

A CURIOUS PREFACE

The perfect crime: this book investigates “the crime of the century,” a title rightly claimed not by the Lindbergh kidnapping, or the “compulsion” of Leopold and Loeb, or by the looting of several hundred million in securities, but by the poisoning and death of Education in our times. Was it a deliberate murder? And, if so, who did it? Was it the result of some “vast impersonal forces” combining to crush the muse; or, was it the stepchild of some old “progressive” spectre running amuck over the land? Was it the result of some flaming evangelical zealotry, or of its shadow, the grim Utilitarianism reifying everything in its path as it swept across the land leaving it a desert? The death of Education is incontestable: Look around you. The only question is: Who did it and why? Was it some person (or persons) unknown on the Left? Or, possibly, his counterpart and shadow on the Right? Or was it, perhaps, a criminal syndicate operating behind “the looking glass war” of intellectuals, Left, Right and Center? Whoever it was, one thing we know: He is sure to be pointing in the wrong direction and to have a perfect alibi. All intelligence work has one cardinal rule: When you hear the perfect alibi, the story within the story in its perfect lucidity, do not release the man. On the contrary, mark him down as an immediate suspect. Open a file on him. Open up a file and settle down to work. The real investigation is only just beginning, and it’s going to be a long night.

In the interests of full disclosure, let me right away indicate some bumps along the road and a couple of fast curves. To read these pages with eyes already conditioned to expect the ideal form of the academic text or the Ph.D. dissertation is to make a “reasonable” assumption and lose your way completely. These texts and journal articles are themselves the outgrowth of a point of view which we may broadly call scientific, academic, impersonal, or didactic. Its watchwords are clarity, precision, and organization: Be clear and systematic and “reader-friendly.” Tell the reader what

you intend to prove and tell him early. Proceed clearly and systematically to your conclusion and end, so to speak, with a QED. Now, however suitable as an article in Nature or a textbook in chemistry, this form is wholly unsuitable to the present enterprise which is a socratic case for Socratic teaching. Immanuel Kant wrote a Critique of Pure Reason. I am initiating a critique of academic reason. My model is not the professorial text of Aristotle's Politics but Plato's earliest and most socratic dialogues with voices balanced in contrapuntal tension and often no resolution. My model is heuristic. It presents the logic of discovery unfolding as drama. All is clue, intimation, foreshadowing, development, unfolding. I am "reader-friendly," but in a totally different sense. I do not patronize the reader by doing his thinking for him. On the contrary, I invite his attention and whole-hearted cooperation in thinking out the issues as he reads these words, reads them with the closest attention and maximum suspension of judgment. Less a lecture than a detective story, you would do well to wait till the end and figure out for yourself whom in fact the evidence points to as the guilty party.

Any talk about Education is inevitably a conversation about culture, about the cultural context that informs and shapes the discussion making it what it is. More sharply stated, in the present American context it is a contribution made in the context of a raging culture clash now in its seventh decade. Still more sharply stated, to participate in this most searing of conflicts is inevitably to take sides. Each and every one of my characters recognizes this, most often implicitly. I wish to be explicit. To talk meaningfully about Education is always and inevitably to talk about culture in both of two senses of the word: the now conventional or anthropological sense and the more strict and classical sense. Education is a culture articulating itself in a process of becoming, a process in which it is reaching out to become itself at its best. And in this reaching out, in this striving out toward the best, there is no neutral space. Taking sides on Education demands an act of moral choice in a concrete cultural context. The

classical paradigm for this is Socrates. But he was not given the hemlock merely for questioning, or teaching without a syllabus, or semantic analysis, or worst of all, for “critical thinking.” He raised the fundamental issue of Education in its freshest, most direct, and uncompromising form. And, if the course he charted is fundamentally right, then much of our course has been fundamentally incoherent and irrelevant, and vice-versa. There is no third way. At its roots Education is either X and not Y, or Y and not X. To decide which of these two fundamental alternatives is right is the Educational question of our time.

The first bump on the road, then, is the fact that I repeatedly “situate” the question of Education as a question in a culture war with no neutrals. In the innocent formula that “twice two is four” one can see the fine Italian hand of Machiavelli at work on one side of a culture clash. Now the “secret” is out (I promised “full disclosure”) and you hold the key to two forms of “digression,” the second wilder than the first. The first plunges us directly into the history and politics of the debate on Education as understood by some of its leading protagonists Left, Right, and Center. This is readily understandable, especially to minds now accustomed to a variety of Leftist ideological onslaughts since the sixties and the Right’s rugged defense of “virtues,” “skills,” “core curriculum,” and the status quo ante. Not so easily forgivable, in fact it may seem an unpardonable crime, are the “digressions” into literature, history and philosophy. Why should a book on primary and secondary Education talk about Literature, History and Philosophy? What does basic Education have to do with that? What do Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, Isaiah Berlin and Eric Voegelin, Bertrand Russell and Nietzsche, not to mention Plato, have to do with Education? If the answer is “Nothing!” you have just hit the second bump and should “proceed with care.” Without arguing the point here, I offer it as my opinion that the correct answer is “Everything!” My “digressions” are much the real point in the futile and uncomprehending stalemate of the culture war with its vast expense in time, energy, and money, and its pathetic poverty of results. My

corollary is still more shocking: Unless the problem of Education is conceived of as a coherent whole and organized from the beginning to unfold along one vector, the incoherence and banality of reform to date will continue. And we will continue to remediate ourselves to death.

This simple observation has an astonishing implication. Education in the modern world is at one and the same time a techné and a culture, a culture of the mind. Now one of the most curious features of the culture war is the fact that each side emphasizes one feature at the expense of the other. The Right emphasizes techné, the Left a new culture. Yet the techné of the former is scandalously primitive, and the “culture” of the latter particularly in its leveling impulse, vulgar beyond belief. And the irony is that neither extreme is necessary. We would do much better if we could see through to fundamentals.

