Critique, Crisis and the Romantic Ideal

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In the summer term of 2002, I was teaching a second year course that I had taught several times – Humanities 202: Great Texts in the Humanities II – which covers the period between the 17th century and the present. According to the calendar description, the course is oriented to "an intensive study of some of the major works which have had a formative influence on the structure and development of western thought" and proceeds through "reading and discussion of primary texts and the major themes which emerge from them" in order to "introduce students to the essential philosophical, literary, social and religious themes of western civilization." Given that this is a 13 week course, such a description might give any instructor grounds for despair. It reads more like an outline for a life's study than an introduction to anything at all. No doubt many of my fellow college and university teachers have had this experience. Designing the course is rather a challenge.

If one adds to this intrinsic impossibility of success the practical constraint that the texts chosen have to be readable in one or, at most, two weeks and comprehensible to second year undergraduates with no specific background, it is no surprise that the course has become known colloquially as 'great *short* texts.' It is certainly my experience that only short texts can be discussed in sufficient detail and quantity to give any sense of the development of modern thought over this period. One must, above all, serve to illustrate that great texts cannot be digested in large gulps or disposed of by waves of the hand. In my view, one also has to choose a theme that one can follow through many, if not all, of the texts so that the course has a unity and does indeed give some sense of *development*. I have chosen science and technology, tradition and enlightenment, and well as various other themes. Luckily one does not always have to select entirely different texts when one alters the thematic focus. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* makes it onto almost all my lists.

That particular summer I wanted to trace the emergence of the modern notion of the individual alongside the tendency to giganticism that one finds in modernity in order to provoke students to think about our knee-jerk ethical individualism that takes place in the middle of massive social organization and conformity—indeed, to think this co-existence as a single problem. My list included Etienne de la Boetie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*; René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*; John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*; George Orwell, *Burmese Days*; and Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man*. Locke, Orwell and Wilde were also new to this course, but it was Rilke who thrust me into a controversy that I haven't resolved yet.

Rilke's *Letters* contain discussions of many issues of moment – death, love, nature, solitude, writing, poverty – in which one can lose oneself in a pub, a coffee

shop, or even a classroom. These discussions are animated by a passionate and unconditional commitment to an ideal of self-expression that has come to be known as the romantic ideal. The term is all right for historical reasons, as long as it doesn't become an excuse for throwing it on the rubbish heap. My students made immediate use of this heap, though without using the term as their excuse.[1] Rilke argued that "the creator must be a world for himself and find everything in himself and in Nature to whom he has attached himself."[2] He urged the would-be writer to search for the reason for this aspiration and would only accept the answer "I must" in contrast to all outward reckoning (p. 18-9). He added that "works of art are of an infinite loneliness" (p. 29) suggesting that Franz Kappus (to whom the letters were addressed) "try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue" (p. 25). At the bottom of this commitment is a decision to "assume our existence as *broadly* as we in any way can; everything, even the un-heard of, must be possible in it" (p. 67). The romantic ideal is instituted by a *decision* to assume one's own experience as the starting-point for the activity of writing poetry. This decision is even more important than the writing of poetry itself. It is what makes writing poetry possible. Even more important, it is what poetry itself seeks to awaken and instill. "Art too is only a way of living" says Rilke on the last page.

I was of course very interested in this ideal as a way of making sense of the experience of creating and being affected by art, especially modern art—indeed, of the ubiquity of the idea of 'creation' itself. But I was even more interested in the contribution of this originally artistic ideal to the living of life in the modern world, its contribution to the critique of ordinary life, of 'ordinariness' as such, and the continuous broadening and generalization of the ideal of self-expression to ever-larger spheres of life. I discussed the effect of this ideal on love and marriage, friendship, and work. I wanted to show how self-expression and self-development was a vital modern moral practice. I wanted to show why many of the great modern poets and philosophers – Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Baudelaire, Wilde, and Rilke himself – saw nothing more important than this great struggle, nothing to which it could be secondary, risking and suffering poverty, ostracism, madness, and death in its name. I had to summon all my rhetorical powers, because I realized that I was not carrying my audience with me.

The simple truth is that although they understood what I was saying, and they understood that Rilke expressed something about a way of living profoundly immersed in modernity, they simply could not summon up any positive feeling about it. They felt no attraction to it. I was reduced to asking them to hold their criticism for a moment and find something good to say about it. Their answers were uncharacteristically ordinary and uninspiring. They understood but it just didn't seem to touch them. I must admit to being horrified.

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[1] In speaking of "my students" in this essay I am referring to the majority sentiment as expressed at the time. It does justice neither to individuals, unexpressed views, afterthoughts, nor the longer-term effects of teaching.

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (Norton and Co.: New York, 1993) p. 21. Subsequent quotations from this source are indicated by a page number in brackets within the main text.

This was a very unusual teaching experience for me. That is why I'm still thinking about it three years later. There have been precedents, of course. I taught a course on utopias during the 1980s because the student mood was so disillusioned in comparison with my own student days. But they gradually garnered some enthusiasm for utopia even if it couldn't be realized. Indeed, the idea of utopia is that it can't be realized. In the case of Rilke, however, I have never so thoroughly felt that my own commitments and those of the students to whom I was talking had greatly diverged.

