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More Indulgence: Writing as a Discipline

I am a librarian by trade and a poet by ambition, not a scholar of rhetoric or cultural studies. And I am today only a moiety; my co-author from *Writing against the Curriculum*, Cathy Eisenhower, could not be here.¹ For months I have been looking forward to this panel, thinking about what I had to say about discipline, vacillating - as one tends to do - between gratitude for the occasion, and fears of my own imposture. And actually, it's imposture that I want to talk about today - discipline being what produces the concept of it - but also about gratitude. And along the way, Gertrude Stein.

I start with a trivial story. Last week I went to a workshop and a lecture at my university. A scholar from Boston had come to talk about using community-based newspapers in the writing classroom, and she had brought a guest of her own - a writer and vendor from *Street Sense*, DC's newspaper for the homeless community. During the workshop, at her prompting, he spoke to us - a small group of faculty and librarians - about his work with the paper, stemming from a personal ordeal of homelessness. Later, after the scholar's lecture - which had a wider audience of colleagues - the man from *Street Sense* joined the Q&A. As he spoke, my conscious, disciplined ego gave my assent to what he had to say. But my sympathetic nervous system told another story - giving the alarm at this breach of decorum, at the sound of this unaccredited voice in our midst, particularly during his impromptu comments. *Breach* is an apt term for the feeling in question, as if my gut was about to retreat from the rest of my body. The cause, of course, is obvious and shameful: the marked difference, in this case, of his race and (presumably) his class, his lack of institutional standing, and above all, his way of speaking. Not that he spoke so differently from

¹ This paper departs, tangentially, from my essay in this volume. Eisenhower, Cathy and Dolsy Smith. "Discipline and Indulgence." *Writing against the Curriculum: Anti-Disciplinarity in the Writing and Cultural Studies Classroom*. Eds. Randi Gray Kristensen and Ryan Claycomb. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010. 127-146.

the rest of us; his speech was, by "our" standards, correct, even eloquent - but its eloquence was too audibly performative, betraying his own awareness of the breach that his speech made (and for which he apologized several times). It's not a stretch to say that I was embarrassed *for* him - a communication that, needless to say (but out of critical self-regard I say it anyway), did neither of us any good.

Here is the discipline that I feel compelled to account for in terms of my own social anxiety: that ever-present prompting of self-consciousness, an internal minister reading off, in monotone, a ubiquitous book of rules for my behavior. This is the normative discipline that our institutions - family, school, church, media, law enforcement, doctor's office - conspire to make us experts in, as soon as we start learning the language in which to articulate its rules, or even before. However much we manage to relegate it to the back of our minds, its voice - its voices, I should say, for they are legion - tend to supervene upon our most quotidian impulses, approving or impugning their propriety. Knowing that the rules thus prescribed are arbitrary and contradictory does little, in my experience, to make them less binding.

According to Norbert Elias, who looks at our subject through the lens of Western manners and decorum, the key point is the sublimation of affect - in other words, constraints placed upon the expression of emotion. Historically speaking, as the sovereign state consolidates its "monopoly of physical violence," its subjects internalize the punishments meted out for deviation from the rules, and this embodied mechanism acts as a check on their behavior. At the same time, competitive energies that once found expression through physical violence, now the exclusive domain of the state, are channeled into more discursive and performative modes. Over time, the process spreads by mimicry through the whole population. The end result is a docile subject, marked from the outset by her "good posture," so to speak - and by anxiety and shame.

But amid the diffuse disciplinary networks of the 21st-century state, it might make sense to talk about sublimation less in terms of the *containment* of affect, and more in terms of its instrumentalization. In other words, discipline converts emotions into "useful" energy - energy useful for a variety of social projects, but particularly for the accumulation of capital.

What does this have to do with the disciplines of the academy? In the humanities, many of us, I suspect, have turned to these disciplines in response to some sense of impropriety in ourselves, our bodies, our emotional landscapes. The disciplines we call "critical" - like cultural studies - teach us to argue with the voices of the normative and proper. They teach us to address these voices inside their sovereign structures of power and oppression, holding out the hope that, through collective effort, we can free ourselves and others from their grip. With this address, animated by a sense of justice that is not merely normative, we can perhaps answer the demands of state and society with more ethical demands.

That is one of the stories I have internalized - a story, told by my education, about the work of thinking and writing critically. And what is the nature of that work? If the discursive mechanisms of anxiety and shame teach us to distrust our emotional responses, could it be said that the repertoire of the critical helps us perform such distrust discursively? As a set of interpretive gestures, the critical serves, as Ralph Cintron argues, to reveal the "partiality" implicit everywhere in our discourse - and by extension, in ourselves. Could it be said that the purpose of such gestures is to produce a certain type of social relation, one marked by the impartiality we call "freedom"? In this, the critical would be allied (genealogically speaking) with the notions of taste and decorum. Unlike taste and decorum, however, this discipline teaches us to perform abstractly and - as it seems to me - impersonally. Is this because it

construes sovereignty - the target of the subject's address - as social, but with a sociability mediated (by and large) by the circulation of the written word?