The attempt to see through to fundamentals, to clarify the issue, is often blocked by an adroit maneuver. To my contention with each of my six characters, this is not “Education,” it is “something else.” I am often told that this is purely a matter of definition. In the plurality of opinions around us this reply comes with a manifest air of plausibility. But it raises the question: “What is Education?” What is it really? To this question I return again and again, taking up the answers offered by my characters and examining them for any truth they might contain and the larger picture toward which they point. So this question, now submerged, now exposed to the light of day, is the leitmotif of the work as a whole. It is always present behind the most innocuous detail and most remote point of investigation.

And “investigation” here is precisely the right word characterizing the difference between this inquiry and those that precede it. The books of my distinguished characters like those which precede them, and on which they draw, are “thesis” books. They start with a thesis, one of which they are convinced before they begin, and

proceed to a lawyerlike conclusion. This book, by contrast, is an inquiry. I offer it as my opinion that the question “What is Education?” is ultimately reducible to and synonymous with the question “What is Socratic teaching?”

Accordingly, the question “What is Socratic teaching?” defines my goal and starting point. It compels me to begin not with a thesis, but with a question, a question that I answer, provisionally, less with a content than with a form, a form growing from a concrete cultural context. And I adapt and apply this form to my six characters in the spirit of the original or platonic Socrates. The form of Socratic teaching was born in the classic culture clash. I adapt and apply it to the modern culture clash now playing itself out in the United States. It follows that my stance as critic and interrogator is itself dialectical, governed by the voice and cultural context of the character undergoing interrogation. My principle aim is to bring out the contrast of voices in argument, debate, discussion and conversation. Only subordinately and in conclusion, do I venture an opinion grounded on the preceding theoretical examination. And these opinions are the less significant part of the whole, intended as they are as the provocative part of an invitation to the philosopher’s Round Table for conversation now projected on the level of Theory. To succeed in this is to have succeeded in truth, for it is to have changed the terms of debate from the level of the dóxa to what promises to be a step in the direction of the logos.

At some point in reading this “curious” Preface the sensible reader might well say “Interesting, quite interesting, but what does this have to do with my regular work and obligations?” And, if he is an “educator,” namely a teacher, an administrator, or a faculty member in a School of Education, his question has an even sharper bite, involved as he is in the realities of the school day and its exigencies and obligations. While this book is oriented toward the fundamental dimension and not intended as a teacher’s handbook, it is alive to the importance of precisely these concerns. So, for example, in *The Eureka Syndrome: Bernard Lonergan (or from Poincaré to Roger*

Penrose via Dewey, Bruner et al.), I shall have something to say about the tyranny of the textbook, and some valid uses that can be made of it. So, too, in a brace of Chapters *The Prohibition of Questioning: Chester Finn, Charles Sykes & E. D. Hirsch* and *Apple of Discord: The Clash in Lincoln & Paulo Freire*, I have a few things to say about curriculum and the craft of teaching, both of which are ignored or violently distorted by my learned and distinguished protagonists. So, too, in “*Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths*”: *Herbert Kohl*, I have a word or two, perhaps even two-and-a-half, about class organization. And, in *The Americanization of Socrates: Neil Postman*, I distinguish the approach used here from the spurious symbol sometimes called “critical thinking” (with which it is easily confused, especially since the sixties). I attempt to make clear the critical difference between the Socratic or true art of questioning and its synthetic rival precisely as requested by the deuterio-Postman. But these brief investigations are merely suggestive, pointers to the right way. The structure of the book itself is intended to exemplify the form of Socratic teaching within the inappropriate covers of a small book as a modest proposal. The concrete content must wait for a second, more substantive venture.

The contemporary culture clash in whose grip we are held is not unique. Indeed, the near universal belief that it is, is itself part of the problem. And I can think of no more naïve and unhistorical a belief. These principles have been argued before and by finer minds. One has only to think of Diderot and d’Alembert, Voltaire and Rousseau, not to mention Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Herzen and Bakunin, or the “unmentionable” Nechaev. This is the historical side of my conjecture. But even if it were to be proved to be false (or in need of drastic modification), the formal structure of my suggestion remains unimpaired.

I begin with the dead body of Education, on display everywhere. And I ask a simple question: “Who killed Education?” a question simpler to ask than to answer. Whether my answer is right or wrong I do not know, not for sure. But it is, I believe, the

right question. And this question dictates my starting point and governs my course of inquiry. My starting point is an event in Athens some twenty-five hundred years ago and my course of investigation is to begin with the concrete here and now, the reflective or unreflective opinions constituting the dóxa in contemporary America. My method is that of the investigator searching for clues in a possible crime. I proceed with intimations as to where the clues seem to point as the inquiry unfolds. This book is my Report to the Commissioner.

Case: Opened.

INTRODUCTION: THE VOICE OF “THE NATION”

1

The culture clash in education can be bracketed between a set of mirror opposites: National Review and The Nation, traditional education and the progressive movement, “back to basics,” versus alternative schools, and as I write, the renewed clash on testing and the place of technology. The intellectual firepower is thoroughly remarkable. If words could kill, we’d all be dead. If ideas had consequences, this is the most consequential debate in modern American history. A Lincoln Douglas debate is said to have lasted for seven hours. This has already lasted for seven decades. Everyone has thrown his hat in the ring, from Jonathan Kozol and Herbert Kohl to Arthur F. Bestor, William F. Buckley and the late Willmoore Kendall. The two sides are evenly matched and each thinks the other is incorrect, irrelevant, irresponsible and all but insane. One says it is for “the basics” and wonders how anyone can be against that. The other rejoins in variance of James Jared’s phrase, “I too am for the basics, only let me define them.” The two paradigms are not merely in conflict but violently deadlocked. The results are predictable, if sometimes macabre. The book of virtues is followed by a call to character and teaching as a subversive activity is followed by teaching as a conserving activity. Bill Bennett and Dianne Ravitch, Chester Finn and Charles Sykes, are swiftly answered by Neil Postman and Mark Edmanson, Herbert Kohl and Jonathan Kozol, Norm Fruchter and Earl Shoriss. The sole point of agreement is the significance of the war. Now taking this as a starting point as perhaps the only uncontroversial statement in the debate, let us proceed socratically in a flight through time, visiting some of our more thoughtful contenders and questioning them with all due respect, to mid-

