Self and Liberatory Pedagogy: Transforming Narcissism

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Within the institutional constraints of a fairly conventional program of Freshman English, emphasizing equal quantities of reading and writing, I have attempted to cultivate in students a critical consciousness of the radical variant. My efforts have no doubt been rendered somewhat problematic by the fact that, while radical pedagogy might well be of and for the oppressed, I have worked with university students who are mostly white and affluent. The resistance of affluent students to this pedagogy might be summarily explained by their inability to question their own ideologically informed values. However, a psychoanalytic understanding of students' resistance to texts that challenge their ideologically informed beliefs suggests deeper and more complex levels of response than that afforded by a purely sociological analysis.

A sociological explanation of students' resistance might take as its central analytic category the concept of authority. Students' resistance to the development of critical consciousness or to learning more generally might then be understood either as a conformist collapse into the authority represented by the teacher (as the Lacanian "one who knows") or a negative rejection of the institutional authority embodied in the teacher. This analysis, however, fails to recognize the diverse and particular ways students inhabit these positions psychologically and affectively. One may find, for example, students who inhabit the conformist position resentfully and ragefully, or students who inhabit the rejecting position with a sense of despair and sadness. These differing affective responses point, I believe, to the critical realm of the students' selves and to their self-relations to their values and beliefs. This argument suggests that liberatory pedagogy requires for its practical and pedagogical implementation a deeper understanding of the profound psychological responses it may invoke in students.

In other words, it is not sufficient that liberatory pedagogy seek to demonstrate, through lecture and texts, that the thought of our society is ideologically informed. Political scientists of a distinctly conservative stripe—the "realists," they are called—delight in doing just that, in demonstrating that in the relations between states, conceived wholly as power
relations, morality is no more than an after-the-fact ideologically informed posturing. What most distinguishes radical pedagogy is the attempt, as Henry Giroux puts it, to have students rise to a critical self-consciousness with respect to the impact of ideology upon their “inner” lives, to the ways in which ideology may suppress, repress, or generally determine their wants and needs (150). This is what I see myself as doing when I ask students not to assume a detached or contemplative stance toward what they read but to attempt to achieve toward it, in the Freudian word, a cathexis as this arises from their values and beliefs.

I hope by this to set off in students a progressive dialectical oscillation between the “outer” text and the “inner” self. I think of critical consciousness less as a final state than as a learning ladder which does not so much lead up towards greater lucidity as down from relative consciousness towards relative unconsciousness or which, more precisely, establishes with a deepening richness a dialectical relation between the two. I hope students are led in a tension with the text to examine how their beliefs, understood as beliefs, might inform their interpretations of the text. In turn, I hope that once students have understood their interpretations as the expression of beliefs they will examine their beliefs in a way that allows for yet another return to the text at an even deeper level of complexity. I have in mind here something like what Hegel means when he suggests that when one becomes self-conscious about what one knows one immediately transcends that knowledge to a relatively deeper and richer unknowing.

Such a dialectical process is hard to document; the imposing obscurity of Hegel’s attempt in the *Phenomenology* may suggest how difficult. I have no proof that any of my students have undergone such a progress, much less begun it. In their written work, students tend to give only the conclusions of their thinking and not the processes by which they arrive at them. What I get to see mostly is only one stage in their possible dialectic. Yet, that I can’t document it does not mean that it does not occur; it may occur silently in the thinking before writing, or it may occur unconsciously. In the following, I will draw upon the psychoanalytically informed concept of narcissism to offer a theory concerning these unconscious processes. But to give a more practical sense of the problems of self involved in bringing students to a dialectical unfolding, it will prove helpful, first, to examine a variety of student responses to a particular text, in this case, Freud’s “Infantile Sexuality.”

