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RETHINKING STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF THE OTHER

Clara A.B. Joseph

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Clara A.B. Joseph
University of Calgary

Abstract

In this essay, I share reflections on what it meant to teach my book of poetry in an introductory English literature class. The book took inspiration from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his studies on encountering the other person. Engaging with this text (both the poetry and the philosophy), I consider some of the nuances of a pedagogy of creativity and its potential for lessons in engaging with the other on the basis of ignorance of the other. The essay is a response to Anna Herbert's The Pedagogy of Creativity (2010), in which Herbert, on the other hand, defines the other as a location within the self.

Résumé

Dans le présent essai, je partage mes réflexions sur l'expérience d'enseigner mon recueil de poésie dans un cours d'introduction à la littérature anglaise. Le recueil tire son inspiration de la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas, notamment de ses travaux sur la rencontre de l'autre. En travaillant avec ce texte (à la fois la poésie et la philosophie), je me penche sur certaines nuances d'une pédagogie de la créativité et sur son potentiel en matière de leçons relatives à l'engagement avec l'autre fondé sur son ignorance de l'autre. Cet essai constitue une réponse à The Pedagogy of Creativity par Anna Herbert (2010), dans lequel Herbert, au contraire, définit l'autre comme étant un lieu à l'intérieur de soi.

Introduction

The Pedagogy of Creativity (Herbert, 2010) is one of the few studies on the pedagogical potential of art and creativity in the classroom (others include Keblowska-Lawniczak, 2014; Schlomer, 2012; and Woldt, 2009). In her work, Anna Herbert interprets methods of higher education chiefly through a Lacanian psychoanalytical framework and considers relationships with the other person as a source of creativity. It is true that making an effort to look beyond one's extreme narcissism has the potential for learning and thus creativity. However, Herbert's fundamental position—that the other is also "'a place' of radical alterity

within ourselves" (p. 103)—requires re-examination, because in this claim the other person inadvertently ceases to exist.

Toward this investigation and as a reflection on a pedagogy of creativity, I will introduce my book of poetry published in 2016 and inspired by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Joseph, 2016). According to Levinas, the other is the absolute other. He noted, "The face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" (Peperzak, Critchley, & Bernasconi, 1996, p. 167). That is, Levinas recognized the self's propensity to consume the one outside—the other; yet he theorizes the I-Thou relationship where I will not only not kill you, but even die so that you may live.

The long poem consists of individual segments, some derived from true events and some prompting meditations, linked by the voice of the other that speaks in the first person and the third person. This genre has the potential to cause unease in a world where I alone am used to speaking as I and where the third person otherwise is at most—to quote Herbert (2010) again—a place of radical alterity within ourselves. I engage with two thoughts. One is from Ann Chinnery, "the pedagogical postures of Emmanuel Levinas," central to which is ethics. The other is Sharon Todd's (2003) reflections on "learning from the Other" (p. 117) as an alternative to the violence and instrumentalization that is, according to her, otherwise inherent in pedagogical practices in general. Todd advocated a Levinasean approach, one that reveals the circumstances that facilitate ethics and morality, "conditions which make nonviolent relations to the other possible" (Levinas, 2003, p. 147). I consider how reflections on the creative process, as long as they refuse the epistemological other, may echo the vulnerability of the self in the face of the other (as theorized by Levinas).

This essay examines the following questions:

1. How and whether metaphor and rhetoric can circumvent the danger of standing in the place of the other;
2. How the genre of poetry may facilitate a relationship with the other, founded on ignorance of the other; and

How and why pedagogy should privilege minimalistic sentience in the face of the other. In the final section, I reflect on what happened in the classroom setting.

