

Jacques Prévert's Queer Acts of Speech, or, an Apologia for a Postmodern Curriculum.

By Alistair Rolls

*In the dull and boring moments of classroom life,
shifting fields of discourse becomes necessary:
the familiar must become strange, queer.*¹

The aim of this article is to draw an analogy between the debate around the contemporary notion of a queer curriculum and a Parisian poet of the mid-twentieth century, on whom the very term would have been entirely lost. If there is an analogy to be drawn between the two, it is, I shall argue, because this political, pedagogical position and this self-referential poetics are both predicated on the maintenance of radical difference within, against and as part of the homogenizing arena of the status quo. This is a difficult balancing act, all the more so since we are arguably in a moment that can be labelled 'post-queer' even though there are still a number of pressures applied to make us, citizens and institutions, return to 'traditional values'.² In the specific context of university teaching in the Arts, and the free thinking that is central to it, a queering of the curriculum can appear at once vital, unnecessary, outmoded and radical. For the purposes of this article, the need for a queer curriculum to play a role in the mainstream of our education system is as present in Australia today as it was in France in 1945. I hope therefore to use this seemingly slender link to reaffirm a contemporary apologia for a queering of curriculum and also a curricularizing of queer, which will lead us to weigh up the relative loss of political edge entailed by a desexualizing, or perhaps 'desexualitizing',³ of the term against the educational gains to be made by integrating queer theory into the educational mainstream. By looking afresh at a 'traditional' mainstay of the French classroom, I

¹ Marla Morris, "Unresting the Curriculum: Queer Projects, Queer Imaginings" in William F. Pinar (ed), *Queer Theory in Education* (Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), pp. 275-86 (p. 284).

² One prominent thinker in the field of Queer studies who senses that, in the political context of everyday life at least, the post-queer moment has arrived is the University of Illinois' Professor Larry Schehr.

³ I should like to thank Professor Murray Pratt of Nottingham Trent University whose advice helped me to work through this analogy and who suggested the term 'desexualitizing' here.

wish both to rediscover its potential for generating radical new meaning and to argue for the universal applicability of a queer aesthetic. This desexualizing of the term ‘queer’ will then, I hope, be productively counterbalanced by a sexualized reading of Jacques Prévert’s poems, derived not from a model of sexuality—heteronormative or otherwise—but, instead, from a deconstructionist erotics of reading. As such, my use of the term here is drawn from the specific context of the queering of the curriculum, and the queerness that I seek to underscore in Prévert’s poetry extends from his characteristic questioning of the nuts and bolts of everyday life, from gender politics at their most basic level to the experience of the classroom and the value of education itself. With this in mind, I shall begin with a review of the recent return to political life of the term ‘traditional’ as it pertains to my own specific situation as an educator in a university in regional Australia.

Apologizing for the Postmodern

Speaking on Australian television, the Deputy Prime Minister and Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, recently made the following apology: “[And] I’m sorry that under that Howard Liberal Government you were subject to that post-modern curriculum”.⁴ One might be forgiven for thinking that the Howard government had shaken off its right-wing traditionalism in the area of education and that the previous Prime Minister had, in fact, been a supporter of postmodernism. But, of course, as the following lines from Melbourne’s *The Age* newspaper suggest, nothing could have been further from the truth: “A fortnight ago [in 2006], Prime Minister John Howard attacked the study of English literature in Australia, based on postmodern ideology, as ‘rubbish’.”⁵ And neither is it the case that Gillard’s comments reflect a recent decision by the Australian Labor Party to display even less sympathy to postmodernism than its predecessors in government; indeed, this article from *The Age* was not focused on the then federal government but on remarks made in 2005 by the ALP’s State Education Minister in Queensland, Rod Welford, who had caused something of a stir

⁴ This comment was made by Gillard on Thursday 6 August 2009 when she was appearing as part of a panel on the ABC’s Q&A programme. For a full transcription see the following website: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s2641523.htm> (accessed 19 August 2009).

⁵ <http://www.theage.com.au/news/education-news/thick-lit/2006/04/29/1146198357150.html> (accessed 19 August 2009).

when referring to a high-school student's 'feminist' reading of the classic fairy tale, *Rapunzel*, as 'mumbo-jumbo':

In 2005 Queensland Education Minister Rod Welford vowed to get rid of 'postmodern mumbo-jumbo' in year 12 English after seeing sample student responses, including a 'feminist' analysis of the fairytale *Rapunzel*, in which the student argued that *Rapunzel* was in fact a name for a vegetable also known as corn salad, and thus reinforced the notion of woman as a vegetable and being enslaved to routines such as cooking.⁶

These comments serve to define the very antithesis of what I wish to call here a 'queer curriculum'; or rather, they seek to attack a curriculum because it is considered postmodern. Welford is attacking this student's work not on the basis of its feminist slant but because it eschews the resurging popularity of 'traditional' essentialism and grand narratives. For critics like Marla Morris, Welford is operating as an 'antiqueer curriculum worker', that is to say a non-digressive pedagogue who "sees herself or himself as a dispenser of facts and students as receptors of knowledge [and who] views curriculum as a set of methods or procedures".⁷

The first point to make about this dogmatic reaction to student initiative is that its mission is paradoxically similar in intent to most of the academic work on the queer curriculum: that is to say that it is in fact working *against* tradition. Morris, for example, seeks to combat pedagogues whose apparent aim is to perpetuate the discourse of the status quo; and whilst this is how then State Education Minister Welford would certainly see his position—and it was at the time a position widely supported in Australian high schools—it had clearly not been the dominant paradigm in university English departments for some decades. Indeed, the advent of poststructuralism in the late 1960s had long left *Rapunzel* and her compatriots in the hands of their readers.⁸ In the new millennium, poststructuralism and 'traditional

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Morris (1998), p. 284.