**Reading “Infantile Sexuality”**

This text always gets under students’ skin. The simplest and most general response to the essay comes from those who conclude, on the basis of the essay and what they have previously heard about Freud, that he was a cocaine addict, a sex maniac, and a dangerously misinformed lunatic. A similar level of response came from one student who said he couldn’t stand Freud because he had a foul mouth; Freud brought up subjects, he seemed to say, that were
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not appropriate for polite company. Another response, more complex because more responsive to the particularities of the essay, is indicated by those students who have trouble with Freud’s apparent depiction of the infant as a creature riven by appetites and seeking “consciously,” students tend to think, the satisfaction of its desires. For some this seems to upset their popular conception of the infant as a tiny bundle of joy; for others Freud’s view seems to run counter to a morally informed conception of the infant as “innocent.” Yet another kind of response comes from those who, mostly because they can remember having sucked their thumbs, object to Freud’s characterization of thumbsucking as an autoerotic act. These students have arrived at a particular cathexis with the essay, which, while it does not always contribute to clear thinking, has led some students to contact their parents to find out if they did in fact engage as infants in the sorts of autoeroticism Freud describes. Finally, the potentially most complex responses come from those students who, engaged primarily in accounting for their own negative responses to Freud, begin to argue that reading Freud and thinking about his theory of drives makes them feel uncomfortably out of control.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to sort out along a line of progression the responses, especially in the mid-range. For example, some students who become involved in the thumbsucking issue, while it offers the potential for a more complex relation to the text, are so intent upon disassociating their own thumbsucking practices from the sexual connotations Freud imputes to them that their last relatively simple line of defense is to declare Freud a lunatic. Further, while some students might seem involved in the relatively simply task of rethinking their popular stereotype of the infant, they become involved, in ways in which they are not fully aware, in the relatively more complex issue of the role of morality in Freud’s “materialistic” system, or in any “materialistic” system for that matter. Finally, some of those students involved in attempting to understand why their fellow students respond negatively to Freud end up, in the name ostensibly of an “open mind,” characterizing their fellow students as unthinking bigots while conveniently and comfortably ignoring the implications of Freud’s thought for their own beliefs.

Still, if we take the extremes we may say that the simplest visceral response which says Freud is a lunatic and the relatively more complex response in which students begin to investigate and account for how Freud makes them feel in relation to some larger concept are both distinguished by a cathexis of belief and materials. What differentiates the extremes, however, is the relative ability of the student to tolerate the challenge to his or her beliefs represented by Freud’s thought. The claim that Freud is a lunatic, while it might lead to the relatively more cognitively complex or philosophically abstract task of defining what one means by a lunatic, usually signifies the position of the student whose system of beliefs, whose self concept, cannot tolerate the possibilities represented by Freud. We might say such a
student is unable to "entertain" the idea, unable to welcome it inside and greet it on polite terms. However, at the other extreme we find the student who is able to welcome an alien idea into his or her house of beliefs. While still maintaining a "negative" relation to Freud, evidenced by a sense of disquiet or even anxiety, such a student does not condemn Freud, but turns inward and seeks a speculative cause for this disquiet: the idea of being out of control.

**Entering the Dialectic**

Theoretically, the dialectic may begin at any point. The simple, visceral response to Freud does represent a cathexis and may lead to a dialectical response. What is important for the unfolding of the dialectic as it moves towards critical consciousness is the individual's capacity to tolerate just this cathexis, especially if it is attended by painful affects such as disquiet, anxiety, and even anger. Indeed, the student with the at least potentially more complex response may possibly feel more anxiety and disquiet than the person who dismisses Freud. In fact, his dismissal as a lunatic may represent the dismissal exactly of those disquieting affects. Theoretically, then the capacity to tolerate negative affects may hinge, not precisely on the nature of the students' beliefs with respect to Freud (whether he be right or wrong), but on the student's self-relation to his or her beliefs. We might say that the difference hinges on the way in which the individual "holds" or retains his or her beliefs, whether relatively rigidly or relatively flexibly. Both may be strong ways of holding; that is, both may prove powerfully resistant to forces which may attempt to dispute individuals' "ownership" of their beliefs. But a rigid way of holding does suggest that in the face of challenging forces, the individual, in the final instance, may become rattled and even snap. The flexible way of holding suggests, however, that in the face of challenging forces the individual may be more inclined to bend than to break.

