

Foreword

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Sam Rocha says this book is for teachers not dreamers, but I'm not so sure. After all, he defines phenomenology¹ as “nothing more than imagining the real.”² The real is simultaneously close-at-hand and distant, what is visible and what is not, what we can hear and what we suspect is sounding if we could only attune ourselves to its frequency.³ “Even the body” - which Rocha takes as “a phenomenological first instance from existence” - “operates in its own times, spaces, and manners.” Like the real itself, the body seems to have a mind of its own.

“I am an erotic person,” Rocha confides, “because *eros* is first and foremost ontological, and therefore must be more potent, fecund, and real than symbols, words, grammar, and the epistemological accounts they prescribe. Even if meaning melts away, *eros* will remain, silently, in the dark.”⁴ Here *eros* is not conflated with the extra-discursive but certainly inhabits it, less an identifiable domain than what exceeds our capacities for comprehension.⁵

“In and through these studies,” Rocha alerts us, “I am led to believe that that there is reason to be hopeful for something new out there, that there is ever-ancient and ever-new beauty to find, become, and be-with and within.” Like “hope” education becomes the “insatiable desire for something real and true.” Coming upon that “something” doesn't end desire, however, as “Being's only invitation seems to be into infinity.” Yet, it is not otherworldly, at least not only: “Being is never ahistorical, it is the very condition upon which history becomes possible. This worldly notion of Being does not make it any less

mysterious.” What it does make of it is more desirable: “Education as mystery reveals education as more, not less, desirable.” Study is an erotic pursuit in this sense.⁶ “The power of a real and true absence is remarkable erotic and tragically powerful,” Rocha affirms.

There is, Rocha writes, a “particular affinity between phenomenology and ontology.” Not only can phenomenology enable us to focus on “the things themselves” – like “joy” – but “even the phenomenon of Being itself.” Indeed, Rocha asserts “phenomenological knowledge is itself ontological.”⁷ No straightforward expression of intentionality⁸, Rocha’s phenomenology means “moving inward through a gentle caress (like evaporation) of the imagination to intensify them [the things themselves] and render them more radically saturated as they are.” Not “going out of tune⁹,” such reduction renders what it caresses “more robust and focused expression of itself. Ontological fidelity.” Fidelity to being-in-the-world, eschewing “that ancient and dangerous fruit: metaphysics and pure essentialism.” Phenomenology, Rocha knows, “is impossible without a genealogy that makes it necessary and prescient for the times we live in.”¹⁰

Rocha outlines the “alarmist” history of public debate over U.S. schooling, noting “the unmistakably apocalyptic tone to these warnings sold as reform.” In our time “education has become messianic.”¹¹ “Schoolvation” is the promise of heaven on earth, provided one’s test scores suffice.¹² He is being critical here of messianism but not education, which he locates less institutionally than ontologically.¹³ Those scores and the quantification of, well, everything, may be compensatory, for “this much is clear,” Rocha writes, “*education remains a mystery to us.*”¹⁴ That mystery has to do with “frustrated desire.” For what? “[W]hat it is we long for, Rocha reminds, is “the hope to become a person.”

What’s *that*? Rocha provides Greek and Roman definitions, now merged (or is it

convoluted) in what he terms the “most radical human invention of all time: the autonomous individual, now fading into the *homo economicus*.”¹⁵ It is this “invention,” he declares, that “inaugurates what Foucault regards to be ‘the death of man’.” Rocha’s point is less historical than ontological: “*individuals do not exist*.” Relationality is in fact “irreducible.”¹⁶ Not only do “we arrive, at birth, in relationship, covered in blood,” but subjective singularity is always already a multiplicity: “the human person is a public onto herself, from womb to tomb.” To put the matter another way, the person is an “existential plurality” within “the erotic proximity of existence.”

What the teacher can offer, then, is not “a public institutional identity.” Rather, what the teacher offers is “her own human personhood,” a mode of being “that also begins as a public.” But the “public” the teacher personifies is not so much the site of spirited debate – although subjectivity can be that too – as it is a lived space of “existential intimacy” in which to “offer true love is to be a tragic lover.” The teacher – as human person – is “thrown into the flux of relations in the world of Being, the subsistent life-world, embodied in an amorous and tragic way, come what may.”