⁸ The battle between the reader and the writer for the arbitration of textual meaning was won quite effectively when Roland Barthes announced the death of the author in 1968. Since that time innovative critical reading has been the bedrock of Anglo-Saxon university literature teaching either in conjunction with or in the absence of biographical considerations of the author of the text under study. It should be noted in passing that the French educational system has offered a curious, and 'traditionalist', resistance to the deconstructionist praxes that were inspired by its own theorists.

English', while synonymous at the tertiary level,⁹ were now apparently opposed in high schools.

The second point to make is that this conservative position in relation to education has been espoused by both sides of politics. While Welford was voicing the position of the ruling State Labor Government in Queensland, the Liberal Prime Minister was pushing the same line federally. According to Xavier Duff, writing in 2007, “[a]s we all well know, John Howard is not happy with the teaching of Australian history in our schools and has called for a return to traditional history, taught by dates with a proper narrative that reflects our proud past rather than the abstract random thoughts of the jaded post-modernist lefties who currently write and teach our history.”¹⁰ Whilst we might wish to dwell longer on the perversity of Howard’s position,¹¹ which calls for a grand narrative to be *forged*—with all the distance and belatedness of remembrance and the objectivity of reconstruction crucial, as we shall see later, to verse poetry as well as history¹²—and not simply *returned to*, what emerges is a common political discourse, where uncertain times call for (the same) tough words. As Mark d’Arbon and Jean Harkins hypothesize with particular emphasis on government policy and the language of education, policy writing is

⁹ The theories of Roland Barthes were described by Professor Keith Reader of the University of Glasgow as being “the air that we breathe” at the Australian Society for French Studies annual conference held at the University of Queensland 15-17 July 2009.

¹⁰ These comments are taken from Australia’s e-journal of social and political debate, *On Line Opinion*; they date from 23 November 2007.

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6680> (accessed 19 August 2009).

¹¹ Professor Henry Reynolds, amongst others, considers Howard’s contempt for academic attempts to ‘rewrite’ traditional historical narratives to be a direct result of his government’s involvement in a number of “controversial issues”. See Reynolds’s article “The Public Role of History”

http://www.nla.gov.au/events/history/papers/Henry_Reynolds.html (accessed 24 February 2010). In light of this, it is interesting to note the allegations that the Howard government’s interest in the traditional grand-narrative teaching of history even extended to a push for greater government intervention in portrayals of Australian history on the Internet. See, for example, the following online article <http://www.zdnet.com.au/news/software/soa/John-Howard-s-team-revise-history-on-Wikipedia/0,130061733,339281468,00.htm> (accessed 24 February 2010).

¹² For an excellent analysis of the concept of belatedness and critical reading praxes, see Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

something of “a genre or canon”.¹³ In this way, we might suggest that postmodernism has finally lived up to both left- and right-wing governments’ expectations and become meaningless. Or rather, it is now a much clearer signifier: it stands for ‘bad education’. Accordingly, its use in policy has become de rigueur, a position always to be shunned.

One may question whether this discourse has only ever been political, a storm in a tea-cup. For, while poststructuralism has been the mainstay of textual analysis since the aftermath of May ’68, there is little sign that high-school students have been extensively ‘deconstructed’. Certainly, they do not enter Australian universities as ‘jaded postmodern lefties’, and their encounters with the theories of Roland Barthes et al. still prove thought-provoking and often revelatory. The voice of political conservatism would appear to be raised against a radical discourse that has itself remained primarily political. We might consider William Pinar’s introduction to *Queer Theory in Education*, in which, in 1998, he recalls describing how as far back as 1981 he had argued “that for curriculum to escape reproduction it needed to be degenerate”.¹⁴ Clearly, if the voice of queer, in the deconstructionist sense, has been subdued in recent years it is not because non-essentialist constructions of identity ever became mainstream. Subdued but perhaps not unheard, however: for, what is the current Australian Labor government’s ‘Education Revolution’ if not a push for an antiqueer curriculum, or perhaps one that is even less queer than the last? Thus, when in 2009 the Deputy Prime Minister and, *inter alia*, Minister for Education apologizes on national television for the postmodern curriculum forced on students by the previous Liberal government, it seems clear that it is time for the author to die again.

French Poetry in the Classroom

In this paper Morris’s, and, as we shall see, Susanne Luhmann’s, notion of a queer curriculum will be broached via a queer reading of some very traditional French poetry: Jacques Prévert’s *Paroles*. And by ‘queer reading’ here we mean both a queering of the poems (a deconstruction and writerly production of textual identity) and a discovery of their queerness (an assumption that there is something inherently,

¹³ Mark d’Arbon and Jean Harkins, “Hidden Meanings: Towards an Appropriate Language of Education”, seminar paper given at the University of Newcastle, 3 September 2009.

¹⁴ William F. Pinar, “Introduction” in Pinar (1998), pp. 1-47 (p. 2).