The sort of pedagogy that does want to deal with student's beliefs, Charles Paine suggests in his discussion of radical pedagogy, will produce anxiety especially in young students (565). This psychological characterization of what students may feel tallies with Hegel's philosophic identification of the motor power of the dialectical bildun with what he calls the "labor of the negative." As the Phenomenology shows, the self (admittedly Hegel's philosophic self) must undergo considerable strain and buffeting. In his interpretation of Hegel, Jean Hippolite places at the center of this labor, as an emblem of the individual's finitude, the realization of death (24). The adventures of the dialectic resemble the mythic pattern of death and rebirth. Or as Hegel's theologically minded contemporary, Schelling, put it in his own speculations on knowledge and education, one must become lost to be found. At a minimum, the ability to enter into and participate in the unfolding of the dialectic (of self and other, belief and counter belief) requires the capacity to
tolerate the anxieties of lostness.

A more psychological instance from R.D. Laing comes to mind:

An argument occurred between two patients in the course of a session in an analytic group. Suddenly, one of the protagonists broke off the argument to say, "I can't go on. You are arguing in order to have the pleasure of triumphing over me. At best you win an argument. At worst you lose an argument. I am arguing in order to preserve my existence." (45)

In the grips of what Laing calls ontological insecurity, (that is, the elemental doubt concerning the right to exist), the "protagonist" experiences challenges to his beliefs (as these occur in argument) as challenges to his very existence. The protagonist's pathology sheds a light on the "normal" requirements for the unfolding of the dialectic. One must argue for one's beliefs in the face of countervailing ones as if one were arguing for one's very self. But one must also be able to tolerate the anxiety inherent in this endeavor. This the protagonist cannot do.

In speculating on the subject, I have come to understand students' responses to the materials I ask them to read as arguments for their selves, conceived as something distinct from their particular social roles. Too often, however, these arguments, like the "protagonist's" refusal to continue the argument, act to abort the dialectical process which might lead to the development of critical consciousness. I agree with Henry Giroux when he writes,

In short an essential aspect of radical pedagogy is the need for students to critically interrogate their inner histories and experiences. It is crucial for them to be able to understand how their own experiences are reinforced, contradicted, and suppressed as a result of the ideologies mediated in the material and intellectual practices that characterize daily classroom life. (150)

My own attempt to encourage students to bring their beliefs and systems of values into the classroom and not to leave them at the door runs contrary to the grain of positivistic pedagogy and its fact/value distinction and represents at least a remedial step towards asking students, in the face of countervailing opinions and theories, to interrogate their "inner histories and experiences." But my efforts in this direction have brought me face to face with a problem. The individual's capacity to enter into the dialectic presupposes that he or she is able to recognize a distinction between inner and outer, between what is in here and what is out there. It is, I believe, precisely the psychological difficulties involved in making this distinction in relation to the relatively "immaterial" realm of ideas that serves to abort many students' entry into a dialectical understanding.

The Role of Narcissistic Need

A psychological understanding of the strains and disquieting affects atten-
dant upon a movement into the dialectical process of critical consciousness may be afforded by reference to the psychoanalytically informed concept of narcissism. Since at least Freud, this concept takes as its primary reference and point of departure the archaic and primitive relation of the infant to its mother. Theorists have argued that in the earliest stages of development the infant recognizes no distinction between self and mother. The infant feels that the mother is part of its self; or, more precisely, that the mother is its self. Further, more epistemologically or philosophically, the infant is said to engage in omnipotent forms of thinking. Reflecting on Freud's view of narcissism, the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut offers the following:

The object [mother] ... is first of all not loved under these circumstances, not cognitively recognized as something separate from the primitive self. It is either experienced as part of the self or used for the maintenance of self-love, self-cathexis, self-investment—narcissism. (Kohut Seminars 11)

