes of “Language Poetry” by including writers such as Michael Palmer, Charles Bernstein, and Susan Howe alongside *Norton* staples such as Adrienne Rich, Rita Dove, and Li-Young Lee (Ramazani, Ellmann, and O’Clair). Anecdotal evidence indicates a corresponding change in syllabi, and teachers may well be discovering what I have always found: that the difficulties of the avant-garde are, perhaps surprisingly, especially well suited to the classroom. Self-conscious linguistic disruptions can focus attention on rhetorical and compositional choices in a way that makes all reading a close reading. At the same time, antinarrative texts can obviate the plot paraphrases, recourse to biography, and facile moralizing that many students have been taught to cultivate.

But this essay is not meant to be a testimonial, particularly one preached to the choir. Testimonials about classroom successes always have the feeling of hearing someone tell about their experiences on drugs (you should have been there, we had these mushrooms and . . .). However authentic such experiences may be, and however genuinely important, they are essentially unteachable, unverifiable, and unrepeatable—even, as René Daumal has demonstrated in his investigation into asphyxiation and absurd evidence, when those experiences are conducted under the most rigorous conditions and with the most scrupulous scientific method. Nonetheless, that sense of a hazardous experiment—of research conducted with all of its promise and danger and unpredictability—is part of what radically experimental literature can remind us about pedagogy, and I want to argue here not so much for the benefits of teaching avant-garde texts (though I think they are substantial) as for a mode of teaching that itself has learned from literary innovations. If avant-gardes are not, in the end, “always pedagogical,” they can indeed present a challenge to the modes of communication at play in the classroom, and they can provide a model of how a truly radical pedagogic practice might more successfully correspond to the theoretical critiques offered by recent trends in the study of rhetoric and teaching.

Innovative, avant-garde, radical, experimental—“the word experimental is apt,” John Cage wrote, “providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown” (*Silence* 13). Taking Cage as an example, I want to suggest, in short, that one might conceive of a pedagogy as experimental as Cage’s own writing: “a way of writing which comes from ideas, is not about them, but which produces them” (*X*x). Such a pedagogy would, above all, resist representation. Additionally, at both the theoretical and the practical levels it would frustrate any model of comprehensive, monological, unmediated communication, and thus oppose what Guy Debord defined as spectacle: the repetitions of habit, the maintenance of the status quo, the representational and reproductive (conditions hinted at in the etymology of “spectacle” from *speculum* [mirror]), and most important all those social relations between people that lead to authoritarian and apodictic communication. As Gregory

Ulmer puts it in his manifesto for an “applied grammatology,” we might reimagine the classroom as a place of invention rather than a site for reproduction (163–64).¹ That is, with the classroom as a laboratory, pedagogy would proceed as a contingent, ad hoc inquiry, rather than a retrospective exposition; or it would stage an enactment rather than an explication. Above all, it would foreground the proving of what you do not know, rather than the reiteration, or transmission, or professing of what you do know.

“It’s when I know what to do that it’s boring,” as Cage confessed in his *Mushroom Book* (*M* 153). And boredom, as the Situationists learned from Arthur Rimbaud (and *pace* Patrice Petro), is always counterrevolutionary. An experimental pedagogy, we should remember, has a politics to its program of refusals and provocations. Cage recounts: “Often I go into the woods thinking after all these years I ought finally to be bored with fungi. But coming upon just any mushroom, in good condition, I lose my mind all over again” (*M* 69). Losing the mind in a continual revolution is also at the heart of Cage’s experiments in composition. Experimental music, he writes, is

about changing the mind—not to understand, but to be aware. The understanding mind is what you get when you go to school, which is boring and of no use whatsoever. The experiencing mind is what we need because it stands us in good stead whether things are going smoothly or not [. . .]. (*Conversing* 212)