‘essentially’ non-traditional about the poems). There is certainly something paradoxical about an anthology of poetry that critics often consider a form of anti-poetry but which has at the same time become almost synonymous with French poetry in Anglo-Saxon secondary education. Few students who have studied French at school for more than a few years will not be familiar with the opening lines of “Déjeuner du matin”, for example:

Il a mis le café	[He put the coffee
Dans la tasse	In the cup
Il a mis le lait	He put the milk
Dans la tasse de café	In the cup of coffee
Il a mis le sucre	He put the sugar
Dans le café au lait	In the <i>café au lait</i>] ¹⁵

If this is the most famous of Prévert’s *Paroles* it is perhaps because it is the simplest example of the most banal of daily gestures becoming *transfigured*, to use his translator’s description, and overvalued.¹⁶ To be made poetry, this is one way that “the familiar”, in the words of our epigraph, may “become strange, queer”. Perhaps the hope is that this “shifting [in] fields of discourse”, via the powerful allegory of the students’ own despair as they read French poetry, will transfigure “the dull and boring moments of classroom life” just as beauty emerges from the poems’ monotonous listing of mundanity. Whatever the reason, so popular has *Paroles* been in the classroom that academic monographs, such as Peter Low’s *Poems for the Classroom*,¹⁷ have been written for this express purpose. In other words, Prévert has finally coincided, if not with himself, then at least with the everyday context against which he railed, sometime gently, sometimes violently, but constantly: the great apologist for radical thinking has been integrated into the syllabus. French academics, too, have used broad brushstrokes to characterize him. In two books, both simply entitled *Jacques Prévert*, Marc Andry and Andrée Bergens each delimit his ‘undefinability’ in essentialist terms, thereby defining away his existentialist, and surrealistic, eschewing of such categorizations.

¹⁵ For the parallel French text and translation of the complete poem, see Jacques Prévert, *Selections from ‘Paroles’*, translated by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965—Penguin Modern European Poets), p. 56-7.

¹⁶ Ferlinghetti notes the way that Prévert “enumerates the ordinary world with a ‘*mouvement transfigurateur*’” (Prévert, 1965, p. 11).

¹⁷ Peter Low, *Poems for the Classroom: Jacques Prévert* (Canterbury: University of Canterbury, Department of French, 1978).

Describing Prévert's poetry as a paean to Paris, Andry considers its success to lie in the way its derealizing effects shock the reader into "descending more deeply into herself".¹⁸ This idea that unusual poetic structures force a reader to dig deep into inner resources is, of course, perverse (poetic shock causes a rethinking of self along with text—that is its power). I say 'of course' because I am so used to the idea that a text is always already (re-)created at the interface of the words on the page and the reader. For my undergraduate French students this concept is much more difficult to grasp. For them meaning is something to be discovered, beneath the surface meaning of the words, something hidden deep inside the poem. But inside the poem, not themselves. Presumably, the poem's meaning will be added to them, once they have found that meaning and absorbed it. This is why students often find Prévert harder to read, less obviously pleasurable, than the nineteenth-century classics: because, paradoxically, he is too easy to read whereas the latter have so much more perceived complexity beneath which to hide their deeper meaning.

Children's author Paul Jennings, in a recent interview for the Australian *Sunday Telegraph* magazine, notes that "[g]etting kids to love stories is really important; it's how you learn who you are".¹⁹ What is nice about this quotation is the use of the second-person pronoun 'you', which is rather ambiguous. While it appears to suggest that reading stories helps kids find their identity, it may also imply that this identity is found in the act of writing stories to be read by children. If this remains essentialist discourse, it does at least suggest some interesting slippage between reader and writer, which enables us to reread Bergens's remarks about the anarchism of *Paroles*: "[But] Prévert is essentially a poet whose sole aim is to express what he feels, i.e. his joy or his indignation at the spectacle before his eyes. This allows him to give free rein to his non-conformism and natural irreverence."²⁰ By tying in so neatly with the idea of the shock felt by Prévert's reader, these comments allow us to reconsider the poem that will be our principal case study here, "Le Cancre" ["The Dunce"]:

¹⁸ My translation: "Lorsqu'un poème provoque chez le lecteur un choc, le jetant dans l'irréalité ou le contraignant à descendre plus profondément en lui-même, c'est la réussite poétique." Marc Andry, *Jacques Prévert* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1994), p. 182.

¹⁹ Interview with Paul Jennings conducted by Jane Hutchinson, the Australian *Sunday Telegraph* magazine, 6 September 2009, p. 17.

²⁰ Andrée Bergens, *Jacques Prévert* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1969), p. 6 (again, unless otherwise indicated, the translations here are my own).

He says no with his head
 but he says yes with his heart
 he says yes to what he loves
 he says no to the teacher
 he stands
 he is questioned
 and all the problems are posed
 sudden laughter seizes him
 and he erases all
 the words and figures
 names and dates
 sentences and snares
 and despite the teacher's threats
 to the jeers of infant prodigies
 with chalk of every colour
 on the blackboard of misfortune
 he draws the face of happiness.²¹

Here, the story of a child giving free rein to his 'non-conformism and natural irreverence' is located on middle-ground: this is a children's story told by a poet for a reader, and the space is the juncture between the poet's aim (so often considered the gauge of the poem's essence or 'meaning') and the reader's deep journey into self. But in fact, none of this happens at any great depth; instead, everything must be taken at face-value in Prévert's poems. All the action of "The Dunce" takes place on the surface of the blackboard, which necessarily provides the "words and figures" that we read through the eyes of the student. The poem's 'essential aim' can be taken quite simply as a *becoming*, an aspiration towards an abstract value, 'poetry', on the part of an existent textual body; and "the face of happiness" is an ambiguous surface, reflecting a rainbow vision shared by reader and author alike.²² The final lines marry the concrete terms 'blackboard' and 'face' with the abstract concepts 'misfortune' and 'happiness', a paradoxical juxtaposition that seems to articulate the failure of the poem to coincide with its own poetic identity (of which it is the sole vehicle).

²¹ "The Dunce" in Prévert (1965), p. 27.

