

---

# A UTOPIC REFLECTION

MARCUS BUSSEY

There is much truth to the saying that one person's utopia is another's dystopia (Nandy, 1987). This has proved true in many areas touched by modernity's utopian project<sup>1</sup>—the paradoxical quest for freedom (freedom from want, from ignorance, from responsibility, from vulnerability) via the creation of vast systems of control (Miller, 2006). Schooling is a great example of this—we seek to free ourselves from ignorance by creating a system that confuses information with knowledge and creates institutional empires of surveillance that oppress the young, terrify and coerce parents and kill curiosity (Gatto, 2002, 2008). Like all utopian projects, difference is trampled under foot and conformity is elevated to a virtue (Giroux, 2003).

What would happen if the modernist dystopian nightmare of heterogeneity, of fractal and micro differentiation, of rhizomic multiplicity was in fact what we do best? How might our cultural systems respond? I want to suggest that we would do well to consider such a proposition. To do this it is better to apply what Louis Marin (1990) termed a utopic lens to culture and imagine a way forward less constrained by habit and violence. Let's rethink curriculum for instance. Poetry offers an interesting utopic disjunction (Greene, 2001). It turns disciplinary logic on its head by offering soft structure, analogy, rhythmic variety, cultural harmonies as a response to human need for ontological and existential coherence.

Poesis in the Greek means to make or create—so teachers and students make and create knowledge via a poetic sensibility (Henderson, 2004). Poetry models this and also models form across time and culture—ancient Greek poetry, the poetry of the Mahabharata, the poetry of Shakespeare—all lay cultural foundations, all weave meaning into context if the ear, the mind and the heart are open to it (Calasso, 1993, 1999). Poetry takes a person as they are and leads them forward into what they might be—the poet suggests a perspective, a new way for the reader. A new learning. Utopian curriculum regimes take much of the creativity out of this (Scott, 1998). Poesis emphasises the 'becoming' of students and their teachers—each encounter making them anew (Semetsky, 2006). Poesis, the making of the moment, in relationship to what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) called the Chaosmos—all open ended, all full of possibility and multiple readings.

To paraphrase Wallace Stevens (1990), let's take our utopic lense and look into a classroom. The students

come in and see a strange site:

The teacher bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day is green.

They say, 'You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.'

The teacher replies, 'Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'

And they say then, 'But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are.'

So curriculum runs the route towards a tune beyond us, yet ourselves. It is pure rhizome, multiple, layered – like Altamira, a dark labyrinth filled with promise and mystery (Deleuze, 1987). We run the course of it, making and begetting and becoming along the way. A poetry of sorts, a shamanic shearsman leading us on into the messy wonder of it all. Poetry sketches a possible trajectory but leaves the map up to each learning context. It is inviting, playful, and rich in human moments—like a ship rich in possible destinations but also a heterotopic space in itself (Foucault, 1986). It generalizes only in order to illuminate the specific. Thus it embeds the micro in the macro and delineates the macro always present in each unique encounter. Maths, as Jardine and his colleagues (Jardine, 2006) argue so well, can be, should be poetry—not dry dust in the mouths of teachers who have forgotten how to dance.

We can turn to Kevin Hart (2002) for help in all this mess and joy. Freed from constraints, students and teacher, teachers and student discover what it means to learn:

This stone brimming with darkness, this weed  
Taking its first breath,  
This body intent upon the pure moment,

Will change: they are leaning into the future  
And the future  
Is bending like a river bank.

It is the guts of things...

The future, (that place of dreams where utopia spawns a new nightmare to control the darkness chaotic), can be benevolent too.

The music in your room  
Will change the room into itself, it will  
Undress the objects around you

---

Thus science can be transformed by a teacher who can sing the skin away from a fact and put heart into a stone. This is the poetry of curriculum run crooked (Sells, 1994). Not the straight and narrow for us! We need a future bending like a river bank; one that promises the sea and desert islands where Robinson Crusoe, as Shapiro (1992) reminds us, is saved by Man Friday.

The learner sees the world refreshed and hearing a new tune (a tune beyond but yet ourselves) stretches out in the sun to soak up its warmth, to dream and to sustain (Berry, 1990). This is an abundant curricula approach (Jardine, 2006). It responds to divergence with a creative thrill and leaves habit safely tucked away, cosseted with other memorabilia that tells us where we were but does not define us (Arendt, 1958). Hart again:

You are moving towards yourself, the one  
Who will give up the world  
As the afternoon blossoms from the cool  
morning,  
As the flame reaches from the wood.

This is learning to be transient within a world of change, a shaman on the brink looking in, looking out (Bussey, 2009). It is the light touch of the poet's eye who does not trust the utopian dreams of the haters of life, the lovers of empty ritual (Loy, 2002). Rabindranath Tagore sees it so, saying to Shiva of the joys of living:

I see them through all ages,  
Play them on my vina in your consort's raga,  
For I am a poet.  
Your attendants, life-hating lovers of burning  
grounds,  
do not know me:  
They cackle with the devilish rancour of the  
mean of spirit...

Our schools are burning grounds. They burn today's dreams in yesterday's utopian schemes. To teach freedom requires a poet's eye. There is the inner discipline, the order of the creative fire. If we run the curricula race of the safe, the cursus honorum of the domesticated cattle of modernity, we learn nothing but our own ignorance and our prize is the death of the imagination in the cremation of our hopes.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> I am thinking here of the quest for order represented by the social experiments of fascism (Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Pinochet's Argentina) and communism (Soviet Russia, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia).

#### References

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Berry, T. (1990). *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Bussey, M. (2009). Six Shamanic Concepts: Exploring the *Between* in Futures Work. *Foresight*, 11(2).
- Calasso, R. (1993). *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (T. Parks, Trans.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Calasso, R. (1999). *Ka* (T. Parks, Trans.). London: Vintage.
- Deleuze, G., and Guattari, Felix (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). London & New York: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G., and Guattari, Felix (1994). *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Gatto, J. T. (2002). *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Gatto, J. T. (2008). *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Giroux, H. A. (2003). Utopian Thinking Under the Sign of Neoliberalism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Educated Hope. *Democracy & Nature*, 9(1), 91-105.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Hart, K. (2002). *Flame Tree: Selected Poems*. Sydney: Paper Bark Press.
- Henderson, J., G., and Kesson, Kathleen, R., (2004). *Curriculum Wisdom: Educational Decisions for Democratic Societies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, Pearson Education Inc.
- Jardine, D. W., Friesen, Sharon., & Clifford, Patricia (2006). *Curriculum in Abundance*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Loy, D. R. (2002). *A Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Marin, L. (1990). *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Miller, V. (2006). Pointing Towards Benevolence in Education: Indicators in the Subjunctive Mood. In S. Inayatullah, Bussey, M., and Milojevic, I. (Ed.), *Neohumanist Educational Futures: Liberating the Pedagogical Intellect* 246-265. Tamsui: Tamkang University Press.
- Nandy, A. (1987). *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- 
- Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sells, M. (1994). *The Mythical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Semetsky, I. (2006). *Deleuze, Education and Becoming*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Shapiro, M. J. (1992). *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stevens, W. (1990). *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books.

**Author**

Marcus Bussey is a lecturer in World History at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He is also a researcher involved with this University's Regional Sustainability Research Centre. He has published extensively in the areas of education and future studies.