The Potential of Art and Creativity in the Classroom

When reviewing what it means for students in a professional or non-professional degree program to produce creative pieces of writing as part of coursework, scholars tend to define targets and measure success based on the potential for self-representation. Speaking of medical students, Virginia Cowen, Diane Kaufman, and Lisa Schoenherr (2016), for instance, examined articles that report on creativity in the classroom and concluded that "creative and expressive writing" contribute to developing "a personal identity" and "reflect on interpersonal skills" (p. 311). They therefore suggested that such writing can usefully integrate into the curriculum. In his article "Gestalt Pedagogy—Creativity in Teaching," Ansel Woldt (2009) provided the benefits his classes have drawn from a holistic and experience-based pedagogy founded on creativity. One benefit that a student can receive was presented as follows: "Creativity is making something new to understand our selves and the universe better" (p. 140). The emphasis was on "mutuality," "reciprocity," and "dialogue" (p. 140). Similarly, Carol Archer and Christopher Kelen (2015) discussed the place of dialogue

in "collaborative and cross-cultural arts apprenticeships" (p. 175). Communication of one's liberty and the enactment of democracy are central to this dialogue (p. 201). Overall, these references point to the importance of contemporary pedagogy in ensuring that the student, with the help of creativity, can learn to present herself or himself to an increasingly competitive world and acquire relevant social skills.

The parameters change somewhat when the scholarship is on the role of studying someone else's creative piece—a short story or a poem, for example. In his essay "Creative Writing and Critical Response in the University Literature Class," Peter Wilson (2011) challenged the common perspective that the response to literature ought to be critical rather than creative. He acknowledged those such as Peter Barry and Rob Pope who maintain that critical writing is inherently, albeit differently, creative, but he argued for a "creative-critical spectrum" involving different kinds of creative and/or critical responses to a literary text (p. 440). Here, of course, Wilson was addressing the types of assignments that literary studies can elicit. However, in opening up the possibilities simultaneously to both the critical and the creative stream within literary studies, Wilson suggested their mutual inalienability. The critical and the creative abide in literary studies. I do not claim that this is not the case in other disciplines; rather, I wish to argue that discussing a (literary) text both critically and creatively—i.e., with consideration for its hermeneutical and aesthetic-cum-inventive elements—can open up a self-other dynamic that tends toward the other.

Herbert (2010) read the process with the help of Lacan and, therefore, observed that the place outside the self is the symbolic order of external signifiers (2010, p. 107). These signifiers are unconscious. In the Lacanian sense, however, the signifier—as long as it is outside the ego—can also arise from within the self. This is why Herbert spoke of the other as also located within the self. The Lacanian notion is not alien to Heidegger's on art as ontological disclosure (*aletheia*) (see Heidegger, 1972). In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger (1971) perceived art as a thing that expresses and even manufactures the culture of the artist, thereby revealing a certain ontological reality that is not necessarily akin to that of either the work or the creator. In these terms, the "other" aspect that art discloses can arise from outside the totally other—from the reader, for instance. Thus, we see a similarity in the thought of Heidegger and Lacan, from which Herbert derived her formulation. Within such a framework, art simply cannot dodge the self.

Levinas: A Poetic Intervention

Levinas kept this particular problem in view when in his 1948 essay, "Reality and Its Shadow," he ranked art below criticism. Levinas was at the time acutely aware of the pro-Nazi direction of Heidegger's theories of art, all of which privileged ontology. In the essay, Levinas proceeded to apply a Platonic critique of art, namely that art "lets go of the prey for its shadow" (Levinas 1948/1987, p. 141). Art engages with the image; only philosophical criticism deals with the concept. In the historical context of the Holocaust and similar invasions on humanity, art is thus fundamentally irresponsible, because it escapes into myth and pleasure. *In Otherwise than Being*, Levinas (1981) wrote: "Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology" (p. 40). Accordingly, art is deceptive on account of its eagerness to thematize or ontologize the other. However,

the unconquerable element in art puzzled Levinas. The resounding of sound, for instance, suggested the unattainable portion of music. It was particularly evident in poetry: "in poems vocables, material of the said [the ontological], no longer yield before what they evoke, but sing with their evocative powers and their diverse ways to evoke, their etymologies" (Levinas, 1981, p. 40).

Furthermore, as Levinas saw it, the generic privilege of poetry approves of the ethical. He therefore studied poets such as Maurice Blanchot and Paul Celan and noted their departure from a Heideggerian vocation. Regarding Levinas's response to Blanchot, Sean Hand (2009) noted, "Levinas is now prepared, with only occasionally residual hesitations, to acknowledge how poetic language is able to generate signs beyond meaning, abandon the order present to vision and hold open transcendence" (p. 74). Poetry's ability to open itself to the world-beyond-a-fixed-meaning, or truth, opens it also to the other. The success of poetry depends on the absoluteness of this other. This other, alterity, cannot be within the self.