²² The turn of phrase 'rainbow vision' is adapted from a reference to the deployment of Prévert's poetic artistry ("*l'arc en ciel Prévert*") that adorns the back-cover of a special issue of *Europe—Revue littéraire mensuelle* dedicated to his poetry (number 748-49, August-September 1991).

Identity and Textuality

From this perspective, Prévert's poems stage, and are predicated on, a kind of surface tension; the pleasure of the text, in this case as for Roland Barthes, is located in the tension created by opposing forces at the surface where the work is read. There is on the one hand the pleasurable activity of reading a meaning that is offered transparently by the work (Barthes's *plaisir*, which describes the consumption of literature, the 'readerly' text²³) and on the other the blissful act of submitting one's own meaning (via the construction of words that will be interpreted by others) to the act of 'being read' (Barthes's concept of *jouissance*). This interaction between the reader and text functions as an erotics, or a sexualization, of the poem, whose status as 'queer text' is predicated on a construction of identity in a specific, but non-gendered, reading context. In a poem like "The Dunce", therefore, the text offers itself to the reader reflexively, as text; it tells of its own words and structures, importing into itself the meanings associated with the abstract concept that is poetry. If Prévert's poems have an essential meaning, it is an identity assumed and worn vicariously. And this otherness, the virtual meaning hinted at beyond the surface, is simultaneously opposed to the actualization of reading that is encouraged on that surface. In this way, both the authorial act and the act of reading, when conjoined in the creation of the writerly text,²⁴ share both the erasing phase and the deployment of the rainbow vision. This is re-/de-construction, the poetics of an identity that is always already to be reconfigured from a fixed point of departure (the words on the page but also the reader, who throughout continuous metamorphosis remains identifiably 'the same person').

The impossibility of self-coincidence that is crucial to this type of poetics intersects clearly with queer theories of identity as developed by thinkers like Judith Butler.²⁵ Both, too, recall existential modes of being. This is perhaps unsurprising in the case of the poems comprising *Paroles*, which were produced during the brief heyday of French Existentialism when left-bank intellectualism was, more than at any

²³ See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* and *S/Z*, both translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975; and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, respectively).

²⁴ For Barthes, the meaning of all literature is located in the active interpretation of the work conducted by a quasi-infinite number of readers (the writerly text).

²⁵ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

other time, in the air and very much in fashion.²⁶ It is certainly the case that an understanding of the most basic tenets of Sartrean ontology can help us today to unpack queer theory. For Annamarie Jagose, in an extension of David Halperin's contestation that "there is nothing in particular to which [queer] necessarily refers", the "fundamental indeterminacy" of queer is predicated on an essential lack, i.e. a lack of essence.²⁷ For an existentialist, there is nothing negative about such fundamental nothingness; indeed, the Sartrean concept of negation depends on a similar surface tension to that seen to be at work in "The Dunce": the human cogito is linked both to its body and its situation via an infinitesimal gap that ensures freedom while obliging the subject to assume her role in the world.²⁸ Our engagement with the world, the way in which we can seek to define our own identity (the desire, ultimately, is to forge an essence for oneself) is effected across this nihilating strip that simultaneously links us to and separates us from the world, on the one hand, and from 'who we think we are', on the other. This is how we offer ourselves to the world as poem; this is our identity as rainbow vision.

Since in existentialist terms we are forced continuously to create ourselves anew and in the evolving context(s) in which we find ourselves, we cannot say who we are. In the same vein, we cannot say what a queer identity *is*. Poetry, on the other hand, is an abstract value; it does not *exist*, unless we follow Plato's model of an otherworldly existence. Unlike poetry and like existentialist phenomenology, queer identity *is not* to the extent that it *is in situation*. It *is* always in individual contexts. For, if Jagose goes to great lengths to defend Butler from misreadings, it is because there has been a strong tendency to confuse acts or performances such as drag (which we might consider reflexive examples or instances of meta-performance) with a more fundamental performativity, which we cannot help but express by the simple,

²⁶ *Paroles* first appeared in France in 1945 (Paris: Le Point du Jour) before subsequently being added to and taken up by the famous publishing house Gallimard in 1949.

²⁷ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1996), p. 96.

²⁸ Sartre's phenomenological ontology is fully, and voluminously, ideated in *Being and Nothingness* (first published in French as *L'Être et le néant* by Gallimard, 1943). In this work, as in Sartre's fiction, ontology is often articulated in a highly sexualized way, which is also often heteronormative and arguably misogynistic. It should not be forgotten, however, that sex is used allegorically, as the most basic arena for human relationships. In the case of Existentialism's tendency to sexualize and Queer's resistance to desexualization, sex is not the whole story.

contingent fact of our existence.²⁹ Queer, then, by its very existence, opposes, and operates a resistance to, essence and the hegemony of essentializing discourses. By seeking here to read a specific instance of French poetry against the grain we wish to harness the trans- or re-valorizing power of queer to undo the not inconsiderable weight of literary tradition. As such, the queerification of poetry is an existential act, a case not of being but of *doing* queer.

There are obvious drawbacks in stressing the overlap between queer and poststructuralism, not least of which is the tendency to reduce queer to a form of reading praxis.³⁰ To group queer alongside other more or less postmodern theories is also potentially to divorce it from the politics of everyday life. For his part, Max Kirsch is disturbed by this apparent disconnection between the real world and the academic perspective of, in particular, the liberal arts degree. He blames the perpetuation of an elitist idea of university education on “the present conservatism in the culture at large”.³¹ We should argue in the same vein that if the liberal arts have any relevance it is precisely because of their perceived irrelevance: the critical engagement invoked in poststructuralist textual analyses in fact gets to the very ‘essence’ of what it means to exist in the (real) world.³² And it is by realigning academic and real-world concerns that Morris, for her part, wishes to unrest the curriculum. For Morris, queer’s project can be reduced to a process of making strange, “a queer sensibility or queer aesthetic”, which she feels has been largely erased in academic discourse and which has everything to do with “the reception and reading of a text”.³³

Morris’s argument is that text, by its very nature as opposing the completed (and closeted) literary work, must be *made to mean*; not “inherently queer” a text, any

²⁹ See especially Jagose (1996), pp. 83-93, for a discussion of performativity and identity.