One might prefer other terms, but the basic distinction between two different perspectives—between the given and the quest for new knowledge, the conservative and the innovative, comprehension and provocation—are the very measure established by the parallax between the comfort of what we know and the risk of wagering that understanding for an unknown and unknowing experience.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Cage participated in the summer sessions at the progressively alternative Black Mountain College, and in the late 1950s he taught now legendary courses in “experimental composition” at the New School for Social Research. The core of Cage’s own experimental pedagogy is nicely encapsulated in a line from his ongoing “Diary”: “Mushrooms. Teaching machines” (*M* 196). Mushrooms, for Cage, played the role that chess played for Marcel Duchamp; they were a lifelong obsession, and an allegory. Cage was one of the founders of the New York Mycological Society, and his extensive library of books about mushrooms (including his own volume, *Mushroom Book* [*M* 117–83]) was legendary, and he returned week after week, for over a month, answering a series of increasingly difficult questions about fungi on the television game show *Lascia o Raddoppia?*—the Italian version of *The \$64,000 Question*. Or the five-million-lire question, as it happened to be when Cage won the jackpot (only about eight thousand dollars at the time, but no small sum in 1958). The final question: “Name every variety of white-spored mushroom.” Cage just barely beat the clock.

Now one suspects, of course, that the whole thing was fixed in some way. Indeed, Luciano Berio, with whom Cage was working at the time, has claimed as much. Cage's answer, however, is suspicious on other grounds. Whatever his knowledge of spore types, his winning response was profoundly disingenuous. Cage valued mushrooms precisely for their resistance to the very sort of classification presumed by the question. Mushrooms, for Cage, are exciting because they are anarchic, unpredictable, and indiscrete—or (what amounts to the same thing) radically discrete. “The more you know them,” Cage says, “the less sure you feel about identifying them. Each one is itself. Each mushroom is what it is—its own center. It's useless to pretend to know mushrooms. They escape your erudition” (*For the Birds* 188). Mushrooms, that is, are always experimental and antiprofessorial: they refuse foreknowledge.

The mushroom's radical indeterminacy has serious consequences, and for Cage the potential danger of mushrooms is part of their appeal. Cage's writings are filled with stories about either the deliciousness of deadly mushrooms, which had been misidentified, cooked by chance, and somehow had no effect, or—conversely—the unexpected lethality of a domesticated supermarket brand. “Many people are allergic to the commercial mushroom,” he writes with more than a tinge of *schadenfreude*; “Donald M. Simons tells of an acquaintance who suffers vomiting, diarrhoea and loss of consciousness from eating any restaurant sauce that has even a trace of a mushroom in it” (*M* 197). When they are not poisoning the unsuspecting, or delighting the poisoned, mushrooms are confounding knowledge. Although it takes the form of a bad joke, his shaggy dog story is typical, and telling: “Mushrooms tested by feeding them to the dog. After dinner, maid said: Dog's dead. Guests 'n' hosts had stomachs pumped. Dog had been run over by a car” (205).

Cage's writings are also filled, not coincidentally, with similar stories about pedagogy, and with calls for pedagogic radicalism and reform. His collection of writings from the mid-1970s, *Empty Words*, is dedicated “[t]o the students in the school / from which we'll never graduate.” The same bad jokes abound (“Twelve disciples. One Teacher. One too many”), as do quips like those from George Leonard (“It would be better to have no school at all than the schools we now have”) and Margaret Mead: “My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school” (*M* 210, 195, 145). Accordingly, Cage recounts the success of classes in which “[s]tudents did research and wrote papers but gave them to one another instead of handing them in to teachers,” and he tells about the time a principal “fired the librarian, permitting students free access to books. Instead of being stolen or not returned, inventory after one year showed there were fifty more books than there had been originally” (*M* 25, 16). Examples could be multiplied, but they are not particularly novel or amusing; the point I want to emphasize is that Cage's educational stories follow the same logic as his anecdotes about mushrooms.

They also follow one another literally. As in the line “Mushrooms. Teaching Machines,” mycological and pedagogical sentences follow each other in immediate parataxis in Cage’s writings. The story about the dog, for just one example, is followed immediately by the passage:

Deschool Society (Ivan D. Illich), Education Automation (R. Buckminster Fuller). Just as, in Buddhism, denial of cause and effect arose from the realization that everything’s caused by everything else, so Illich’s society without school isn’t different from Fuller’s society with nothing but school. All there is to do is live and learn. (*M* 205–06)

Learning and living, in the logic of Cage’s universe, bring us back to mushrooms. “Ideas,” he writes, “are to be found in the same way that you find wild mushrooms in the forest Instead of having them come at you clearly, they come to you as things hidden” (*Musicage* 90). The unpredictable, unrepeatable wild mushroom hunt is precisely the scene of teaching for Cage. In place of the schoolroom: the aimless walk, the unknown territory, the treasures of a vague terrain in which mushrooms fruit and sprout and disappear sporadically, revealing themselves only—briefly, by chance—as so many graces of fate. Or so many fates of grace.