In light of his conception of relative maturity as the capacity for love and work, Freud posits a movement away from narcissistic self-love, with its suggestions of "selfishness," toward libidinally cathected object love. However, Kohut intriguingly argues that narcissism is best understood not as something to be overcome or rooted out but as something which undergoes in the course of a normal development a series of tempering transformations (Search 446). The course of this tempering is marked by a movement from a relatively grandiose and archaic narcissism to a position in which the individual has achieved a relative integration of the narcissistic need with his or her actual abilities, skills, and ideals. Such a person is then positioned to respond to narcissistic wounding in a healthful, adaptive way. Kohut writes,

Under favorable circumstances the neutralized forces emanating from the narcissistic self (the narcissistic needs of the personality and its ambitions) become gradually integrated into the web of our ego as a healthy enjoyment of our own activities and successes and as an adaptively useful sense of disappointment tinged with anger and shame over our failures and shortcomings. (Self Psychology 107)

Most importantly for the line of reasoning I will offer in the following, Kohut argues that just as narcissism persists through the life of the individual, so too does the individual's need for what he calls "selfobjects." Selfobjects may be "real" objects (a car, an item of sentimental attachment), other persons, types of activities, as well as ideals or values; in all cases, such objects serve to confirm individuals' sense that they dwell in an environment empathically responsive to their narcissistic needs. Kohut, with Ernest Wolfe, writes,

Selfobjects are objects which we experienced as part of our self; the expected control over them is, therefore, closer to the concept of the control which a grown-up expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of the control which he expects to have over others. (177)
While relatively immature persons may experience themselves as compelled by a grandiose narcissism toward a compulsive holding of certain selfobjects, relatively mature persons are better able to choose their selfobjects in relation to their particular narcissistic needs. In producing for the individual a sense of an empathically responsive environment, these objects serve to shore up the self against what Kohut calls the pathology of modern humanity: the problem of the crumbling or fragmenting self.

Thus, some sense of what I mean by the aborting of the dialectic process as the failure to recognize the inside/outside distinction may be afforded by conceiving of students' beliefs (understood as knowledge claims infused and sustained by values or ideals) as selfobjects. In this case, the sort of control students may expect to have with respect to their beliefs may more resemble the sorts of control they expect to have over the parts of their bodies or the thoughts in their minds. Those challenges to beliefs which suggest that they might be reexamined may be experienced by the student as a challenge to his or her selfobjects and concurrently his or her control over these objects. It is as if to say some outside force had suddenly laid claim to a territory one had previously regarded as under one's own control. Students may indeed feel, with respect to challenges to their beliefs, much the same sorts of feelings of embarrassment and even shame that one might experience before suggestions that one's nose is too long or one's body too fat.

In other words, narcissistic need implies narcissistic vulnerability. One's nose, which one had previously experienced as a confirming selfobject, as something valued because beautiful or handsome, becomes, before suggestions to the contrary, a sore spot or point of vulnerability. The nose itself has not changed; one's self-relation to it has. At this point, one may redefine one's notion of beauty: one may reassert the beauty of one's nose, not as existing in the nose per se but in its relation to the other parts of one's face, or one may reassert it as the beautiful expression of one's family or race. Or if one is not able to reestablish a positive relation to one's nose, one may come to ask why this nose and not another. One's nose was not something after all that one was allowed to choose (any more, I might add, than most people can be said to have chosen their earliest and most fundamental beliefs). Or to refer again to Hegel, implied in the sense of the self's infinitude (understood here as the philosophic emblem of archaic narcissism and its claims to omnipotence) is the experience of one's contingency, of one's finitude.