Within this “wider context of Being,”¹⁷ teaching becomes revelation. If “mystery causes us to desire disclosure,” is it surprising that teaching is the “art of showing,” an exhibitionistic phrasing I thought at first. But “showing” isn’t exclusively visual. It can mean 1) display, 2) type of performance, or a 3) presentation of facts. The last is a commonplace of teaching, the second is in sync with theories of performativity often associated with the celebrated work of Judith Butler, and the first – display – can connote the visual, but it can also suggest intellectual and psychological disclosure. Rocha seems to have something sacred in mind: “showing is made possible by the offering.” Offerings are gifts¹⁸ of course; they can also be rites of contrition and celebration, gifts for gods.¹⁹

“The teacher never knows for certain that the offering is given,” Rocha writes. In fact, “the exchange is never clear or even real.” Here is acknowledgement that concepts of “outcomes” can’t be quantified, as they are layered and often deferred.²⁰ Nor does the teacher have a right to expect to know how the offering is received, as Rocha admits only “the hope of showing something real, a hope without expectation or confirmation.” That hope seems to reside – to emanate from – the presence of the teacher, an offering that can be beautiful. “When the offering is shown,” Rocha writes, “beauty emerges.” He is here more hopeful²¹ than I, or, perhaps more precisely, he is more philosophical, as when he insists that “when a lesson or a homily or a routine or a scale is complete, these are the only questions: What was offered? What was shown?” For me these questions not only usher in empiricism, but history, culture, politics, ethics, and metaphysics as well, themselves at times overlapping.²² As expression of “folk phenomenology,” his questions contain these categories; they provoke like a prism, disclosing a different hue at each angle.

Folk phenomenology, we learn, is “a way to imagine the real, gleaned from pages and experiences and ideas, but most of all from persons, wrestled together through the art of writing and editing.” Rocha offers folk phenomenology to the “teacher who feels the anxiety of these times and also the joy, in the only way the offering is ever made: in love, in love, in love, with all the tragedy and life that love brings.” Love is the consummation of this offering: “In the end, it disappears as knowledge and becomes something like understanding, something you can understand without knowing. Love.”²³ Rocha’s folk phenomenology provides passage from knowledge to understanding to love.²⁴

For Rocha, such movement is a matter of being-in-the-world, “most vividly and consistently revealed in our passions and erotic life.” Not sexual²⁵ necessarily, “desire” demands presence, seeking, study.²⁶ “Desire is fundamental,” he emphasizes, but the eros²⁷ it

references “begins with the simple fact that we desire to be something: *something instead of nothing*.” That “something” is not identity, or anything static for that matter; it is

the enormous task of being and dwelling within Being, living, and existing by seeking, sensing, and seeing with a fierce and radical fidelity to the absolute reality of our most profound desire: our desire for love and *theosis*, the desire for Desire.

Eros is what enables Tomas to refuse his father’s teasing of him.²⁸ Not psychoanalytic²⁹ resistance he insists, but ontological, the substratum of human experience, as even “the most banal and mundane desires hide a deeper and more potent reality that gives way to the dark, pregnant womb of *eros*.” Is the teacher – like the parent³⁰ – a midwife to the human person seeking to be born?

What is elusive in English becomes clarified in Spanish. In Spanish, Rocha writes, there is a difference between the two expressions for “I am”: *soy* (“I am”) and *estoy* (“I am”). *Soy* “speaks in an existential voice,” he explains, “while *estoy* can only speak from experience and often speaks in term of ‘I have’.” “*Tengo hambre*” (“I have hunger”) is a way to say “*Estoy hambriento*” (“I am hungry”). “*Soy hambriento*” is nonsensical, except if desire is lack –as it is for Lacan - and then that ontological substratum is indeed hunger.

Spanish also clarifies the crucial concept of knowledge. Rocha explains that *saber* is a form of the verb “to know” that references “information or data: knowing *about* things.” In contrast, *conocer* means “the knowledge of things themselves.” I draw a somewhat similar distinction between “information” (anonymous, just the facts please) and “knowledge” (bearing the imprint of author, place, and time). The two terms blur but in Spanish the distinction is clear: “*Saber* is to know-about. *Conocer* is to know.” For Rocha, the latter

references “epistemological knowledge,” while the latter “at least approaches ontological knowledge.” For him, it is ontological knowledge that yields understanding.