wife some agreement where presently none exists. Socratic investigation of current opinion can begin most appropriately with John Taylor Gatto as the first witness for the prosecution, and right away the whole choir will ask, “and who precisely is John Taylor Gatto?” Well let me tell you, John Taylor Gatto was the teacher of the year in the city of New York, more significantly as our first witness he brings the single most incisive insight to illuminate our problem. He begins with the fundamental distinction between pre-thought thought and real or genuine thought. This insight makes him one of our most interesting critics and if he had only held on to it, one of our most significant. The long-standing debate about Pedagogy in textbooks leaves Gatto unmoved. His distinction cuts through to the heart of the problem; with the rise of schooling we have a new kind of dumbness. The old kind was simply ignorance. The new kind is the pseudo knowledge of pre-thought thoughts, the recitation of received opinions, from Time magazine to the New York Times, CBS and the President. Gatto couples this with a second distinction that places him a notch above the National Commission on Excellence in education. He distinguishes between schooling and education, schoolbooks and real books, i.e., pre-thought thought and real thought. His text is rich in metaphor and gypsy phrase, exaggeration and panache. Here is where the dialogue can be joined. Gatto himself provides us with a rosetta stone, a gold standard, and a yardstick. The words are his. His beau ideal is the Shelter Institute and the Main & Maritime Institute, the library and the museum. His vision is of a world we have lost, of free self-determining individuals, building homes and ships in an Arcadian setting, free from the sting of the cash nexus. They flourish in the warmth of the face-to-face community and in that work of art known as the family. Nazism, according to him, was the result of the clockwork school and Prussian pedagogy. Why then didn't it arise in the U.S., which according to him followed the same model?

The disease of “pre-thought thought” might be more widespread than Gatto contends. The Plato of home schooling may himself have gotten it. He relies on the authority of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for his explanation of Nazism without noticing the economic analysis by Sweezy, the political analysis by Franz Neumann, the philosophical analysis by Lukács, or the psychological analysis by Schuman.¹ What has our “Teacher of the Year” been teaching? To talk of the “tyranny” of compulsory schooling is to trivialize the word in the century of Stalin and Hitler. Like our other critics, Gatto is on to something but it may not be what he thinks. “Pre-thought thought” and “received opinion” cast a broad net, perhaps too broad. How should the parents involved in home schooling teach American history or the history of Russia, the history of the Middle Ages or of the ancient world? The school edition of Moby Dick asked all the right questions, so he threw it away. Bravo! But how would he teach Mathematics and Science? Pythagoras’s Theorem is pre-thought by Pythagoras and exponents by Descartes and Wallace back in the 17th century. And the fascinating story of the discovery of DNA has become “received opinion” since the publication of The Double Helix. If “pre-thought thought” is not to exclude all such things, the concept needs to be re-thought.

If Gatto is saying that the right way to teach Literature and History, Science, and Mathematics is as the result of live thought, thought thinking (pensee pensante), he has a very big point. The only way to achieve this result, if he is serious, is by the careful training of teachers (or parents acting as teachers) and right here where we expect it the most, Gatto fails to provide any institutional machinery. In the absence of any institutional machinery to deliver the goods, his entire conception of education rings hollow. The examples he cites are the clues to the questionable quality of education, as he understands it. For all their virtues, learning plumbing and electrical work, carpentry

and boat building, is not what we mean by receiving an education. On that at least there is a consensus.

The value of John Taylor Gatto as the first of our witnesses lies in the distinction he is struggling to articulate between “thought thinking” and “thought thought,” between the fresh and the active mind and the textbook mind. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. It cuts a lot deeper than Left and Right, or at any rate very differently. Hans Meyerhoff called it “the move from Plato to Socrates” where “Plato” stands for discursive thought in the form of the lecture, the treatise, the summa and “Socrates” is the metaphor for the inquiring mind searching for true knowledge, for norms projected on the level of theory in a time of transition. And with this we can say farewell to John Taylor Gatto for now. He has helped us to pin down the critical starting point and fix attention on it, but beyond that he is misleading. In fact his “mission statement” takes him right over the precipice. Our problem is education and the training of the young in an industrial society marked by the extreme division of labor. And, while Gatto rightly distinguishes between schooling and Education, his concept of Education as measured by his own yardstick, is simply irrelevant. The Arcadian society it presupposes has vanished. As we prepare to enter the 21st century he is resolutely looking the wrong way.

There is no conspiracy to “dumb down our kids,” neither by the capitalists of John Taylor Gatto’s nightmare nor by the “educrats” of conservative rhetoric. There is no conspiracy, but there is intellectual confusion. And a considerable part of this confusion flows from incompatible “mission statements” rooted in the conflicting values of two traditions each of which has something to say. One is focusing on equity, the moral right of Equality as the proposition to which this nation is dedicated. The other fixes attention on the mathematical Olympiad, on skills and knowledge and competition in the international arena. While ignorant armies clash by night, the educational ground is

collapsing. “Oh” for the days when our students were bursting with “pre-thought thought” and answering the right questions to Moby Dick. Mr. Gatto, you really must meet “The Spanish Armadillo.”

“The Spanish Armadillo” is the title of a sparkling article on “our cultural circumstance” by the editor of Harper’s in his Notebook for April 1997. Mr. Lapham mentions the official estimate of 40 million functional illiterates. The official estimate of 40 million illiterates is “optimistically low.” The test was to read simple road signs and menus. Raise the bar a notch and the figure might be closer to 200 million. The story has been told before but never more entertainingly he tells us than by Richard Lederer who pieced together a narrative from student compositions across the nation. “When Elizabeth exposed herself before her troops,” says the last example, “they all shouted ‘Hurrah’ then the navy went out and defeated the Spanish armadillo.”