Linking mycology and pedagogy, living and learning, Raoul Vaneigem’s “Avertissement aux écoliers et lycéens” (“Warning to Students of All Ages”) deploys precisely those themes familiar from Cage’s writing:

L’apprentissage de la vie est une promenade dans l’univers du don. Une promenade mycologique en quelque sorte, où le guide enseigne à distinguer les champignons comestibles des autres, impropres à la consommation, voire mortels mais dont un traitement approprié peut tirer des vertus curatives (n. pag.).

[Learning about life is a walk through the universe of gift. A mycological stroll of a certain kind, where the guide teaches how to distinguish between edible mushrooms and others, unsuitable for consumption, which are mortally poisonous but that, with a proper treatment, can exude very healing qualities.] (All translations mine)

Vaneigem’s “univers du don” sets up a complicated chain of punning translations: from the French *don* to the English “gift” to the German *Gift*, or “poison”—precisely the danger of those mushrooms that appear unexpectedly when one strolls off the path. Like the difference of a single “t” in Vaneigem’s text, which distinguishes *morel* from *mortel*, the edible from the deadly, the pleasure of his promenade requires a heightened linguistic attention. The playful paths of experimental literature’s open texts—the work of Cage, say, or his literary mentor Gertrude Stein—cultivate precisely such attention in its readers. The fourth act of Stein’s play *What Happened*, as it happens, opens: “A birthday, what is a birthday, a birthday is a speech, it is a second time when there is tobacco, it is only one time when there is poison” (272). Like the move from *torte* (cake) to *tote* (death) that motivates the proximity of the

word “cake” to “bones” and “ashes” in Stein’s contemporaneous *Tender Buttons*, the ungiven birthday “gift” of *What Happened* is titrated as that “poison,” and withheld. For both Vaneigem and Cage, the indeterminacy of the word “gift” is the indeterminacy of the mushroom. They understand that both writing and mushrooms share a certain logic, which Jacques Derrida has termed the logic of the *farmakon* [pharmakon]: “the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indetermination, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation, permitted the rendering of the same [Greek] word by ‘remedy,’ ‘recipe,’ ‘poison,’ ‘drug,’ ‘philter,’ etc.” (71).

Behind Derrida’s description of the drug’s “regular, ordered polysemy” one can make out the distinct echo of Rimbaud’s “immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens,” with its own polysemy indeterminately rendered—without mistranslation—as both the “sustained and rational derangement of all the senses,” and, equally, the “sustained and rational disruption of all meaning.” “Pardon du jeu de mots [excuse the word play],” as Rimbaud writes to Georges Izambard when he first explains this antisemantic program (343–50). Moreover, just as pedagogy is at the heart of those Platonic texts scrutinized by Derrida in his discussion of the *farmakon* (and not just in the sense of their contextual debate against the Sophists), both of Rimbaud’s “derangement” letters, not incidentally, are framed by a discussion of the pedagogic. The letter to Izambard (13 May 1871) opens:

Vous revoilà professeur. On se doit à la Société, m’avez-vous dit; vous faites partie des corps enseignant: vous roulez dans la bonne ornière—Moi aussi, je suis le principe. (302)

[You are again a teacher. You’ve told me that we owe a duty to Society. You are a part of the teaching body: you’re on the right track. Me too—I’m also following the same principle.]

And when Rimbaud actually comes to the concept of the *voyant* [seer], in his letter, he writes:

[V]ous ne comprendrez pas du tout, et je ne saurais presque vous expliquer. Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de *tous les sens*. (302)

[You won’t understand this at all, and I don’t know how to explain it to you. It’s a matter of coming to the unknown via the derangement of all the senses (in all its senses).]

Rimbaud’s *voyant* is a savant, a scholar, who knows nothing, an academician who cannot instruct. “Moi aussi,” *moisit*: me too, it mildews. Rimbaud’s letters that May are full of mycologic language: literature “grows mouldy [moisit],” and the seer “cultivates fungal growths [se cultivant des verrues]” on his face (302, 306). Moreover, his pharmacopic program of curative poisons is explicitly experimental: “coming to the unknown [arriver à l’inconnu]” is a phrase Rimbaud repeats in both of the *lettres*

de voyant, the goal of which is to “discover a language [trouver une langue],” or to invent a language, because “inventions of the unknown require new forms [(l)es inventions d’inconnu réclament des formes nouvelles]” (306, 302, 310).