³⁰ Pinar, for example, is certainly cognizant of the political problems inherent in postmodern “conceptions of identity”, including the loss of “a degree of consensus and mobilization”. These concerns notwithstanding, he concedes that, in addition to being “more sophisticated”, they can be considered “more ‘true’ than previous essentialized ones” (1998, p. 7).

³¹ Max H. Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 30.

³² See Alistair Rolls and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, “How Relevant is Relevance? Weighing the Relative Value of Relevance against Disciplinary Integrity in the Teaching of French in Australian Universities”, *The International Journal of Learning*, 15.7, 2008, 55-62.

³³ Morris (1998), p. 276.

text, “may be read [...] queerly”.³⁴ And by reading a text queerly (which is to say, in the mode of reading discussed above, in a ‘writerly’ fashion), conscious of the active production of meaning at stake in the reading process, one necessarily creates oneself: the reading consciousness is projected out of the body onto the textual stage and meaning is created at this interface—of words and consciousness. As Morris puts it, “reading constructs the reader as well as the text.” And this irrespective of the work being read, for it is the queerness of the reading that produces the “text’s radical political potential”.³⁵ In this way, despite Morris’s own—and ostensibly opposite—concern that the text not be reduced to a political function, there is clearly a way in which deconstructive negotiation of text and queer theorizing of identity have a common aim, and this aim is at the very core of human being-in-the-world and is, therefore, necessarily political.

Towards a Re-/De-Generation of the Curriculum

Prévert’s “The Dunce” lends itself to a queer-curriculum project in two ways: in addition to demanding that its meaning be read into it at surface level, the poem also deals directly, in terms of its content, with matters of pedagogy. Indeed, Susanne Luhmann’s description of the traditional pedagogue seems almost to offer a synopsis:

Better known than the term *pedagogy*, the *pedagogue* connotes, rather unflatteringly, the pedantic and dogmatic schoolteacher. *Queer*, used homophobically, is meant to shame people as strange and to position them as unintelligible within the discursive framework of heteronormative gender dichotomies and binary sexualities.³⁶

In the poem the discrimination is not based on the student’s sexual orientation but on his rejection of the markedly anti-queer discursive framework within which the lesson is locked, and which the pedagogy serves to perpetuate and reinforce. As Luhmann suggests, queer, like Prévert’s student, “contests authority and hopes to resist ideological appropriation”.³⁷ A queer pedagogy must then have as its mission statement the deconstruction of the “very notion of a unified human subject” and, by extension, that of the essentially meaningful text. “[F]luid, permanently shifting, and

³⁴ Morris (1998), p. 276.

³⁵ Morris (1998), p. 277.

³⁶ Susanne Luhmann, “Queering/Querying Pedagogy? Or, Pedagogy Is a Pretty Queer Thing”, in Pinar (1998), pp.141-55 (p. 142). The italicization is the author’s own.

³⁷ Luhmann (1998), p. 146.

unintelligible”, the emotional response offered in “The Dunce” offers the very parody of essentialism and its queering that Luhmann is calling for.³⁸

The poem stages a curriculum that recalls John Howard’s ‘traditional history, taught by dates with a proper narrative’. Knowledge and the idea that something can be known are transformed into a process of normalization; and the student becomes the victim of the French canon, politically biased interpretation and, ultimately, poetry itself and the perception of poems as bodies of received knowledge.³⁹ For Luhmann, as for Butler, the subversiveness of queer pedagogy “lies in the very moment of unintelligibility, or in the absence of knowledge”.⁴⁰ This is a pedagogy predicated on a fundamental shift away from the (renewed reactionary focus on the) traditional towards an examination of the ways in which knowledge is produced “in the interaction between teacher/text and student”; the shift is, therefore, “from what (and how) the author writes or the teacher teaches, to what the student understands, or what the reader reads”.⁴¹ Clearly, student-centred learning and reader-response theories have much in common, and both are staged in this poem.

Poetry and its Other

The queer reading of “The Dunce” that we are offering here is hardly a queering at all insofar as the text seems to wear its queerness quite transparently. We should, however, like to re-emphasize that Prévert’s is a sentiment dating from 1945, which serves to put narrow histories of poststructuralism and/or that brief period that Calvin Thomas has referred to as “the queer moment” into perspective.⁴² Should we assume that Prévert’s poetry was a radical new anti-poetry at that time of violent historical upheaval?⁴³ His translator, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, defends the quality of the poetry

³⁸ Luhmann (1998), p. 146.

³⁹ In Luhmann’s words, “knowable subjects are merely another form of subjection to normalization” (1998, p. 146). The French republican system is famously enamoured with standardization (from metric measurement through to rigorously controlled national curricula), which is known as *la normalisation*.

⁴⁰ Luhmann (1998), p. 146.

⁴¹ Luhmann (1998), p. 148.