2

Our next two stops are more controversial, closer to the center of the debate and more richly varied. On February 17 in response to President Clinton’s Inaugural Address, The Nation published a set of articles by leading progressive educators. They explain what it will take “to get beyond the gimmicks” announced by Clinton and before him by Bush. What then are “the gimmicks”? In the absence of equity, no reform (no standards, no charter schools, no computers, no parent participation, no break-up of large schools, and no free markets) can save public education. The lines are drawn, but they may be a little wavier than they seem at first glance. Since the charter school per se has no political coloration “activists from ‘born-again Christians’ to civil rights leaders have, embraced the concept” says Amy Stuart Wells. This spectral embrace promises something to everyone. For progressive policy makers it “promises to wrestle

control from the uncaring and hegemonic state.” She would like to “wrestle” control and shape charter school reform to “democratic ends.” How? And what does she mean by “democratic ends?” She makes three modest recommendations for targeting federal funding for the lowest income areas, the most racially and socially diverse schools, and for transportation costs.

Lisa D. Delpit writes from the perspective of old civil rights days. She too, looks to Federal funding to refurbish the schools and reward the teachers. And she looks to the President. What can Clinton do? He can value the children. He can care. How can the “hegemonic” state make reforms on request? And why ask the leader of “the uncaring hegemony”? Amy Stuart Wells’ statement of the problem pulls out the rug from under her feet and those of her fellow contributors. The concept of hegemony was tailored for The New Prince and a revolutionary Leninist party, not for “a certain percentage” of \$15 million to go for transportation costs.

More promising, perhaps, and certainly more on point are the contributions by Mike Rose and Norm Fruchter. Rose is a Professor in The Graduate School of Education at UCLA and the author of Possible Lives: The Promise of Public School in America. His tone is judicious. His language is fair-minded and realistic, free of sentimentality and moralizing. Rose draws our attention not only to the conditions of education (i.e., proper funding, race and class bias, etc.) but to the “cognitional structure” of the student as learner, as the active agent in a renewal of Education (the very point that John Taylor Gatto had hit right on the nose). Rose strikes this note early and returns to it again late in his paper. There is, he agrees, much wrong in our educational system from “the way we educate our teachers to the patronizing curriculum we offer our students” (emphasis added). With one simple phrase he has exposed the nerve of the problem. This is the theme which has fascinated Neil Postman, our most

literate critic, from the outset, and one to which he has returned valiantly in book after book.

Rose places the critical question, the question of a paradigm shift in “cognitive theory” right on the table. “When,” he asks, “was the last time you heard a story of achievement that includes curiosity, reflectiveness, uncertainty, a willingness to take chances, to blunder?” Rose’s question points to the Educational question of our time, the question which this study explores. The answer marks the true dividing line between the conservative and the anti-conservative in Education. How should we educate our teachers in the art and craft of teaching? And how do we introduce them to curricular materials which are no longer “patronizing”? Strangely enough, Rose gives us no guidance to light the way. He points to no tradition, no body of literature either pro or con, no book and no article.

One who does clearly and crisply is Norm Fruchter, Director of Education and Social Policy at New York University. Like Rose, he is interested in the right question: the question of teaching and learning. And unlike Rose, he tells us precisely where to look. His authority is Richard Elmore, Professor of Education at Harvard University. He directs our attention to Professor Elmore’s recent article in the Harvard Educational Review, certainly a promising place to look. Elmore, he tells us, “argues that successful reform must change the core of educational practice, the deep structure of how teachers think about knowledge and how students learn.” With this we have reached the heart of the matter: how teachers should think about knowledge (not simply facts and formulas) and how students learn. But when we turn to Elmore’s article we can only blink in disbelief. In this extended survey there is not a word about the “deep structure” of mathematical or scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, or knowledge of literature, or of how teachers think about it, if this is indeed what they think about

(pace John Taylor Gatto).ⁱⁱ Nor do we discover “how students learn.” Elmore is primarily interested in the problem of scale. He says next to nothing about the crucial questions which are Fruchter’s concern, and ours. And with this the trail runs out. None the less, Fruchter’s questions are good questions, the right questions, the critical questions, and we must always keep them in mind as we travel around the circle of received answers which constitute the doxoi, the assemblage of more or less reflective and unreflective opinion in the culture clash of our time.

But even as the trail runs out on one side, the cognitional Right of the reform movement, it opens up afresh on the political Left in the formidable, ever-present figure of Jonathan Kozol. Kozol has been called “the most visible critic” on the American Left, the most prominent and, perhaps, the most gifted. In Kozol’s contribution, the various strands of the progressive creed all come together and form a single seamless whole. Here, in brief compass, is the demand for Equity in its most naked, uncompromising form. Kozol’s call is a call for Equity, against the backdrop of “hegemonic” class exploitation and race prejudice, defended by an “odious” rhetoric. The anger burns the pages, here, and in his books.

What is Kozol’s argument? This might seem to be a simple question. Yet, curiously enough, this simple question is easier to ask than to answer. The case as he presents it is easy enough to state: Children are compelled by law to attend schools in a two-tiered system, one for the rich, another for the poor, one for the white, another for the black. This rigidly stratified structure is perpetuated by an “arcane” system of funding in the name of local control. Reinforced by the political power of the rich and backed by a conservative Court in defiance of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. And this hegemonic system of exploitation condemns the children of the poor, “other people’s children,” to a life of despair and degradation. In

the lottery of life they have drawn a blank. It is imperative they be given the same education as the rich, an equal education. But “equality” here does not mean mere equality in the face of unequal needs. Plainly, their needs are greater, and Equity demands they be redressed, redressed immediately after lo these many years of exploitation by the selfishness and detachment of the exploiting class.

Here, in the most compact form, is the Kozol brief in the politics of education, the most ringing clash in the culture war. In expanded form ranging over many books and articles it has made him the leading publicist in a movement adorned with names like Michael W. Apple, Bowles and Gintis, Giroux and Aronowitz, and the prolific Herbert Kohl. But what is the fundamental perspective and its point of origin? That is an infinitely more complex and interesting question. So, let’s zero-in on it, but not before making a few preliminary stops beginning with the mercurial Neil Postman and the iconic Socrates to whom he pays his fitful homage.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS SOCRATIC TEACHING?

1

Socratic teaching is the form of teaching forever linked to the name and figure of Socrates as the metaphor for the timeless way of teaching.