With the demand for “new ideas, and new forms [*nouveau*—idées et formes]” (308), Rimbaud sets the course for a century of experimental writing, and I want to end by being clear about the dangers of teaching those new literary forms, whatever their pedagogic benefits and remedies. Cage, the pharmacist, has in fact already given us the warning. “Teaching machines” is not only a phrase (adjective and a plural noun in apposition to the plural *mushrooms*), but it is also a perfectly good sentence in its own right, set off as it is by a period, and it might be read—without mistranslation—as noun and verb: teaching machines. Teaching tools and die cuts.

To mold: to instruct, or to give over to fungi. As Cage quotes Mao: “[R]emould people to their very souls” (*M* 142).

To culture: to grow fungi, to instruct. As Rimbaud writes to Izambard: the voyant “has cultivated his soul [il a cultivé son âme]” (306).

The danger of experimental literature is not the instructor’s fear that it cannot be taught, or the conservative colleague’s fear that it eventually will be taught, but that it will be taught with an inadequate pedagogy: that it will be familiarized, domesticated, inoculated, neutralized, and counteracted—in short: professed. Contemplating the introduction of experimental literature to the college classroom, however one feels about the works themselves, is an opportunity to reimagine a pedagogy as radical as the work it addresses (and to ask why the most radical pedagogies have not more often sought out equally radical literatures). It gives us a chance to consider what sort of teacherly response to the diversities and discomforts of the avant-garde would be adequate to its subject, and would not betray the avant-garde’s own scathingly critical ethos. The directions such thinking might take have already been suggested by a number of post-Freirian “critical” pedagogies. Like the impulses earnestly confessed in Paul Kameen’s *Writing/Teaching*, some of these “specific pedagogies—collaborative, feminist, critical, and Rogerian, to name a few”—have been characterized by a turn toward a “decentered classroom” (Segal 174). Others, such as the positions enumerated a decade ago in Morton and Zavarzadeh’s *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics* and continued more recently by rhetoricians such as Thomas Rickert, Geoffrey Sirc, and Victor Vitanza, emerged from attempts to develop a pedagogy in accord with poststructural theory. But we have also always had the examples of the poems themselves, from which we can extrapolate.

One might, for example, follow the pedagogy of Cage’s mushrooms, which, as we have seen, teach ignorance, rather than knowledge. These two themes come together, once again in Cage’s writing, in a haiku of Basho:

pine mushroom ignorance leaf of tree adhesiveness

Cage was particularly fond of this poem, and he translates it, with a Poundian condensation, to “What mushroom? What leaf?” And then, simply: “Mushroom? Leaf?” (*M* 70). Explaining later: “*That that’s unknown brings mushroom and leaf together*” (77). The mushroom—hallucinogenic, experimental, indeterminate—leads one back to the unknown (“arriver à l’inconnu”). “[D]on’t know what we’re studying; don’t know how we’ll do it. Studied map. Should have taken road not on it” (80). And later: “Unless we go to extremes we won’t get anywhere” (*Conversing* xi).

Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” opens: “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it, and that is poetry” (*Silence* 109). Which we might translate as: What saying? What poetry? “True poetry cares nothing for poems” (Vaneigem, n. pag.). To have nothing to teach, and to be teaching it, that too is pedagogy.²

NOTES

1. Ulmer has much to say about poetry and pedagogy; in addition to *Applied Grammatology*, his exemplary essay “The Object of Post-Criticism” is of particular relevance to my own thinking, which I hope is more saprophytic than parasitic. My debt, at all events, is substantial.

2. A version of this project was presented at the Poetry Division panel on “Poetry and Pedagogy” at the MLA Annual Convention, 28 December 2000 (Washington, D.C.); I would like to thank Susan Stewart for inviting me to speak on that occasion and for everything she has taught me since. Thanks also to Gage McWeeny and Sarah Willburn for their generous and attentive readings of an earlier version of this essay, which is dedicated, in all its forms, to Karen Beckman—my strictest, and very best, teacher of teaching.

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