My long poem, *The Face of the Other*, builds on and engages with Levinas's concept of the absolute other, where the other is always a person. It asks: What does it mean to look into the face of the other person? The long poem consists of individual poems separated by the omega symbol, where each segment is the space of the other person and most of the time a different person. What is discomfiting is that the other person speaks. The other person speaks from a place of marginality, brokenness, and injustice; this place cannot be measured by the memory or imagination of either the author or the reader. Only the other can speak about what it means to be in that place. The genre of poetry, particularly its characteristic of ambiguity and its potential for multiple interpretations, makes way for a relationship between the reader with the other that is founded to a great extent on ignorance. It serves to forestall understanding by the self *about* the other. All the same, the genre facilitates encounters.

The following lines appear as a refrain at key junctures to signify the problem of the other, a problem that is distinct from the experience of Jesus, for instance:

I thirst
mouthless, I plead
voiceless. I set my facelessness
toward Jerusalem (p. 8)

In his final days, Jesus turned his face like flint toward Jerusalem (this is a combined interpretation of Isaiah 50:6–7 and Luke 9:51). The Christian narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus acknowledges the face of Jesus as one that is decipherable through all its torture. The knowledge of that face is so heavy among Christians that the approach to it takes the form of devotion or piety. These attitudes are lacking among the same Christians and others when the one who heads to Jerusalem is the "other." The other's trip to that historic city is marked by mouthlessness, voicelessness, and, ultimately, facelessness. In fact, these are only some of the (negative) characteristics of the absolutely other, and these are characteristics that defy hoarding within the self. Any relationship with the other, then, would have to be founded on lack, rather than ontological, worshipful, presence.

Sentience versus Pedagogy

It is also, however, a fact that teaching and learning happen not in lack but presence. Pedagogy to a great extent has to do with what one feels and thinks, and if one is doing neither, then the person in the classroom, being absent when present, is merely warming the bench. The word *sentience* suggests the capacity to feel, perceive, or experience subjectively. In general definitions, reasoning and thinking are beyond its pale. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1844/1900) opened the term to intelligence when, in "A Vision of Poets," she wrote:

> Extending from which instrument
> And angel, right and left way bent,
> The poet's sight grew sentient
> Of a strange company around
> And toward the altar; pale and bound,
> With bay above the eyes profound. (p. 251)

Albeit otherworldly in this instance, sentience is an awareness, here, that is both perceptual and comprehensible. Both sense and sensibility, thus, sit within the term. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano adopted the term *sentipensante*—feeling-thinking—to caution against removing "reason from the heart," as he put it in *The Book of Embraces* (1992). Almost 20 years later, Laura Rendon published *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* (2009), with the call for a return to Galeano's concept for the sake of a holistic pedagogy. This pedagogy, because it is based on sensing and thinking, or the *sentipensante*, rejects the mind-body dualism. However, even as it is holistic, it tends toward what Levinas would reject as totalizing in its emphasis on knowledge and being, or what Rendon described as being "guided by a nondual epistemology and ontology" (p. 142).

The objection is not to meaningful inquiry, but to the possibility of founding a pedagogy on the assumption that the other can be put in its place in ontology or at last understood in epistemology. When one privileges either epistemology or ontology, ethics—possible only in the face of absolute alterity—becomes difficult if not impossible. In their introduction to a special issue of *Critical Arts*, "Unruly Pedagogies; Migratory Interventions: Unsettling Cultural Studies," Louise Bethlehem and Ashleigh Harris (2012) recognized the combination of "giving thought" (p. 11) and what is "felt" (p. 12) in a pedagogy of sentience. They emphasized the need for students' "sentient engagement" (p. 11) and, therefore, they used pedagogy "to push Swedish students out of the complacency generated by their relative social stability, cultural and social homogeneity, and conviction that Sweden is somehow exempt from precariousness of any kind" (p. 11). Bethlehem and Harris used pedagogy to introduce "a dynamic of danger and threat in the classroom in which the stakes…are very high indeed" (p. 11). Yet the fear and excitement—the engagement at long last that students experience in a utopian Sweden experience—are at the possibility of an imminent threat to that stability, at the risk to *themselves*, rather than the always already dire reality of a state such as Jerusalem or Palestine, for instance. The point is, both sentience and *sentipensante*—and one could add other terms, such as *qualia* (Dennett, 1988) and *affect* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987)—seem to be self-oriented, not other-oriented.