⁴² Calvin Thomas “Introduction: Identification, Appropriation, Proliferation”, in Thomas (2000), pp. 1-7 (p. 1)

⁴³ This paper is already too thinly spread across theories and schools to justify a discussion of Charles Baudelaire’s Parisian prose poetry of the mid-nineteenth century, but there are significant parallels to be drawn not only between the critique of poetry offered by these two poets but also between the two periods of change that

while suggesting that, far from being subversive, it is now and perhaps always was too simplistic to be taken seriously: “And finally he is put down by today’s poets and critics for committing the cardinal crime of too much clarity in a world whose very Absurdity [...] Absurdly cries for an expression of that Absurdity in all its arts.”⁴⁴ When one thinks of works of criticism of French poetry such as Malcolm Bowie’s famous *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (1978) one is reminded that a poem worthy of analysis is traditionally considered to be one invested with a complex meaning (or, as my students recently put it, ‘hidden treasure’) that only scholarly examination can comprehend. What tends to get lost in such discussions is the fact that Prévert’s poems, in their description of the mundane, offer a mirror of the world’s absurdity. This reflection displaces and inverts the location of complexity: no longer is it inside the poem but outside, in its virtualization as reading. Or rather, the poem and its own virtualized other are both present in the reflexive staging of poetry that Prévert offers. Like existentialism’s being-for-itself or a queer identity, reflexive poetry is always both itself (the poem in its immutable, immediately recognizable sequence of words) and other (the meaning that it inspires, the face it offers to the world). In this way, the following description is applicable to “The Dunce”:

[Thus] queer theory and pedagogy, in difference to a repressive hypothesis of sexuality and power, suggest that the construction of the norm actually requires and depends on its abject other to become intelligible. The norm and its negated other are implicated and mutually constitutive of each other.⁴⁵

In the first four lines Prévert chiasmatically opposes two poems (one of ‘yes’, the other of ‘no’); the reader is thus able to follow the two sides of the same poem. The rational aspect (the ‘no’ poem) is the poetic work being studied in class while the emotional aspect (the ‘yes’ poem) is what the poem means to the student. The poem that we ‘real’ readers encounter is made up of both; it is made up, quite literally, of “words and figures / names and dates” as well as “chalk of every colour” and the “face of happiness”. As I hope to have demonstrated, this is not (as is the case for

arguably inspired, or at least acted as a backdrop to, their work (the wholesale Haussmanization of Paris, and its Occupation by and Liberation from the Nazis, respectively).

⁴⁴ Prévert (1965), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Luhmann (1998), p. 151.

“Déjeuner du matin” [“Breakfast”], for example⁴⁶) a reflexive staging of how to write a poem but of how to perform a writerly text, which depends on an interaction between (dead) work and (living) reading. The reading is, therefore, a negation of the poem in the sense common to queer and existentialism: the one cannot exist without (implicitly, necessarily and always already) referencing the other.

This plurality of the poetic text is implicit in the title of the anthology from which “The Dunce” and the other poems mentioned here are drawn: *Paroles*. Ferlinghetti’s suggestion that *paroles* refers to the ‘passwords’ spoken by members of resistance groups during the Occupation of the Second World War is an interesting historical contextualization of the poems,⁴⁷ and it is perhaps not entirely at odds with a more linguistically focused interpretation. In Saussurian linguistics *la parole* denotes the existential speech act, and as such it opposes *la langue*, which is the virtual system that enables individual actualizations of language. As such, Prévert’s is an anthology not of poetry but of poems, that is to say everyday words brought under tension by the constant juxtaposition (in the text) with and expectation (on the part of the reader) of the abstract concept of poetry. For, when words are put on a page in a certain way, an appeal is made to poetry; and when words prosaically belie this identity they can only do so partially. In other words, a poem is always both poetic ideal and real words.

Readerly and Writerly Selves

I hope that I have to some extent countered the perverse reader, or politician, who might ask why, if it is either so difficult to understand or meaningless to the point of confounding understanding, why one would read postmodern French poetry at all. One answer is that it aligns itself so well with Luhmann’s model of a queer curriculum, according to which “learning becomes a process of risking the self”.⁴⁸ And again to pick up Kirsch’s idea, these ideas only appear radical to the extent that

⁴⁶ In “Breakfast” it is the deployment in poetry of the words coffee and milk that generates the synthesized result: milky coffee. I should argue that Ferlinghetti’s decision to use the French term *café au lait*, while an attempt to illustrate the transfiguring power of Prévert’s language, in fact occludes the way in which *café* and *lait* are brought together, in the French original, as simple linguistic building blocks to drive the poem. Beauty does not need to morph out of the mundane because it is already present to it, albeit as an aspiration, as potential.

⁴⁷ Prévert (1965), p. 9.

⁴⁸ Luhmann (1998), p. 151.

the real world outside academia has sought to impose its relevance. The idea that students might seek to become educated by embracing newness rather than confirming or consolidating their sense of self has only recently taken on this radical aspect.

Lauren Smith reflects on the political and pedagogical implications of staging the self in her study of expressivist narratives in first-year creative writing courses. She notes, for example, the longstanding practice of placing form very much over content:

Criticism of the use of personal writing, especially in expressivist classrooms, focuses on the construction of the student-subject as an isolated and apolitical being. [...] Susan Miller argues, for example, that the emphasis on self-reflexivity in expressivist composition theory takes part in a history of composition practices that sought to separate the academic, intellectual work from profane or utilitarian concerns...⁴⁹

The problem with expressivist teaching as discussed here is akin to that of investing a work of literature with one transparent ‘meaning’. If its aim is to unfetter the subject, then it implies the articulation of an essential identity; if its aim is to study this articulation, or the production, of personal identity, then it embraces the self-reflexivity outlined by Miller in the above quote from Smith, but it must also investigate a more textual kind of reflexivity, in which case the writer would remain conscious of the constructs used in the composition process and of the image of self being produced, that is to say that the writer would remain *self*-conscious. Otherwise, Smith seems right in her appraisal that

[t]he difference between the drag queen and a writer who more unself-consciously takes up a particular identity is not so much of content as of style. [...] The camp artist, however, wears his mask as a mask while the author of the coming-out narrative treats the mask as if it were the truth. The camp artist, in other words, stages the self as a production, as a construction; and this self-consciousness undermines the construction/production as natural.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lauren Smith, “Staging the Self: Queer Theory in the Composition Classroom”, in Calvin Thomas (ed), *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 68-84 (p. 69).