These remarks begin to suggest the sort of theorizing I bring to my understanding of the trials students may undergo as they are asked to step into the dialectic process. In summary, critical consciousness requires critical self consciousness; students must bring their values and beliefs to bear upon the materials of their learning. If they are able to accomplish this, they may be said to have "cathexed" with the material. The cathexis arises from narcissistic need, and in relation to the satisfaction of this need students may come to regard a particular piece of material or work as a selfobject. This
Reading and the Creation of Selfobjects

An examination of students' responses to poetry may provide some clarification of my meaning. Theodore Roethke's short poem, "My Papa's Waltz," may serve as an instance. This poem might be described as presenting a son's retrospective and highly ambivalent relation to his father: positive connotations of love mingle in a highly polarized way with feelings of hate and fear. Typically, first-year students read this poem in one of two ways: as the secret allegory of a child beating, or as a perfect picture of a loving parent-child relationship. Once after a class and at the end of a long day, a student asked for further clarification of the comments I had made on her just-returned paper on this poem. Vigorously written and the student's best work of the quarter, it asserted that the poem was primarily about a loving relation between parent and child. At that time, I was still groping toward a more psychological understanding of students' responses to texts, and feeling perhaps challenged and defensive before the student's question, I hastily responded that if the paper had any shortcomings it had to do with the failure even to acknowledge the darker aspects of the poem. I was startled to see that my remarks had moved the student to the verge of tears.

My brief response to the student's question raises an issue critical for any pedagogy which would respond to the psychological dimension of the learning process: the instructor's own narcissistic investment in his or her values and educational background. Just as psychoanalysts attempt to examine not only the "analysands" transferences but also their own countertransferences, so too must educators submit their own narcissistically informed values and beliefs to a dialectical and questioning relation to students' beliefs and values. My response to the student was informed by my undergraduate training in the New Criticism, with the requirement that one approach a poem as if it were a type of "external" object possessed of an aesthetic unity, the "correctness" of a response being dependent upon its ability to recognize and encompass this unity. The intensity of the student's response, however, alerted me to the fact that she did not see the poem as an "object." Seeing the poem as a whole or a unity would have required that she see those darker aspects which she could not see if she were to maintain her narcissistically charged cathexis with the poem. Like many other students, she did not see herself as interpreting the poem, for the idea of interpretation requires that the individual see the object to be interpreted as an object, that is, as experientially something distant or other. What this student had in fact done was to "merge" with the poem, to create it as a selfobject responsive to her narcissistic need to see a loving relation between father and son of the same kind, as her writing asserted, that apparently existed between herself and her
father. My remark, particularly in its invocation of the poem's darker parts, directly challenged her narcissistically informed merger with the poem. The result was a momentary wounding.

This notion of "merger," in pointing to the psychological level of reader response, is not without implications for liberatory pedagogy. It suggests that the difficulties students may experience in developing critical consciousness may have nothing to do with their intellectual capabilities or with some failure to rise to higher cognitive functions implicit in the grasping of theory. The fact that most students can clearly see that Shakespeare intended Antony and Cleopatra to be the heroes of the play called Antony and Cleopatra does not keep many students from producing papers which argue that the play ought properly to be called Caesar. In effect, a psychological understanding of students' reading responses suggests they do not "misread" the poem or play; rather, they recreate it as a self object which conforms to their values and beliefs as these are informed by narcissistic need. Thus, it is nearly impossible to argue students out of their "misreadings" by traditional appeals to theory, logic, or rules of evidence for, if the student has retained the poem as a self object, it does not exist "out-there" as an object susceptible to objective scrutiny.

If students do create self objects from their readings, the attempt of liberatory pedagogy to employ literature in ways that might help students to examine critically their beliefs and values becomes extremely difficult. This difficulty might be obviated if students were inclined to recognize the psychological factor in their responses to literature; however, the attitude of most students towards psychology resembles that of the general population: they are deeply suspicious, particularly of psychoanalysis. It is the unusual student, for example, who will admit that the teacher, in disputing an interpretation of a poem, has managed to hurt anything as vague, subjective, emotional or psychological as his or her feelings. This disavowal of any affective response or cathexis with a given reading is understandable as a disavowal of narcissistic need. The admission of narcissistic need, as Arnold Rothstein argues in his The Narcissistic Pursuit of Perfection, may prove itself narcissistically wounding, for to admit to such need means admitting to a need for sustaining objects which exist in some sense beyond the self. In effect, it means moving from a conception of the self as autonomous to a conception of self as existing in a finite network of interdependence over which one can never hope to exercise complete control.