Perhaps this distinction – between *saber* and *conocer* - informs Rocha’s emphasis upon the human person and, specifically, his posing of the teacher’s key question: “Who?”—*Who shall we teach?*³¹ I share Rocha’s sense that “human persons are something of an endangered species.” That danger derives, in part, from the refusal to know the ontological. The catastrophes behind and before us – in front of us now – may ensure that the lover that the teacher is is condemned to be “tragic,” but, as Rocha also suggests, the teacher is inspired, “possessed by the erotics of study” and “the irreducible posture” of the parent. Rocha says teacher, but I think the posture of the parent may convey even more clearly what is “irreducible” in the posture of the teacher, namely the resolve to recognize that Tomas is not a goose.

Surely Rocha is right when he asserts that the “existential question of teaching is also the question of ‘who’.” He adds: “The other questions we might ask—what, where, or how—are ordered by this question.”³² But as maybe he would also agree, the “who” informing our reply to the curriculum question are not only those actually existing children we find in our classrooms; they are also those who have preceded us, and those who will follow. It is not within History that ontology reveals itself to us as human.³³ “We must struggle for love against nihilism,” Rocha appeals, but he seems to sense that the struggle is Sisyphean. Education, Rocha concludes, is “the site of hope for tragic transformation for those who dwell in it and suffer its fortune and existential reality.” In the pages that follow Rocha shows us the site.

References

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Endnotes

¹ Not only in the philosophy of education (see, for instance, Denton 1974) has phenomenology enjoyed a long history. In 1977, theorizing a political economy of curriculum, Huebner (1999, 292) suggested that “a phenomenological methodology would help, in which the investigator brackets out his/her own taken-for-granted realities and indeed turns to consciousness of the ‘thing itself.’” His advice was very much taken up by scholars in curriculum studies,

especially in Canada (see, for instance, Aoki 2005 (1990); Pinar and Reynolds 1992; Pinar et al. 1995, chapter 8.)

² Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages are from *Folk Phenomenology*.

³ Rocha is also a musician, a guitarist and singer. “[W]hat singing means,” Friedrich Kittler (2013, 260) asserts, is “binding, enchanting with love, knowing.” He (2013, 260) reminds us that the “word ‘music’ derives from *muse*, even in Arabic.”

⁴ Kittler (2013, 303) writes: “The essence of the human being involves, before all knowledge, moods.” Rocha knows: ““We cannot separate our communal and social life from our innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires.”

⁵ “*Eros* does not submit itself to interpretation,” Rocha writes. “It is a question of being as opposed to meaning.”

⁶ “[S]tudy, then, is like other forms of *eros*: a wild thing, partly this and partly that, teeming with fortune.” Rocha terms his view an “erotic theory of study.”

⁷ Working within Chinese cultural traditions, Chen Xiangming and her colleagues characterized the teaching they observed as “ontological,” and the teachers with whom they worked regarded their teaching “as something requiring a synergy of heavenly blessing, worldly advantage and human harmony,” no simplistic adaptation of technique nor teaching to the test (quoted passages in Zhang and Pinar in press).

⁸ Rocha sees himself making “a corrective suggestion to phenomenological approaches that rely on intentionality as the primary or sole force of reduction and replace it (intentionality) with the complexities of subsistence. In place of purely intentional accounts of study, I will describe study that subsists erotically, that lives in and through desire, but also within a subsistent ecology of fortune.” Describing phenomenology, Maxine Greene (1973, 131) depicts “consciousness” itself as “characterized by intentionality.”

⁹ “Once the visionary capabilities associated with the eye, sight, and light – and, by extension, with their Enlightenment heritage – have exhausted themselves as potentially liberatory instruments,” Richter (2007, 103) writes, “the auditory possibilities of the ear still hold out promise.” Ted Aoki (2005 [1990]) concurred.

¹⁰ Invoking genealogy – often associated with Foucault – and the historical moment makes Rocha’s embrace of phenomenology almost seem a pragmatism. For a link between Foucault’s conception of genealogy and Dewey’s pragmatism, see Koopman 2013.