⁵⁰ Smith (2000), p. 76.

We should argue that in the poems mentioned here, and perhaps more obviously in “Breakfast” than in “The Dunce”, it is precisely a case of a celebration of textual masquerade. The poetic form chosen for these works—they look like verse rather than prose poems, even if they are highly prosaic in content and lexical choices—frames the text within the context of an overarching meaning, an essential or abstract identity. The words that make up the poem, however, tend to eschew, and break from, this abstraction, forcing the reader to consider the mundane words in the specific context of their occurrence in the poem. The poem, therefore, is simultaneously, read from outside and inside an objective, poetic frame of reference. It is precisely the disconnection between inherent (readerly) and de-/re-constructed (writerly) meaning that is reflexively and self-reflexively staged in Prévert’s poems. The effect is for the reader to become aware of the plurality of her own identity, the impossibility of her ever coinciding with others’ understanding of her.⁵¹

The identity or ‘I’ of the poem, the reading subject and the read subject (in the case of those poems written by a first-person narrator) is expressed as a desire to be remade. To this extent, the poem stages the same voice as the ‘I’ that suddenly reveals itself at the very end of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, and which cannot speak its name aloud. This is the desire of a text that disingenuously claims not to have access to public space and which needs the reader to remake its identity: “If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.”⁵² To use Judith Still and Michael Worton’s terms, this is the voice of a text protesting its love of the reader as the extension and affirmation of its textuality, where the latter is “a process, a dynamics” activated on that surface between the work and the reader.⁵³ The nature of textuality is such that the public and private realms are fused: while the production of textuality is an intimate and erotic experience between reader and text, its projection beyond the page is necessarily a ‘making public’ on the part of the text. In this way, the very denial of the ability to speak aloud is a deliberate act of seduction—deliberate in the sense of

⁵¹ In Sartrean terms, we might call this a nauseating experience: the poem reveals itself as sticky in order to recall the fundamental viscosity of the human being for-itself, caught forever between the hardness of a fixed identity and the fluidity of intentional consciousness.

⁵² Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Signet, 1992), p. 265.

⁵³ Judith Still and Michael Worton (eds), *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1993). This quote is taken from page 4 of Still and Worton’s extensive introduction (pp. 1-68).

inherent to the text. The novel's "textness", then, is inextricably linked to its textuality: the one depends on and shapes the other.⁵⁴ As such, the text's individual shape—that by which a reader can immediately distinguish it from all others—is its means of intentionality, of projecting beyond itself onto the world beyond. This potential for otherness, accessed and operated by specific instances of reading but always already there nonetheless, is crucial to Barthes's understanding of text and its fundamental intertextuality. As Barbara Johnson so eloquently describes, "a text's difference is not its uniqueness, its special identity. It is the text's way of differing *from itself*".⁵⁵

This confusion of essential and existential elements has also been associated with the work of Jacques Prévert. As Vittorio Sereni has noted, for example, "Je suis comme je suis"—we are incessantly told in Prévert's poetry, which is offered to us in the form of an abundant and rainbow-coloured collection of characteristic recordings that individual readers will choose according to their own mood or whim."⁵⁶ There is something perverse about Prévert's use of the expression "I am what I am": while clearly he is difficult to pin down from our perspective as readers, his own turn of phrase suggests as much a jocular reference to existentialism as a sincere belief in essential identity. That is to say that he is alluding to Sartre's maxim that one is not what one is and is what one is not. So, as Sereni implies, the most clear-cut expression of one's essence is via the objective gaze of the 'Other', or here the reader. Only this other can interpret us 'as we really are'. Or, as Sereni puts it, Prévert owes his plurality to Barthes's model of textual difference, and the reader, in a bid to understand the poet (and, we assume, the poem) and to give him clear definition, ultimately displays a desire to see him (or it) as "different from what he is".⁵⁷

⁵⁴ For a description of textuality *versus* textness, see Still and Worton (1992), pp. 2-7. Indeed, I should agree with Still and Worton that models of sexuality and textuality overlap sufficiently for us to be able to posit that for all identities, including the apparently desexualized voice of the text, "[t]he construction of the self as subject is, today, a construction as sexed and sexual subject" (p. 6).

⁵⁵ Johnson, Barbara. "The Critical Difference" in Diana Knight (ed), *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000), pp. 174-82 (p. 175).

⁵⁶ Vittorio Sereni, "La Vocation de la joie", *Europe — Revue littéraire mensuelle*, 748-749 (1991), 13-18 (13). (The term 'rainbow-coloured' is not used innocently; it is my spin on the French *bigarrée*, which has overtones of 'garishness' in addition to the multiplicity of colour.)

⁵⁷ Sereni (1991), p. 16.