Thus, the difficulty for students in the face of countervailing forces seems to have nothing to do with their particular cathexis with the poem or given work but with the instructor's apparent and perhaps perverse inability to see that their "interpretation," far from being the expression of a subjectively retained belief, represents an accurate or objective depiction of things as they are. For example, when responding to Machiavelli many students write that while his teachings might appear to some horrible, such persons should get
their heads out of the clouds of idealism and see that he is absolutely right about how the world works. All it takes to know this is to open one’s eyes; if certain airy idealists refuse to do this, they pretty much deserve what they get. What this argument does is to define any potential opposition to the Machiavellian view, as the student understands it, as the expression of a subjective irrationality or airy idealism. Dialectically and psychologically this argument also defends students against any sense that the Machiavellian view itself does not accurately represent the real but is the expression of a subjectively retained belief. Such a student, I would suggest, has cathected with Machiavelli; he or she has found in the work a selfobject which confirms narcissistic need.

From Despair to Commitment
Given the apparent ability of narcissistically informed cathexis to abort the inner/outer distinction, the theoretical question that must arise for a pedagogy devoted to cultivating critical consciousness is how best to manage this cathexis in ways which encourage students to enter a dialectical unfolding. The answer depends on the evaluative stance that one takes towards the role of narcissism in the developmental process. In “On Going Home: Selfhood in Composition,” Evan Carton argues for a continuing place for relatively difficult readings in the writing classroom, a position also held by Aronowitz and Giroux in their opposition to the increasing “technicization” of writing (52). Carton concludes that students’ narcissism, and with it their relatively shallow and dogmatic conceptions of self, must be confronted with the relatively more complex and questioning depictions of self found in literature (347). I emphasize “confronted” because what one might mean by this word begins to suggest the nature of one’s evaluative stance toward narcissism. What Carton might mean by it is suggested by his having embraced as the theoretical framework for his remarks Christopher Lasch’s Culture of Narcissism, in which narcissism and the culture that feeds upon it is depicted in an entirely negative light (343). In this context, the idea that students need to be confronted with literature’s relatively more complex presentation of the self suggests a position that is anti-narcissistic, which posits as its notion of maturity the uprooting of narcissism.

Lasch’s and Carton’s position toward narcissism is congruous with Freud’s: maturity is a movement away from narcissism (self-cathexis) toward libidinal cathexis with objects; narcissism in the adult is a product of either regression or defense. Kohut, however, argues for a morally neutral position with respect to narcissism and asserts that the view which posits object love as superior to narcissism is tainted by the general values of Western culture, which “extols altruism and concern for others and disparages egoism and concern for one’s self” (Search 619). The fact that our “culture,” especially popular culture, reinforces rather than seeks to develop individuals’ rela-
tively archaic and grandiose narcissism does not mean that the need itself is a sign in the individual of regression or psychological instability. Rather, if Kohut is correct, this need persists through the individual's life and may find relatively transformed and tempered symbolic expression in certain forms of religious consciousness or in utopian expectations and projections of the kind, for example, that may be found in Marx. What these symbolic expressions—whether in the mystical unity with the deity or in the utopian hope for a society erected on social justice—seem to me to manifest is precisely the narcissistic need for an empathically responsive environment.

