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Academia: A story about troubadours, castratos, and singing mice

In 1979 psychoanalyst Michèle Montrelay proposed a seminar on male sexuality at Jacques Lacan's institute at the University of Vincennes. It is widely recognised that Montrelay's essays on femininity, published two years earlier under the title *L'ombre et le nom*, aim to somehow transcend Lacan's phallogocentrism. Lacan, however, forbade Montrelay to conduct the seminar, declaring that if women are not entirely governed by the phallic function, they won't have anything to say about it.

This story recounts, in quite an uncanny way, the foundation of Western academia, calling to mind the rather unhappy story of Peter Abelard, the medieval French scholastic philosopher, theologian and logician. Abelard was a preeminent figure of the Université de Paris, metonymically known as the Sorbonne, the second-oldest university in Europe after Bologna. His love affair with Héloïse d'Argenteuil, his student, resulted in a pregnancy that became legendary. It is well known that when Héloïse's uncle found out about the incident, he arranged for a band of men to break into Abelard's room one night and castrate him.

The professor Abelard, now a castrato, has been the haunting figure of Western academia ever since. Even when, in 1969, Jacques Lacan developed his concept of the four discourses, which he called Master, University, Hysteric and Analyst. While claiming that the provision and worship of "objective" knowledge usually happens in the undisclosed service of some external master discourse (being that of the official religion, the state, the market etc.), he failed to inscribe himself into his scheme. Abelard and all professors along with him, including Lacan, have gradually become socially irrelevant as masters, as the only right granted to them is to sing in high pitch while delivering extremely complicated theoretical constructions in favour of the so-called intellectual establishments. A theory, much like an aria,

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receives acknowledgment based on the performative, self-imposing and socially well-orchestrated attitude of the castrato-entrepreneur who iterates it.

But at what cost?

The anarchist philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend explains the fallacies of the dogmatic use of rules, as well as the ethical implications of every objective reasoning based on rigid dogmatism and a rationalist scientism.

He writes:

"Is it not possible that an objective approach that frowns upon personal connections between the entities examined will harm people, turn them into miserable, unfriendly, self-righteous mechanisms without charm or humour? 'Is it not possible,' asks Kierkegaard, 'that my activity as an objective [or critico-rational] observer of nature will weaken my strength as a human being?' I suspect the answer to many of these questions is affirmative and I believe that a reform of the sciences that makes them more anarchic and more subjective (in Kierkegaard's sense) is urgently needed."¹

Maybe it is in Feyerabend's work that the castrato Abelard meets Franz Kafka's Josephine, the protagonist of the short novel *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*. Josephine the talented singer who sings for the rest of the mice is alone in the mouse community, looked upon as different and somehow alien. She might also be, according to Lacan's typology, a hysteric showing symptoms that embody resistance to the prevailing master discourse. She is "anarchistic" or "dadaistic", just as Feyerabend himself is, a rarity among the mouse folk, and people soon forget her when she eventually disappears. Kafka's parable refers to this difficult relation between the one who makes the difference (being an artist, a scholar, an inventor, or a therapist) and her audience. A highly-pitched language might also belong to the ones who sometimes challenge and oppose the master discourse, the hierarchisation of knowledge production, the concealment of heteronormative power relations, the exclusion of the socially alien and the not human enough. These are the forces which often operate in the name of an abstract academic universalism, which often simply conceals the master's voice that directs such a claim.

¹ Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*. London and New York: New Left Books, 1975, p. 154.

In her essay *We Refugees*, (1943) philosopher Hannah Arendt acknowledges migrants as “the vanguard of their peoples” while arguing for the right of migrants to be politically active and participate in social practices. In the face of over 60 million people migrating today and given the current political situation in Europe with the rising of xenophobic, populist and identitarian political movements, it becomes imperative to invent new means of bringing people together in a society, without, however, homogenising them or subjecting them to class hierarchies, social stereotypes and identity politics of all kinds. When we see the migrant as the political subject of the 21st century we necessarily call into question established political principles while challenging notions such as global citizenship, a democratic way of living and collective self-mastery. How are all of us in Europe to learn and develop from this novel situation? How can we, the castrated professors who became dull schoolmasters and their submissive followers, learn from the migrant and crossbred Josephine and deliberately subvert through her “hysteric” stories the prevailing master discourse? How can we educate ourselves?

For the French philosopher Michel Serres, all forms of pedagogy require painful yet exhilarating departures from home and encounters with Otherness. To be educated is to become a harlequin, to wear a coat of inimitable and unexpected, yet curious multiplicity:

“A motley composite made of pieces, of rags or scraps of every size, in a thousand forms and different colors, of varying ages, from different sources, badly basted, inharmoniously juxtaposed, with no attention paid to proximity, mended according to circumstance, according to need, accident, and contingency – does it show a kind of world map, a map of the comedian’s travels, like a suitcase studded with stickers?”²

And when the harlequin is stripped down from all the layers of clothing a hermaphrodite, a mixed body, a naked androgyne is exposed, “a monster ... a sphinx, beast and girl; centaur, male and horse; unicorn, chimera, composite and mixed body” (ibid., xvi). This body continuously faces the unmovable never changing power, which only declares obedience to its self, “Power does not move. When it does, it strides on a red carpet. Thus reason never discovers, beneath its feet, anything but its own rule.” (ibid., xv)

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This crossbreed-harlequin, much like the person who wishes to learn, must always risk a voyage from the familiar towards the strange and foreign. As Serres asserts, the hybrid plunges into the river's current and swims. "No learning can avoid the voyage. ... The voyage of children, that is the naked meaning of the Greek word pedagogy. Learning launches wandering." (ibid., 8)

And it is true that amidst this wandering a new educational ideal is revealed: the troubadour of knowledge. True learners are those *trouvères*, finders who will not succumb to the mediocrity of already existing methods, rules and paradigms, but will actually take the risk and restlessly explore the unexpected and unorthodox which is separated from the familiar and determined. How can we "find" when our whole educational system is based on reaching already predictable outcomes defined by pseudo-managerial rankings and evaluations? (Learning is not and cannot be a business.) How can true learning take place when our educational system is entirely structured to operate at the costs of those who don't have a voice (Jacques Rancière), migrants, outcasts and the unprivileged? What kind of learning can take place if our educational system deliberately excludes the affective powers emanating from the body's roots? What is this kind of education that forgets that science's general truths always derive from poetry's singular stories? True learning, Serres writes, takes place in the fluid middle of a crossing, that is, the crossing of fixed territories and stable identities while allowing for a chaomotic (think of Félix Guattari) crossbreeding of learners and a destabilizing complexity of ideas to take place.

The troubadour, the castrato even, may always entertain by singing in the presence of a king; a king, however, who will never know the true nature of that song, the longing for an eros. Learning is such an erotoalgc enterprise; such as the one heralded by Sappho and all other bards alike. The song of Josephine, the hysteric-harlequin, a hybrid of our origins, will always remind us – like a newborn child – of that divine foundation.

UNIVERSITAS

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Bahtsetzis & Joulia Strauss

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