In the context of the above reflections, the particular long poem questions if the best way to understand or engage with the other is not in fact to prompt a certain *kenosis*, a self-emptying, in the face of the other. In a Levinasean sense, this would mean emptying

the self of notions of the other. It involves being silent before the other (Levinas, 1985). According to Todd (2003), it makes all the difference between learning *from* versus learning *about* (p. 16). One of the poems is about a sixteen-year-old who is betrayed by her fiancé, a cab driver, who submits her to multiple rapes and even gang rape. Her eventual complaint to the police is not taken seriously and goes unregistered. The lines that follow appear in this format and were close-read by the class:

> Day by day the dread of
>   deeds done
> to her
> dawns
>   a little more, pushes vomit
> up her   throat
> at the memory of
>   a touch,
> wrecks
> what
>   little
>   sleep
> she steals upon the brutal
> bed. (p. 56)

I quote these lines to bring the reader into the kind of involvement and its disruption that the verses, coupled with the format, prompt. A reader has the opportunity to comprehend the "dread" somewhat; the reader may also not appreciate the effort required to follow, which the positioning of words imposes, as in the movement from "wreck" to "what." Many students tracked the storyline in the poem, the moments of empathy, but also the alienation caused, sometimes by the subject matter and sometimes by the format. The tendency of the genre of poetry to demand multiple readings for further insight in some ways provides a cushion to reader/learner sensitivities. Ultimately, the girl commits suicide by using her mother's sari as a rope to hang herself, kicking away her study chair. Students could pick any of the poems for discussions and assignments. This was also one way of respecting members' personal and lived experiences.

The mention of a sari and a few other context indicators fix the locale as some place in South Asia—and to the extent that India often stands in for South Asia, India. Awareness of this location can immediately switch the reader/learner into an "I know you" mode. The self as a reader/learner in the West can easily stereotype the character(s) involved on the basis of race. Therefore, to ruffle this complacency, the next poem begins:

> Never say, there was no chair, they squat
> Over there. Squatters too can climb and kill,
> Taunt you with their dangling pain when
> You have almost turned away. (p. 58)

By intervening in the process of the objectification of the other and knowing the other through stereotyping, the poem reminds the reader/learner that it is important to unknow, not to forget that the alien other can haunt—i.e., "taunt you with their dangling pain." In my introduction to the poem, I shared with students that the poem of the girl was based on a true event that happened in India. I invited students to share similar and recent instances they had read about, heard, watched on the news, etc. The conclusion was that it could have

happened anywhere. This awareness can, in turn, reduce sentience, bring about minimalistic sentience, of the racialized other, a significant aspect of reading the poem.

Even as a post-colonial pedagogy is sensitive to the extent of othering (as Gayatri Spivak would term the process) that a non-Western subject can be subjected to in our classrooms, a revised pedagogy would insist on the dangers of knowing. Michalinos Zembylas (2005) called the latter a "pedagogy of unknowing." According to him, "A pedagogy of unknowing is responsive to the Other and creates opportunities that do not consider the learner as 'knowable' and fixed. Instead, educators can invite learners to read, watch, and listen to others' testimonies. For example, a teacher could challenge students to attend to the testimony of an individual who has suffered in life" (p. 151). Zembylas would like to replace knowing with witnessing. The classroom is the space to witness the suffering of the other. Todd (2003) phrased the idea as follows: "To teach responsibly—and responsively—one must do so with ignorance and humility" (p. 15). Here, however, the other always remains unknowable and thus beyond the self's urge to define and contain.

The Descent to Earth!