While the notion of narcissistic cathexis may pose many problems for radical pedagogy, which as Giroux notes has been too cognitive and insufficiently psychological in its understanding of the learning process (39), this pedagogy must assume an attitude of moral neutrality towards narcissistic need if it wishes to introduce students to the unfolding of the dialectic. For example, when one seeks to confront students with the idea of the unconscious, whether this be Freud's or Jameson's political unconscious, one must recognize, as Freud argues in attempting to explain the hostile reaction to his teachings, that this idea may "prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house," that, in short, the idea of the unconscious may wound what Freud calls humanity's "naive self-love" (285). Further, the signs of this wounding must be understood not as signs of regression or students' irrationality, which must somehow be put aside if the student is to be teachable, but rather as signs of the painful effects of self-fragmentation. In the context of an assumed moral neutrality toward narcissism, the problem becomes not to get students somehow to put aside or hold in abeyance their beliefs, but to help students dwell with and maintain painful emotions as they seek (through an examination of their beliefs as they are brought into question by the text) to reachieve the narcissistically cathexed relation of belief and self at a relatively more tempered or transformed level. In other words, I take the psychological motor power of the dialectic to be that narcissistic need which seeks constantly to reestablish the unity of self and world; this is the force which must be worked with in ways which lead the individual (in the grasping of his or her limitations, of his or her social and political situation or contingent being) to relatively less grandiose narcissistic expectations.

Understood in relation to narcissism, the question for a radical pedagogy is not whether students should be "confronted" with a vision of knowledge as ideologically informed and historically contingent but whether this confrontation aims to teach the suppression or the transformation of narcissism. Paine rightly notes that some students may despair in the face of radical pedagogy's inherent relativism, and this despair would seem to put in doubt the primary goal of radical pedagogy: to promote commitment and social engagement (565). I would suggest, however, that the signs of such despair do not necessarily represent a danger to the goal of radical pedagogy; indeed, they may indicate success, that students have begun to internalize the
teachings of radical pedagogy, that they have begun to understand the historical and social origins of their own beliefs and with that to face the contingency or finitude of self. The recognition of contingency, as Sartre reminds us, goes hand in hand with anxiety and despair, but in anxiety we may find the seeds of commitment.

Despair, in the context of narcissism, may be understood as the painful falling away of relatively grandiose expectations as they come into contact with a world apparently unresponsive to narcissistic need. Many "idealistic" students, when confronted with a work like Crime and Punishment, are brought to a strong sense of social injustice; however, unable to participate in Raskolnikov's irrational solution to this injustice, they are left with a painful sense of personal limitation. A wounded narcissism of this kind lies behind the claim of many students that plans for social change, of the grand kind one might find in Marx or even ones much more limited in scope, are simply impractical or "won't work." This apparently uncharitable or "realistic" argument serves primarily to protect the student against the narcissistic injury which might occur were he or she seriously to consider what he or she might do, in his or her limited and finite self, to change the world.

In other words, the moment of despair offers the potential for a realization of one's limitation or finitude. It offers the possibility that students might come to a more realistic sense of what they can do to promote social change or, as I have suggested, to create a world more responsive to their narcissistic needs. The movement from despair to commitment, I am suggesting, requires not the repression of narcissism (as one realistically faces the world as it is) but its transformation. In an attempt to explicate the difference between the suppression of narcissism and the transformation of it, Kohut makes a distinction between what he calls "ego autonomy" and "ego dominance." The former, which Kohut associates with Freud and his allegiance to the ideals of science, Kohut describes as "the rider off the horse, man as he reflects coolly and dispassionately, particularly as he scrutinizes the data of his observations." But there is also a place in our understanding of the human psyche and its needs "for ego dominance: the rider on the horse; man as he responds to the forces within him, as he shapes his goals and forms his major reactions to the environment; man as effective participant on the stage of history" (Self Psychology 129).

If radical pedagogy is to achieve its primary goal, it must formulate a pedagogy theoretically responsive to the notion of ego dominance. This concept will necessarily produce narcissistic wounding and with it moments of depression and despair. But this despair, I would argue, is nothing compared to the despair produced by the traditional positivistic pedagogy, which in the interests of ego autonomy teaches the suppression of narcissism. It is this pedagogy, which, as Paine suggests, presents knowledge as if it were the product of a vast and impersonal machine and which consequently enforces upon students a detached or contemplative relation to that machine
(559), that produces the sort of relativism criticized by Bloom in his Closing of the American Mind.