Socrates taught openly, walking barefoot through the streets of Athens from the day his mission began to the day of his death in the year 399 B.C. Yet every attempt to define the nature and essence of Socratic teaching seems to slip through our fingers or result in controversy. And it remains as elusive and controversial today as on the day it was born. It made a shattering impact on the city of Athens and resulted in the most famous trial of all time. Yet it remains elusive and paradoxical. The literature addressing this question is voluminous, mocking libraries, encyclopedias, and the weightiest tomes. Yet over the years it has produced no net gain that we can point to with certainty as a sure advance. To understand why this is so, and will always be the case is to begin to understand something of the meaning of Socratic teaching.

The first attempts to describe Socratic teaching were by Plato and Xenophon. Xenophon describes it as the work of a high-minded civic reformer, something like a good Headmaster in our day. Why then was he tried and executed? Plato presents a more convincing and dramatic picture in his dialogues. But he confused, or, at least, obscured the issue by the composition of his dialogues (and remarks in the **Letters**). Socratic teaching does not lend itself to any written form. Even the consummate and supple artistry of a Plato cannot overcome that. Why not? Because the written word

kills the living thought which is like a light or fire. The written word freezes the fluency of real thought into immobility. Written words are the mummified remains of what once was thought. “When I question them,” says Socrates, “they do not answer back.” Socratic teaching is by nature oral, controversy incarnate emerging from the interplay of voices.

Socratic teaching is not a lecture delivered from on high, but the dialectical interplay of voices locked in debate. Still, what is the debate about? Some of the finest minds of the century have addressed themselves to this question without producing any more agreement than existed between Plato and Xenophon, or, more precisely, Plato and the Sophists. And we can, perhaps, learn something from this. Socratic teaching is debate, says Livingstone, who writes from a profound admiration for Socrates. Socratic teaching, says Lord Russell, is ultimately about the use of words, words like “justice,” and “the good.” In the Catholic view, Socrates is the Bearer of the Word who gave his life for the truth. But what is that Truth? No fixed and firm answer can ever be provided, says Strauss, because the dialogues themselves are composed in such a way as to forestall it. They form a great pedagogical mark of interrogation. In its most intimate essence Socratic teaching creates a question mark.

The magic of the Socratic question lies in its power to draw one in. Socratic teaching is a process of questioning, drawing one into an I-Thou relationship; its results depend as much on the Thou as on the I, on the student as on the teacher. Like a wizard’s wand, Socratic teaching can bring a class to life within seconds, because its magic lies in making the student the psychic center of response. He is now responsible for his own learning. A Socratically taught class is always responsive because the psychic center at which it directs the question is never purely mental; it is the emotional and intellectual unity (Socrates called it the psyche or soul) of the learner. The student

as learner is now the active agent in all learning. Naturally, this also changes the role of the “teacher.” And there is something odd, something curiously amiss, in thinking of Socrates as a “teacher.” The traditional teacher-student relationship dissolves and instead a new relationship emerges: “Come,” it says, “let us inquire together, let us investigate.” The hallmark of all Socratic teaching is dialogue, the development of the art of conversation.

The power of Socratic teaching is in the art of the question. This is, perhaps, the most striking difference between Socratic teaching and traditional teaching, which characteristically favors the lecture delivered from on high in the traditional teacher-student hierarchy. Traditional education leans this way because it is “traditional,” i.e., it represents a consensus or orthodoxy. It subscribes to what may be called “the transcript theory” of knowledge in which the facts are unproblematic and safely contained and prepackaged in the textbook. “The relation of facts to thought is as bricks to mortar.”ⁱⁱⁱ We know that the battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. But suppose we ask, “When did ‘the cold war’ begin?” Can this be answered in a similarly factual and unproblematic way?

By contrast, Socratic teaching is essentially problem posing. It is not the formless vapor of social conversation. Nor it is a transcript of the wisdom in a lecture.

This is our old friend “bricks and mortar” reappearing in another of his many guises; the forms keep changing but the essence remains the same. In modern times it began with the French Encyclopedists and Comte’s fantasy of a hundred great books, containing all knowledge. Then came the authoritative textbooks, the promise of television, and now of technology. Facts and formulas are so real, so palpable, so readily packaged that they make an irresistible appeal to the public mind. We want our

student to know, say, the Declaration of Independence, or the First Amendment, or the Gettysburg Address, and these can all be packaged in textbooks and software. Learned by rote, students can recite them: “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation...” Socratic teaching is the polar opposite. It begins with a question: “Why four score and seven years ago?” And this question poses a problem and opens an investigation into the meaning of the Gettysburg Address and the political shape of the United States of America.

Socratic teaching is the art of the question. Its magic comes from its special ability to motivate the student. “Why four score and seven years ago?” is immediately engaging. And the process of questioning creates deeper involvement. Unlike the fact-and-formula approach, the function of this process is to develop a real understanding of the issues. If Socratic teaching can be summed up in one word, that word is understanding. But “understanding” is a process, a progressive disclosure, an unveiling of the issues. And “understanding,” like all good wine, takes time.

Socratic teaching is a process, a form with a varying content. Just as “the medium is the message,” here the method is the content. It is an exploration of the issues involved in say, the first six words of the Gettysburg Address or the 14 words of the First Amendment’s free speech clause, not a simple statement of “content” which can be fitted into a textbook.

In science and mathematics the case is different. There is a right answer, but it is often a mystery to the student, who will understand it as a formula unless he works out each step.

The question “What is Socratic Teaching?” emerges as itself a Socratic question peculiarly elusive of precise formulation. The ground keeps shifting under you, and

always has, since Plato first set his hand to depicting it. Strange to say, the dispute begins with the figure of Socrates himself. The physical figure presents no problems. The bust of Socrates exists, and portraits of him are available for inspection. He was a short, almost squat man with slightly bulging eyes, a widespread nose, thick, somewhat protuberant lips, and something of a paunch. A step beyond this the controversy rages, first around the problem of the Platonic Socrates vis-à-vis the historical Socrates, then on the character of the historical Socrates himself. It divides the religious and the secular, the Liberal and the Conservative.