The traditional definition (Houle, 1961; Knowles, 1980, 1989) of adult learners is bound by factors of age ("maturity") and experience. Accordingly, traditional undergraduates are in their late teens or early 20s and are not saddled with responsibilities; adult learners, on the other hand, are usually parents and in their retirement phase. Many students who enter Canadian universities are indeed young; some, however, are older. Whether young or old, what is striking about the majority of entry-level undergraduate students in our universities is precisely their level of maturity and commitment to studies. Many of these students are in relationships, most have jobs, and many take on multiple responsibilities—at school, at work, at home, and even in the community. The leap (with or without a break) from high school to university provides in itself a learning curve that is somewhat akin to that experienced by many adult learners who enter institutions of education after life elsewhere. Such was the case with many of the students who registered for my introductory course in English literature: ENGL201.14 "Approaches to Literature" (winter 2017). Also noticeable was that about half of the class were international students and, as I soon found out, about 10% of those were second-language learners.

The process of deciding to select and then having the class engage with my own creative piece was difficult. Could I ever get students interested in poetry by giving them my production? Will the long poem be an easy and creative way to introduce students to reflections on the relationship between the self and the other? Together, these two questions composed the pedagogical challenge. After a period of deliberation, I decided to include the book along with an anthology of short stories in the course. The department approved the course proposal quickly. I then had to make sure, for my sake, that I did not benefit financially from the sale of my book. My method was to purchase the book at the author's rate and then make it available for purchase to the students at a 25% loss to me. This way, while it ensured that students got the book at the cheapest rate, it also preserved my ego intact. It appeared to me that, at least initially, when students held the book in their hands, most were convinced they could survive this one. After all, it was only 69 pages long. I asked the students how many did not like poetry, and a few (hesitant/daring) hands went up. I introduced myself as the culprit behind the book—the poet.

I chose poems that were easy to teach. I preferred short ones so that students did not get discouraged. When I picked long ones, I made sure they were dramatic rather than reflective to get the attention of the students. I introduced the context, traced the links of the plot to newspaper reports, and explained foreign words. I chose poems that had some rhythm and were soothing to the ear. I used my ability to sing to recite the short refrain, which now had a tune. Homer (sometimes) nods in my class, and I hoped my singing would wake him up. I made sure to modulate my voice during declamations. Teams decided what questions to pose to me. Representatives, about 16 of them (in a class of 60) interviewed me to get a better sense of what made me write and what I had written. Interviewees mustered the courage necessary to stand in front of their classmates and instructor. Face to face, I felt vulnerable, naked. I alone was responsible for every word and pattern on the page. I was bound to respond. "Why are there so many grim poems?" "What is the religious background that you bring to the poems?" "What is the refrain supposed to do in the book?" "Did the poem just come to you or did you have to revise?" These are just a sample of the questions. The technical ones were easier to answer. The personal ones (my religious background) I answered honestly but with a tinge of resentment: Wasn't I being forced to reveal too much? Will the information be held against me and my book? Was I instantly forgiving of the person who asked the uncomfortable question? Was my *responsibility* (not *willingness*) to forgive a confirmation of my ignorance of the other or minimalist sentience?

The assignment was a conventional essay on a reading of a poem in the context of reflections on the self-other relationship and its representation. It had to have a context, the statement of a problem, a thesis, an overview of three ways to prove the thesis, and a suggestion on what kind of contribution the thesis made to literary studies and a philosophy of the self-other relationship. I encouraged teamwork so that students could share the burden. Those who preferred to write individual essays could do so. I provided guidelines. Later, several students complained about the lack of clarity in the guidelines. Students had permission to record my lectures; they had access to my PowerPoint lecture notes online. By the second month, I knew the names of almost all the students because I called the roll in each class and made it a point to associate the name and the face.