This event has remained a *topos* for reflection. Reflection on my own origins, both the depth and the spontaneity of my commitment to self-expression: How did it come to be that an 18 year old from a small town in southern Ontario had already become passionately attached to this moral ideal? I remember saying at that time in the late 1960s that everyone has at least one great novel or poem in them struggling to come out. Never mind whether that naïve statement is right. By what means of cultural transmission and re-invention had that ideal come to grip me? I'm still asking that question. Also, how can these students do without it? Or, do they really do without it? Is it just reticence, the fear of speaking their commitments, or the fear of commitment itself, that holds them back? There is something in this but it is not the whole answer. What does it mean to live a life not dedicated to self-expression? Is a life without self-expression worth living? The social scientific banality that we are all 'socialized' to belong in our family, group, class and society gives an easy excuse for not asking these questions. Looking back to my own origins, trying to understand and explain the experience of my students: attempting a dialogue, an experiment in understanding, that itself would need to bridge the years between 1968 and the early 21st century, and to probe the limits of 'socialization.'

Later that term we read the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. A significant number reacted to the critique of capitalism with approbation. In Marx and Engels the critique of capitalism is instrinsically connected to the method of its overthrow. Capitalism concentrates and organizes the workers in order to exploit labour more thoroughly. The newly organized workers experience their labour as the creation of the world in which they live. They are no longer the passive artifacts of their past formation. Thus, "workers of the world unite." The new world free of exploitation is already visible in the critique of capitalism. Students divided this analysis into its two constituent parts: the critique of capitalism with some merit (worth discussing anyway) and the classless society an unrealizable ideal not worth much breath. But this bifurcation of the two elements, whose connection is the specific claim of Marxism to uniqueness, is not a bad starting point for learning. One can point out that it is the connection that is key to Marxism as such. One can show that, if the prospective classless society is not a viable ideal, then the critique of contemporary capitalism cannot be accepted as presented. One can point out that a future-oriented ideal may perhaps never be actualizable as such. One can show how the historical experience of Communism discredits certain readings of Marx but leaves open other less-acknowledged possibilities.

In other words, despite the tendency nowadays to treat Marx as a dead dog, the pertinence of his critique of capitalism to contemporary neo-liberal globalization keeps the discussion interesting and takes it to new levels in which one's thinking

must be sharpened and go beyond the formulations of the text itelf. What more could one want from a great short text aiming to introduce students to essential themes of western civilization? What keeps the discussion of Marx going is his critical realism that is presented in seamless unity with the romantic ideal. What is taken to be unrealistic utopianism in Marx is precisely the ideal of self-expression to which Rilke gave potent voice.[3] But the critique depends upon the ideal and upon the ideal becoming a moral practice. Otherwise the critique becomes 'purely theoretical' and doesn't cut in the world of work and social institutions. Critique without crisis is a purely theoretical enterprise. By 'crisis' I mean a situation in the lived world which presents alternative possibilities that demand to be addressed in action. I don't conclude from this, as many of my students might, that it is thereby without value, but its social significance is drastically reduced. There is no crisis if self-expression as a moral practice is rejected because the frustration of self-expression does not provoke a critique oriented to change. The future tense is lost. The present extends indefinitely into the future without break. Crisis is the presently experienced possibility of a break, and the romantic ideal is the determination to live this crisis thoroughly and without reservation, to assume our existence as broadly as we in any way can.

This is why I find my students' out-of-hand dismissal of Rilke's ideal as expressed in the context of poetry more significant for contemporary demoralization than their ability to accept parts of Marx. Rilke is more one-sided in this sense. His purpose is exclusively to explain the decision for self-expression that underlies poetry. That exclusivity underlines the radicality of the decision for self-expression. It is this radicality whose reception is clouded by the duality that the contemporary eye sees in Marx and whose clarity in Rilke brings forth only a stunned silence. The students were more sympathetic to Franz Kappus himself, who explained in the introduction to Rilke's letters to him that "life drove me off into those very regions from which the poet's warm, tender and touching concern had sought to keep me" (p. 13). Kappus concluded that the strenuous romantic ideal was only for a favoured few. Of the subsequent turn of his own life he remarks, "but that is not important" and adds that "where a great and unique man speaks, small men should keep silence" (p. 13). It is not often that one of the sheep articulates the Nietzschean solution. I have always thought that the most basic task of a teacher is to fight Kappus' resignation, to provoke every student to refuse to say of his or her own life "that is not important" whether they are great or not. This basic task is what connects teaching to social enlightenment.[4] Taking any measure whatever, not all will measure up, but, wherever each one may be, a further step is possible.

One could divide the human species between those who are capable of self-expression and those who are not. One can cede history to the great men, and now women too. One can cede education too, of course. This is the most likely alternative in our supposedly democratic university. Or one could, like my students seem to

[3] I am not at present trying to give a historical account of how Marx's and Rilke's commitments to the ideal of self-expression are related nor explore their similarities and differences. This, again, is a life-task not a task for one course or short paper. There are such connections, but the point here is the relevance of this moral ideal and practice to a contemporary thinking of modernity.

[4] Note that this statement is a double negation. This is indeed the logical form of teaching.

have done, dump it altogether for the practicality of training. And then where would we be? Must I be an either an elitist or a democratic sheep? Is this the only option? Is it not possible in this time to be committed to self-expression for everyone? It is in this question that the dialogue between me and my students, between 1968 and the 21st century, begins. I am not sure whether I can love this question, but I cannot avoid it.