The Master of Balliol famously compared the last hours of Socrates (as dramatized in the Phaedo) to a second equally famous scene.^{iv} There is a loving and admiring portrait of him by Romano Guardini in his study of the Apology, Crito, and Phaedo. And Willmoore Kendall portrays him as the Bearer of the Word, the apostle, servant, and agent of the Truth, who would brook no compromise. On the other side, equally distinguished names present a startlingly different picture. The most famous is Nietzsche who, after a colorful introduction of Socrates as “the new type of man,” presents him as the embodiment of “theoretical man” of decadence and the impotence of “theory.” Von Lukács went further. In Soul and Form he opens with a Nietzschean tribute to “the new man” and the New World he ushered in.

“Alcibiades already saw clearly what Nietzsche was to emphasize centuries later that, Socrates was a new kind of man, profoundly different in his elusive essence from all other Greeks who lived before him. But Socrates in the same dialogue expressed the central ideal of men of his kind . . . that ‘tragic and comic’ is entirely a matter of the chosen standpoint. In saying this, he formulated the profoundest anti-Greek thought.”^v (Emphasis added)

Soul and Form is the peak of aesthetic refinement in the Kantian world of Weimar or Wilhelmian Culture.^{vi} And yet, Von Lukács concludes on a note of cultured contempt: “Socrates was vulgar.” Need more be said?^{vii}

Lord Russell, the genuine aristocrat, is more ambivalent, though not on Nietzschean or aristocratic grounds, towards Socrates the plebian, the stone mason.^{viii} Russell distinguishes between the Platonic and the historical Socrates in a manner one can only admire. Of the one, he says, “His merits are obvious.” Socrates’ merits are precisely those his admirers will associate with Lord Russell himself. To the hour of his death “he remains indifferent to worldly success.” More, like Russell, “he remains calm and humorous and urbane to the last moment.” Is this not the very picture we carry of Lord Russell himself in his last days “caring more for what he believes to be true” than for anything under the sun including life itself. Nonetheless, the author of “A Free Man’s Worship” finds some “grave defects” in the freest man sentenced to death by the freest city man has ever built. “Socrates,” he says, “is dishonest and sophistical in argument.” He rationalizes his private thoughts and uses his intellect “to prove conclusions agreeable to him.” Worse yet, “there is,” says Lord Russell, “something smug and unctuous about him which reminds one of a bad type of cleric.” The shaft goes home to anyone who has spent an afternoon with this type of cleric, English or American, German or Swiss. For Lord Russell, unlike Jowett and Monsignor Guardini, the Phaedo does not leave an unblemished picture. In Russell’s opinion, “his courage in the face of death would have been more remarkable” if Socrates had not believed in the gods and the bliss of life in the hereafter, where he could spend his time discoursing about justice and the good and questioning Orpheus, Hesiod, and Homer ... Leo Strauss and Bertrand Russell. Lord Russell’s picture of the Platonic Socrates is also divided against itself. The Platonic Socrates compares very favorably to Aquinas, the philosopher, and

ranks with Boethius, the soul of philosophical serenity. Boethius, the man, is the single most impressive figure to grace Russell's pages. In his pure and high-minded vision, he recalls Lord Russell himself for those who do not know Consolations of Philosophy. Lord Russell describes him as a man of "perfect philosophic calm - so much that, if the book (Consolations of Philosophy) had been written in prosperity, it might almost have been called smug. Written when it was, in prison under sentence of death, it is as admirable as the last moments of the Platonic Socrates."^{ix} Aquinas' genius was for systematic thought, thought ultimately in the service of revealed religion. "There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead."^x Yet this same Socrates, we have been told, is guilty of "treachery to the truth" and "the worst of philosophic sins." In his thinking, in his pursuit of truth, he was not "scientific," not governed by impersonal ideals universal in scope, but "determined to prove the universe agreeable to his ethical standards."^{xi}

The Socrates of Nietzsche is the most awesome and frightening figure to rise up out of the pages of philosophy, understood as the critique of culture. He is the dissolvent of culture, the destroyer of tragedy and myth, the surrounding, life-giving envelope of mist, of dream and passion, of the Dionysian spirit of great and noble life, of the life of the gods in Hellas. He is a creature of "massive intellect and penetrating gaze." He saw straight through the veil of Maya with a new kind of energy streaming down from the Apollonian sun. He was the victory of the Apollonian over the Dionysian, "a brand-new demon" before whom the old gods would flee. Before this huge, relentless, all-seeing Cyclops eye (the image is Nietzsche's), the soft surrounding clouds of myth and art, poetry, drama, and religion dried up and dispersed over the horizon. The emotional wellsprings of Dionysian culture in Hellas began retreating in

the face of “the gigantic driving wheel of logical Socratism turning, as it were, behind the Socrates which we see through Socrates as through a shadow.”^{xii} Nothing could resist this force, this elemental power of pure cognition which generated the crisis of Greek culture. In the collision of the Socratic and the Dionysian “the temple of culture, of Aeschylean tragedy lay in ruins.” Socrates knocked the Apollonian and Dionysian, rightly coupled as Yin and Yang, Male and Female, out-of-balance and the result is history.

Nietzsche frames the fatal question on its most decisive level: “Who was this man who dared to challenge the entire world of Hellenic culture. ” And answers, “He was a solitary man, arrogantly superior, and heralding a radically dissimilar culture, he stepped into a world whose least hem we have counted it an honor to touch.” It was a world commanding “the highest reverence” from figures as different as Nietzsche and Marx, and whose latest adventure Thucydides would write up as “a possession for all time.” What was the shape of this demon that appeared suddenly out of nowhere and dared “to pour out the magic filter in the dust? This demi-god to whom the noblest spirits of mankind must call out ‘Alas!’ with ruthless hand you have destroyed this fair edifice. It falls and decays.” A strange new creature, mysterious and unclassifiable, half-demon and half-god, leaps out of the pages of philosophy and steps on to the stage of history in the shattering collision known as Nietzsche contra Socrates echoing the great trial in Athens and resounding in the culture clash of our time.