This permanent disconnection from self that continuously (re)creates the identity of both text and reader is also a source of pleasure. This is the pleasurable side of postmodernism: it is only ‘Meaning’ and ‘Identity’ that are dissolved; meaning and identity are continuously being created in infinite multiplicity.⁵⁸ Indeed, were it not for this pleasurable side to the dissolution of identity, Sereni would be right to question why Prévert’s poetry, which pushes reflexivity and poetic self-destruction to the limit of readability, should resonate so powerfully, and so consistently over time, with readers.⁵⁹ In terms of the identity politics implicit in our discussion of pedagogy, there is clearly a fine line to be drawn between the essentialist practice of expressivist writings of the self and an engaged reading praxis (in which case the text becomes a world that can only be understood by a reader conscious of her own place in it).⁶⁰

Prévert’s world is both a public and private space, one in which one’s personal conception of self merges with an objective reception of that self. From the perspective of reading this poetry as queer acts speech, it is important that there not be a smooth synthesis of ‘I’ and ‘non-I’, for such a smooth, unproblematic dissolution of self into otherness would take the radicality out of queer as surely as it would take the engagement and shock-factor out of reading poetry. Reflexivity provides the surface that always acts equally as mirror and border, a doorway maintaining access to otherness and distance from it (both situatedness and autonomy of the self). In her study of Prévert’s use of the first person, Danièle Gasiglia-Laster proposes a plural understanding of the singular pronoun, according to which “‘I’ can become everything [and] everything can become ‘I’, because each being contains a part of the universe”.⁶¹ Accordingly, Prévert’s rainbow vision is an intertextual one, or a celebration of textuality, where I equals poem equals Paris equals other equals self. In

⁵⁸ As we have already suggested, Barthes’s essay, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, translated by Richard Miller), suggests that pleasure itself—the pleasure of the title—is both itself and its other, i.e. *le plaisir* (or pleasure) of the passive experience of reading transparently meaningful text and *la jouissance* (or bliss), from the perspective of the work, of actively ceding responsibility for the construction of meaning.

⁵⁹ See Sereni (1991), p. 17.

⁶⁰ Gasiglia-Laster points out that Prévert’s own criticism of narcissism, which can only lead to a “deformed image of oneself”, must always be balanced against the illusion that the world can be reduced into and reproduced in text, which itself leads to a “hypertrophying of the ego”. See Danièle Gasiglia-Laster, “Les ‘Je’ de Prévert”, *Europe. Revue littéraire mensuelle*, 748-749 (1991), 56-65 (56).

⁶¹ Gasiglia-Laster (1991), p. 57.

even the most obviously autobiographical text, the I that the author imposes on the text is at the same time an invitation to the reader to enter into the other's body, to incarnate the text.⁶² The erotics of textuality, therefore, whether it is considered to be desexualized (a challenge to read pronouns as textual props rather than 'people') or necessarily sexualized (where we are always present to the world, and thus the text, as sexual subjects), is always relevant. The importance of reading in the construction of a postmodern identity ensures that Prévert's poetry covers the ABCs of Morris's curricularization of queerness:

(a) Queerness as a subject position digresses from normalized, rigid identities that adhere to the sex = gender paradigm; (b) Queerness as a politic challenges the status quo, does not simply tolerate it, and does not stand for assimilation into the mainstream; (c) Queerness as an aesthetic or sensibility reads and interprets texts [...] as potentially politically radical.⁶³

Conclusion

What are the dangers of making this most iconic of modern French poets a model of non-canonical poetics? To turn something so popular and extensively read into a model of radicality is a bit like having queer championed by a celebration of a heteronormative model of sexuality. Thus, while a queer lens can be productive from the perspective of poetry analysis, there is a way in which its appropriation for the purposes of a traditional academic exercise might be considered a domestication of queer's political edge. As has been seen, Pinar is all too aware of this danger. Allaying such fears is also at the heart of Calvin Thomas's work on queer theory in the context of heterosexuality. In his introduction to *Straight with a Twist*, he notes how "[t]he very fact that some straights have begun to write about queer theory or perhaps even produce theory that itself somehow lays claim to queerness [...] might be taken as a sign that the queer moment has passed."⁶⁴ Indeed, when Thomas explicitly positions his own work against the sense of loss expressed in Butler's description of the "institutional domestication of queer thinking", it is in part because a normalizing process has already led to "its sad finish".⁶⁵

⁶² See Gasiglia-Laster (1991), p. 58.

⁶³ Morris (1998), p. 277.

⁶⁴ Thomas (2000), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Butler quoted in Thomas (2000), p. 1.

From a purely pedagogical perspective we should hope that queer's place is no longer on the margins, to be proposed as a radical counter-curriculum, but in the body of the curriculum itself, where its canonization can serve to ensure that grand narratives are always already scrutinized and made meaningful by engaged minds. This is a curriculum where meaning is to be put in and otherness is always an extension of self. By returning to 'traditional' French poetry and teasing out its queer potential I hope to have demonstrated that queer extends both before and after a queer moment. For, the poetry of Jacques Prévert was already locating the radical in the domestic, and thus simultaneously radicalizing the latter just as he was domesticating the former, at the end of the Second World War. This was very much Liberation as well as liberating poetry; it was a championing of non-normativity and pro-diversity, and a challenging of dominant institutional power structures.

The tendency to broaden the idea of queerness, beyond the realm of sexual politics, is perhaps then both an admission that something of the power and newness of Thomas's queer moment is passed but that, at the same time, there is a need for queerness to be put back on the agenda, so that it can inform academic disciplinarity and for its newness to be rekindled across faculties and departments. In conclusion we can say that as early as 1945 Jacques Prévert was calling for a radical shake up of French education. The stance he was taking was a queer one indeed; it was against everything essential, traditional and dogmatic. In short, Prévert was putting forward a case for a postmodern curriculum—and for that, he was making no apologies.