Students in teams were beginning to know each other, or should I say, unknow each other. Those who were working individually also had opportunities to meet others like them in class and to discuss their projects. I reminded them and myself that we had to look into the face of the other, remember names, listen, and help each other to succeed. It was exhausting for all of us. I had the opportunity to interact with individuals and teams several times in a bid to make sure they understood the assignment and were on the right path. The class followed the same process again later on when focusing on the anthology of short stories. In a lower-level English class that requires attention to the writing skills of students, 60 is a big group. Surprisingly, student feedback at the end of the semester repeatedly was along the lines of "the class size is fairly small which makes it nice as you get to know people"; "class size is not too big which is helpful to fully have a good connection with the prof."; "good class size"; "class size—the size is not that big so we can have one-on-one time with our instructor"; etc. No one complained about class size. Looking back, I would like to think that these comments on class size are reflections also on the extent of the Levinasean face-to-face interactions that students strove to engage in, often against their better judgment. The "face of the other" became a theme at various levels: in the study of

the long poem and the short stories, in encounters between the poet and the reader, in the student-teacher relationship, among classmates, etc.

All the talk about unknowing, which turned out to be a theme in the book and the lectures, and being thrust in the face of the other also placed added pressure on me as the instructor to recognize that I cannot label my students. In one instance, a chatty and disruptive student told me when I approached her, "I want you to know that I am a good person." Indeed, minimalistic sentience had to become my methodology too. Increasingly, candid questions and responses from students and me in the classroom served to point to not just some but whole layers of prejudices that hid behind the one we thought we had just dismantled. Team assignments caused students to encounter a neighbour or a friend as the face of the other, and in the spirit of Levinasean ethics, with reminders to unlearn expectations and understandings. Encounters became repeated lessons in minimalistic sentience.

Feedback at the end included the cosmic plea of one student: "please less poetry, thanks." Overall, however, the Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI) was 6.34 out of 7.00. (The department mean was 5.81, and the faculty mean was 5.97.) Previous USRIs had been lower than both the department and faculty mean. Could my book of poetry have made a difference? Was it on account of the fact that it was a creative piece and I was its author, with whom the students could interact? Did it prompt students to engage a bit more with the text? In the same semester, I was teaching Levinas to graduate students with the help of Levinas's essays in English translation. My undergraduate students who were referencing the book of poetry often understood the "other is greater than the self" position of Levinas better than my graduate students. Therefore, I wonder: Was it this specific book that facilitated, however imperfectly, a Levinasean pedagogy? Or can any creative text of the instructor facilitate this learning regardless? Was it this particular long poem that facilitated a Levinasean pedagogy, or would any poem suffice?

I began this section by acknowledging my students as adults. If I see my students as adult learners, what is the most prominent characteristic of adult learning that also sits at the heart of the poem and the pedagogy? Adult learners are seen as self-motivated. But they are also outward-oriented. As Geleana Drew Alston et al. (2015) noted, "Adult education is grounded in responding to the needs of others" (p. 175). This is a new direction away from the focus on "self-image and identity development" in Randee Lipson Lawrence's "Participatory Visual Methods: Revisioning the Future of Adult Education" (2017, p. 94). But Lawrence privileged social change: "the ultimate goal…is to change oppressive conditions and make an impact on society" (p. 97). Alston et al. proceeded to discuss the role of service learning in graduate programs of adult education; Lawrence considered the possibilities of filmmaking, photovoice, fashion shows, etc. in adult education. We, in turn, can reflect on the potential of a Levinasean perspective in education. In "A Novel Approach to Teaching a Long Poem: Ellen Fitzarthur," Stephen Behrendt (2016) provided helpful techniques and methods for teaching the story/plot and technical aspects (poetic devices)—"rhyme, rhythm, other sonic devices, figuration, and even lineation" (p. 313)—of a long poem. That has not been the purpose of this essay. I, nevertheless, see value in the genre of poetry, especially its characteristic to suggest rather than expose. I suspect that creative works that can prod students to orient toward the other and a pedagogy that values the challenge of alterity have the potential to make adults of learners.

This essay has suggested the potential of art to give way to the other, of poetry to prompt an encounter with the unknown other, and of the need for a pedagogy of minimalistic sentience in the face of the other. Paralleling the title of a book by Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (1981), C. A. Safstrom (2003) wrote an article on "teaching otherwise," by which he meant an ethically oriented, rather than knowledge-oriented, pedagogy. In response to Herbert's *The Pedagogy of Creativity* (2010), it may be possible to claim that the focus on the face of the other, the poem, and the teaching method that went with it, are minuscule steps in that pedagogical direction, a direction that is otherwise than the self when (ironically) the creative piece is one's own.

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