This in brief and in barest outline is “the Socrates problem” which has baffled and intrigued the best minds for two millennia, compounded as it is of three parts: the problem of the historical Socrates, the riddle of the Platonic Socrates, and the relation between them. Lord Russell phrased it with his customary wit and piquancy:

“Socrates is a very difficult subject for the historian. There are many men concerning whom it is certain that very little is known, and other men concerning whom it is certain that a great deal is known; but in the case of Socrates the uncertainty is as to whether we know very little or a great deal.”^{xiii}

Socrates is a prism diffracting the most varied rays of insight. The conventional figure is that of the seeker after truth, skeptical, agnostic, a character out of some new, unwritten Euripidean drama who gave us the immortal line about the unexamined life, a line still honored if only in the breach. Beyond this the lines are drawn. And even his most admiring critics differ on every point of substance. His character and teaching remain as intriguing and fascinating a puzzle today as on the day after Plato completed his last dialogue. As against the conservative view handed down from the Reverend Jowett and Gardini to Willmoore Kendall and Leo Strauss, we can at least set down the following: After an incisive analysis of Socratic elenchus Richard Robinson says, “Socrates was certainly a unique reformer if he hoped to make men virtuous by logic.”^{xiv} In his most characteristic mood, Lord Russell has told us that the Socratic elenchus was ultimately about the way words are used. At the end of Socratic elenchus, we have at best made a linguistic discovery. And finally, as noted, in the refined opinion of Von Lukács, “Socrates was vulgar.” In Winspear’s Marxist analysis he emerges as the apologist of aristocratic reaction and privilege. In Nietzsche’s defense of aristocratic culture he is the ultimately lucid destroyer of tragedy, myth and culture. The radiant Apollonian sun dispelling the life sustaining vital force called Dionysus. To Lord Russell, in another of his many moods, he was guilty of that worst of philosophic sins, the betrayal of truth. Such is the enigma of Socrates, son of Sophroniscus, with whom we continue to be preoccupied, even under pain of death.^{xv}

Present day usage of the term “Socratic teaching” is a far cry from this. Yet strangely enough, it persists in looking back to Socrates as a symbol or metaphor. It has been called a “philosophical tool kit for class control,” “a box of devices for class management.” It has been called many things. It is all of these and none of these. As an academic question, it is an especially powerful method of sparking the mind, enhancing motivation, creating involvement and developing understanding. This is its utility in Science and Mathematics. But beyond its utility, in the liberal arts, it is a way of transforming the student by creating the desire to understand the issues behind the facts. And this is what makes it more than an academic question.

But precisely what more? The attempt to answer this on the level of “doctrine” seems fated to eternal frustration. A definitive attempt made by Richard Robinson on Plato’s Earlier Dialectic received a definitive rebuttal by Paul Friedländer. And so it goes, or has gone. One thing we know it was the first and certainly the most dramatic culture clash in the history of Western civilization. Sophistic versus Socratic education is the grand theme of Werner Jaeger’s Paideia sketching “the ideals of Greek culture,” as it is, in a sense, the underlying theme of the more conservative and more epic work of Eric Voegelin. What, if anything, can we learn as we face one another in the culture clash of our time?

2

While we have no “rules of method,” nothing comparable to Reichenbach’s classic text or Descartes’ Discourse, we can by common consent, set down some of the characteristica of the model. First, Socrates talked to the young and the old, to some of

the high and the mighty and some more ordinary folk, to teachers and some more like “students,” to the virtuous and, shall we say, the wicked. His “starting point” in the methodical sense was the common opinion of men. Socrates famously began with the Dóxa. He began with “ships and shoes and sealing wax and cabbages and kings.” And he was, or said he was, or seemed to be, in search of a definition. What is it that united different instances of what was said to be the same class? What is the “real” uniting dimension? What is Justice? What is Moderation? What is Courage? What is Virtue? What is it really? The Socratic question is classically the “What is X?” question.

Socrates was a talker; he was also a listener. But above all, he was the questioner. His mission began with a question and a paradox. The Oracle had said that there was no man wiser than Socrates, yet he knew that he knew nothing. A god could not lie, so he set out to question his fellow citizens about their knowledge. Of course, he often talked, sometimes a great deal. But it is the stance of the questioner, the mode of interrogation that forms the differentia specifica of the Socratic search. The art of the Question is the very personification of Socrates and forms the underlying dimension from the homespun examples to the transcendental theory of Ideas.

Second, Socratic teaching is not question and answer, least of all is it question and the right answer. The characteristic form is dialogue or conversation in various settings. Sometimes Socrates does speak and speak for quite a while. But these are not really monologues or mini-lectures. In one suggestive phrase they represent “the conversation of the soul with itself.” The dialogue in its inevitably appropriate setting is the natural configuration for Socratic teaching precisely as the lecture in its setting is the natural configuration of present day instruction. Each is a way of shaping the mind by structuring the perceptions. Socrates dramatized the life of reason. Then Plato wrote the script.

These dramatic dialogues create the most intense involvement, but they also create two extraordinary effects. Socratic teaching often leads to a state of radical puzzlement. The Greeks called it aporia. Conventional wisdom, what we might call the “textbook” answer, no longer worked. And the result was a state of radical bewilderment. The mind was stung, even numb for a moment in a state of disorientation. One unfortunate, who should have known better, likened Socrates to a stingray. Undermined by the stream of questioning, the façade of the familiar suddenly crumbles leaving nothing in its place. For a dizzying moment one found oneself in a sort of “in-between,” in a moment of decision.

Third, Socratic teaching is an open challenge to conventional wisdom, to traditional interpretation, to the sanctity of the ancestral and hallowed. In the person of Socrates it became controversy incarnate, the transcendental dissolvent threatening the “bonds” that held society together. “Opinion,” the element of society, now appears as “prejudice,” or as partial truth, as the Dóxa which translators call “vulgar opinion.” The dialogues are streaked with these comings and goings, from the more minor and lesser known to the grand collisions marked by the names of Protagoras and Gorgias, Thrasymachus and Kallicles. They’re all there, the imagemaker, the handler of men, the Might is Right Realpolitiker, and the Nietzschean Übermensch in what was to become the case of the City of Athens Versus Socrates.