This relativism, I would suggest, is but skin deep and not relativism in any meaningful sense. For example, it does not take much psychological acumen to understand that when students who believe in creationism dismiss Darwinism as “just another theory” they are attempting to protect themselves against any sense that their beliefs may themselves represent just another theory. Students' casual dismissal of the teachings of Marx, Freud, Skinner, and Karen Horney as “just theories,” or as “extreme,” or as “overgeneralizations” represent the conscious expression of those psychic mechanisms by which students’ protect their beliefs from any potentially wounding cathexis with the knowledge they are afforded. These remarks do not suggest relativism but its opposite: the preservation of one’s “personal” beliefs in a relatively grandiose and unconscious form. In its fetishization of fact and its valorization of the detached or contemplative attitude, traditional pedagogy suppresses narcissism, leaving its energies untapped and untransformed.

In leaving these energies untapped and untransformed, traditional pedagogy leaves students easy prey to those social forces (found particularly in what Lasch calls the Culture of Narcissism) which promise immediate and trivial solutions to narcissistic need rather than requiring the “labors of the negative” inherent in the transformation of narcissism. Rather than assist students in bearing with and learning from the narcissistic wounding which must accompany any meaningful education, positivistic pedagogy, by not pointing to the ideological sources of all knowledge, leaves students easy victims to that culture which promises ideologically informed solutions to the modern pathology of the crumbling or fragmenting self.

An Oyster Divided

A recent television commercial explicitly argues that since the solitary individual can do nothing about the national deficit or about environmental pollution, the individual should buy Bugle Boy jeans; then, the commercial promises, the world will be your oyster. A sense of narcissistic well being, of a world responsive to one's needs, is nicely captured in the image of the world as one's oyster. In effect, the commercial proposes as the cure for the narcissistic wounding implicit in the realization that the solitary individual is too weak to effect significant change upon matters of global scope that one do what one can do for one's self: buy a selfobject ready-made. However, this “cure” for the modern pathology does not represent a transformation of narcissism, merely a momentary salving of the narcissistic wound. It does not represent a cure because it leaves untransformed that grandiose narcissism which somehow expects that the solitary individual, like an omnipotent god, might be able to effect significant change. The cure proposed is a mass cure, not one which would allow the individual to come to an understanding of
what he or she, in his or her particular strengths and weaknesses, might do to influence significant social change.

If my largely affluent and largely white university students resist stepping into the dialectical unraveling of self and other and the pain this may involve, it is because they are positioned economically to buy into the mass cure for the crumbling self. Their nearly universal and angry rejection of Marx’s *Manifesto* as incomprehensible, “extreme,” or the product of a now dead history, I understand as a defensive reaction designed to put at a distance any challenges to the grandiose self. For example, to even accept the idea of “class” requires accepting that one might oneself belong to a specific class, that one, far from being omnipotent, may have very particular social, political and historical origins. However, if one does come to see there are classes and that the interests of one given class may not be the interests of another, it becomes more difficult to look at the world as one’s oyster. At the very least, it is an oyster divided, perhaps, at its heart.

If radical pedagogy is to invite students into the dialectical progression, it must not conceive of this progression as involving simply cognitive adjustments or student’s simply adopting a certain way of thinking. One must expect rather to meet real psychological resistance—anger, depression, and despair, the painful consequences of that narcissistic wounding which must occur as students seek to realize and confront their self-limitations. Further, this resistance must be understood not as resistance to “truth,” but as attempts to flee the painful affects attendant upon the transformation of narcissism. The wish to feel at home in the world is not the expression of a delusion, or as Freud might have it of humanity’s naive self love; it is the expression of a profound human need. What radical pedagogy must, instead, aim to do is to transform this need from a grandiose expectation into the desire to create a world in which all may feel at home.

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**Works Cited**


Transforming Narcissism


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