¹¹ This is a point affirmed and extended to democracy by Tzvetan Todorov (2014, 77), who points out that “messianism, this policy carried out on behalf

of the good and the just, does both a disservice.” He adds: “Democracy has grown sick with its own excesses, freedom is turning into tyranny, the people are becoming an easy-to-manipulate mass, the desire to promote progress is turning into a crusade” (2014, 180-181). These are the “inner enemies” of democracy which it itself has created (2014, 181). Among these is school reform (Pinar 2012, 223).

¹² The fervent intensity of school reform signals, it seems, that the school is “dead.” But, Rocha writes, “the death of school presents a useful litmus test for studying the metaphysics of education.”

¹³ “Is our notion of ‘education’ wild and fertile enough,” he asks, “to endure and exceed the endangered and domesticated era we live in?”

¹⁴ For Alan A. Block too, “Study is an engagement with the mysteries of the world” (2007, 219).

¹⁵ “Neoliberalism,” Todorov (2014, 90) points out, “shares with Marxism the belief that the social existence of men depends mainly on the economy.”

¹⁶ Luxon (2013, 179) concurs: “Solitary individuals are not to be taken as starting point; the relations that bind them to one another are.” I would point out that relations are among individuals. Here my difference with Rocha is terminological: my “individual” is his “human person.”

¹⁷ Being is not only “wider,” but “dark and wild.” Such “unknown forces and energies that drive us to study in our (un)conscious life,” Rocha explains.

¹⁸ Rocha is wary of the gift. “[T]he struggle [is] to show what has been offered,” he writes, “with the hope that never creates the expectation of a gift.”

¹⁹ “The erotics of study,” Rocha explains, “mediate between the human person and the world through the particular ontological passion that calls from beyond and within.”

²⁰ Not only outcomes, but Being itself is layered: “One of the perplexing curiosities of Being is that it often resembles a never-ending Russian doll or an eternal onion.”

²¹ As the title of chapter four confirms, Rocha is not so hopeful as to be naive.

²² “Phenomenology is not timeless,” Rocha knows. “Phenomenology is not immune from history or politics.”

²³ For Rocha, “understanding” is “the desire to know and be known ontologically.” For me, that knowledge occurs through study, the ongoing engagement of alterity. Such engagement is informed by the extra-discursive, what Rocha terms the world’s mystery, but it is threaded through human thought and emotion, including their formalization and reconstruction in the academic disciplines.

²⁴ See Ephesians 3:19. The theological ground of Rocha's philosophy of education is also explicit in his assertion of a "trinitarian lens of Being, subsistence, and existence." Such a lens, he writes, is "a way of seeking, sensing, and seeing things as they are." A religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, the Trinitarians are a religious family dedicated to a ministry of charity and redemption, committed "to help all who suffer uncommon hardships, especially those who suffer for their faith or who are poor." See: <http://www.trinitarians.org/> accessed on January 23, 2015.

²⁵ Even "Freud's own conception of *eros*," Luxon (2013, 102 n. 28) notes, was "as creation rather than eroticism."

²⁶ For Rocha "study must be associated with being within Being, subsisting, and existing," and it subsists as an erotic force that comes and goes, but never leaves us altogether." Indeed, "without *eros*," Rocha writes, "there is no learning." Discussing the Talmud, Alan Block (2004, 62) asserts that "the goal of this *eros* is to make a holy people."

²⁷ Quoting Lynne Huffer, Luxon (2013, 147) writes that *eros* is "the name we can give to an ethical practice of embodied subjectivity in relation to truth ... *eros* is both ancient and always changing."

²⁸ Rocha writes: "He [Tomas] is asking me to do the impossible: to love him totally as he is, subsists, and exists, all at once."

²⁹ Rocha writes: "It [the challenge presented to him by his son] is not important simply because he is my son and I am his father."

³⁰ "Only when I can begin to seek, sense, and see him [his son Tomas] in this way," Rocha writes, "will I be able to love him—to understand who he is and be present to him." In what way? "Closely."

³¹ While recognition is crucial, for me it cannot occur apart from academic knowledge. Perhaps because I position teaching as supplemental to study, I assert the canonical curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – as the teacher's (and student's) central question.

³² For me these questions blur, one into the other, but I subsume them within the curriculum question. On that point Rocha and I disagree.

³³ Perhaps History affirms the "folk" in Rocha's phenomenology. "The cacophony of voices," Luxon (2013, 117) writes, "helps us to recognize that our personal, ethical vocabularies are woven together from many different languages, different periods of time, different logics and commitments."