Fourth, Socrates is another name for Irony. And Socratic dialogue is irony writ large. So much so that it is impossible to think of Socrates (and especially of his famous claim that he knew nothing) without thinking of irony. Question and answer, skepsis and knowledge teeter on the edge of irony. When Kierkegaard, most skeptical of philosophers, wrote on The Concept of Irony, it could only be “with constant reference to Socrates.” How could it be otherwise? This makes all Socratic teaching indirect: the

truth is hidden, hidden, Hidden. It is for you to work it out. Education, as distinct from instruction, is always a self-appropriation.

Fifth, the ironical stance created a mask, the equally famous Socratic incognito. There are changes of setting and changes of stance, but what do they mean? Interpreters of the dialogues find “contradictions.” Are they deliberate? Did the historical Socrates actually “hold” those doctrines and believe all those arguments? Some perhaps, and perhaps not others. But which? Only in death did the mask disappear. But then at last his lips were sealed and we can learn nothing. Except that his death is a lesson for us all.

Education was for him the supreme and shaping end of the state (Polis). So the clash between Socrates and the “wisemen” of Athens became inevitable. Education now meant three things: 1) the search for a view of the whole, 2) the improvement of the soul as the radiant center of authentic education, and 3) education in this sense as the highest way of life for a man and a city or culture.

What can the foregoing model do for us in the American culture clash? In one sense nothing. In another sense everything. It has nothing to say to the flat-footed literalist. Taken literally, it breathes the last enchantments of a refined antiquarianism deserving the ready dismissal it will receive from all sides in the culture wars. But taken as a metaphor for the timeless way of teaching, it can become the single most effective solution to the mutual incomprehension of the major camps now facing one another across the chasm of the culture clash.

Let us proceed socratically, that is to say, by taking up the various opinions as they present themselves with due regard for the partial truth they may contain. Socratic investigation is forensic not feral. Starting with the partial truth of a position, it explores

its boundaries. The debate to date has been violently polemical and even acrimonious. By now the sides barely hear one another. Each side has been spinning its wheels making no appreciable gain. The educational scene has been deadlocked to the complete frustration of all concerned. Adding one more voice on the same lines does no one any good. A partisan voice is sure to be lost except among its fellows. Instead, let us search for what I like to think of as “higher ground,” a perspective from which the partial truth is seen for what it is, and its partiality overcome.

Introduction: The Voice of “The Nation”

ⁱMaxine Y. Sweezy Woolston, The Structure of the Nazi Economy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1941; Franz Neumann, Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, V.Gollancz Ltd., London, 1942; Georg Lukács, The Destruction of Reason, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1981; Frederick L. Schuman, The Nazi Dictatorship, Knopf, New York, NY, 1936.

ⁱⁱ John Taylor Gatto, Dumbing Us Down, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, PA, 1992.

Chapter 1: What is Socratic Teaching?

ⁱⁱⁱ Pluck this flower from Chester E. Finn, Jr., We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future, Maxwell Macmillan, Toronto, Canada, 1991. For a fuller analysis of We Must Take Charge, see below Chapter 9, *The Prohibition of Questioning: Chester Finn, Charles Sykes & E. D. Hirsch*.

^{iv} “There is nothing in any tragedy, ancient or modern, nothing in poetry or history (with one exception), like the last hours of Socrates in Plato.” Jowett, as quoted in Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy, Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, NY, 1945, op. cit. p. 132.

^vGeorg Von Lukács, Soul and Form, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1974, pp 14-15.

^{vi}The prose is exquisite, admired alike by Thomas Mann and Max Weber. The varied portraits of the soul and the prose in which they are portrayed are universally regarded as elegant, almost precious. Its innermost quality is poetic, poetry in prose, sensitive, evocative, intensely personal, intimate and allusive, it sings its song of metaphysical enchantment in “the lyricism of the new solitude,” whispering its suggestive dreamlike message of ultimate aesthetic refinement to the solitary individual alone in the vastness of the universe, a lone traveller in the infinite deserts of Time. I am thinking especially of the original text, Georg Lukács, Die Seele und die Formen, E. Fleischel & Company, Berlin, 1911, and especially of the final breathtaking dialogue: “Metaphysik der Tragödie”: Paul Ernst.

^{vii} Quite possibly so, von Lukács writes, “He was vulgar: a sentimental man, and a dialectician. Therefore he “wrapped himself in names and expressions like a wild satyr in his pelt.” His discourse never fell silent; nothing ever clouded its transparent clarity. Socrates was never monological. He went from one group of discoursing men to another, always speaking or listening to others. His whole life seemed absorbed in the dialogical form of his thinking. And when he fell silent for the first time in his life – after he had emptied the cup of hemlock and his feet had already begun to grow numb – he wrapped

himself in his cloak. No one saw the changed face of Socrates: Socrates alone with himself and without a mask.” Georg Lukács, Soul and Form, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1974, p. 93.

^{viii} Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, NY, 1945, op. cit. p. 89 ff.

^{ix} Op. cit. p. 371. “During the two centuries before his time and the ten centuries after it, I cannot think of any European man of learning so free from superstition and fanaticism. Nor are his merits merely negative; his survey is lofty, disinterested, and sublime. He would have been remarkable in any age; in the age in which he lived, he is utterly amazing.” Ibid. p. 373.

^x op cit. p. 463.

^{xi} op cit. p. 143.

^{xii} Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, Anchor Books, New York, NY, 1991.

^{xiii} Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, NY, 1972, op. cit. p. 82. More recently, in “Platonic Justice,” Kelson advances an implicitly Nietzschean argument: Socratic elenchus conceals a will to power: elenchus is mastery. See Hans Kelson, What is Justice, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1960, see especially pages 90-91. His arguments are controverted by Ronald Levinson, In Defense of Plato, Russell & Russell, New York, NY, 1970.

^{xiv} Richard Robinson, Plato’s Earlier Dialectic, Oxford University Press, Amen House, London, 1953, page 14.

^{xv} See, for example, Willmoore Kendall, “The People Versus Socrates Revisited,” Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum, Arlington House, New Rochelle, NY, 1971, pages 149-167.

Chapter 2: The Americanization of Socrates: Neil Postman