What I think I am suggesting is that the fact of this mediation has become internalized, so that the mode of the critical seems linked, in advance, with written discourse - and marked by a feeling for the detached (i.e., impartial) scrutiny to which such discourse can be subject. For the writer, writing critically, must return, again and again, to what she has written, vigilant for the appearance of partiality (for the imprecise word, the unpacked assumption, the incoherent statement). Such partiality threatens the liberal social order. In effect, the writer writes poised in anticipation, performing her judgment for a virtual - that is, an anonymous and deferred - audience of equals, who stand ready to impugn her for staking claim to more than her fair share.

Gertrude Stein describes the experience of watching a play as "troubling," because the spectators' emotions seem out of sync with the emotions portrayed on stage. The gap between sovereign and subject, the gap between my performance of a self and my judgments about that self, takes, I think, this theatrical form:

...At the theater there is the curtain and the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain. The emotion of you on one side of the curtain and what is on the other side of the curtain are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other.

Then also beside the curtain there is the audience and the fact that they are or will be or will not be in the way when the curtain goes up that too makes for nervousness and nervousness is the certain proof that the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together.

Nervousness consists in needing to go faster or to go slower so as to get together. It is that that makes anybody feel nervous. ("Plays," xxx)

"Nervousness," as Stein suggests, has a temporal structure. It is the feeling that the parts of a situation do not belong together, that one's body does not belong with these others here, that one's emotions do not come at the proper time. And that no event will arrive to bring them all together. It can be terrible, this feeling out of sync with oneself. In her writing, Stein seems to

have sought a practice that would abate this condition: "The business of Art as I tried to explain in Composition as Explanation is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present." ("Plays," xxxvi)

Reading Stein, I find myself drawn to the possibility of a discipline where judgment is not the principal disposition of the mind. A mastery minus sovereignty. But what could it mean, "the actual present"? Not an object of knowledge, unless we take knowledge in the sense in which Stein defines it: "Of course knowledge is what you know and what you know is what you do know" (xxx). The emphasis there, I imagine, falls on "do." And whatever you are doing, in the actual present you are becoming that which, from a sovereign perspective, it might be said that you "are." This present, however, does not permit such stability of predication: on the contrary, it

produces percepta which are vague, not to be controlled, heavy with emotion: it produces the sense of derivation from an immediate past, and of passage to an immediate future; a sense of emotional feeling, belonging to oneself in the past, passing into oneself in the present, and passing from oneself in the present towards oneself in the future; a sense of influx of influence from other vaguer presences in the past, localized and yet evading local definition, such influence modifying, enhancing, inhibiting, diverting, the stream of feeling which we are receiving, unifying, enjoying, and transmitting. (Whitehead, 178)

That is Alfred North Whitehead, imagining a metaphysics not of being but of becoming, not of enduring subjects but of perishable events. He writes here, in language almost reminiscent of Stein's, of experience as a flux of transmissible feelings in which there is no sovereign vantage point. I am drawn to Stein's prose because of the sense I get there of a writer maximally attuned to the flux of language as embodied in herself. Language as a sort of sense unto itself, a sixth sense, if you will, a feeling for what is emotionally *possible*:

What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it. The question does not come before there is a quotation. In any kind of place there is a top to covering and it is a pleasure at any rate there is some venturing in refusing to believe nonsense. It shows what use there is in a whole piece if one uses it and it is extreme and very like the little things could be dearer but in any case there is a

bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be reckless be reckless and resolved on returning gratitude. (“Tender Buttons,” 314)

In this passage, as everywhere in *Tender Buttons*, the propositional form of the sentence *feels* emergent, the writer's judgments about - whatever - being a function of the shades of feeling that emerge between words or lie dormant in syntactic structures. For me, the logical meaning of these sentences lasts almost no longer than the experience of reading them aloud or to myself. If by "logic" we mean the ability of sentences to justify themselves - to justify the feelings that motivate them - then these are sentences *almost* without justification. And yet, in the absence of that logic, their urgency remains - a reminder that every sentence anybody utters is a small emergency. Putting sentences together is, in the first place, a matter of survival.

No doubt the critical stance, tirelessly cultivated, is what the project of a just world, and our collective survival there, requires. I don't want to prescribe anything else. No doubt the capacity to justify oneself in the face of authority, particularly the repressive institutions of the state, is also of the utmost importance, and to many a matter of personal survival. The unequal distribution of that capacity amounts, in itself, to a gross injustice. But I am speaking here of another kind of survival - survival in the face of oneself. Writing has become linked for me, somehow, with surviving the internal sovereignty of social cum critical judgment - the same judgment that accuses me now of being unjust and demands, almost successfully, that I retract my words. Thank you for indulgence.

Works Cited

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