

Mission (Im)possible

When all is said and done, philosophizing is the only real teaching. While still a classical philologist attacking the existing system of university teaching, Nietzsche maintained precisely that. Challenging loyal citizens and his own conformist colleagues, he argued that anyone starting to teach others should first decide whether he or she wanted to be a philosopher or merely a hired clerk – the latter being bound by neither the truth nor any code of honor.

Philosophers shouldn't be clerks, but neither should they be actors. This leads to the next paradox: the reasoning of a teacher-philosopher should be organized in accordance with the inner integrality of the speaker's thoughts and views – regardless of whether listeners like what they hear. On the other hand, there is no greater satisfaction for a teacher than the applause of his listeners. But how can one reconcile this with the role of a seeker of truth, a teacher-philosopher? One has to acknowledge that teaching is not a free profession in our present circumstances. Yet might it be one, at least sometimes? Is the term "teaching mission" a pointless relic of the times when the mutually voluntary teacher-student relationship lasted until the student himself decided to abandon it and start taking responsibility for his own life? That was a genuine mission, because it required not only qualifications, but also a readiness to make special sacrifices. To give everything while not demanding anything in return.

Is such a mission still possible, then, if our relations with students are regulated by an external system of core curricula and rules? I believe it is, but at enormous cost. The framework for practicing teaching as a profession with a special status was devised centuries ago. This, after all, is the meaning of the autonomous university, a republic of scholars independent of the state and governed by its own rules. Today such academic autonomy no longer exists. This is in fact not due to legal regulations, but because the academic community itself does not demand enforcement of its rights in this respect. University senates and department councils are mainly concerned about immediate problems: calculating their budgets, running the university as an enterprise. Thus, teachers are doubly threatened with becoming mere clerks. Not only are they hired and paid by the state, even their own community in the autonomous academy hires them all over again to be managers, production-cycle supervisors, accountants.

It would seem, then, that a return to the teaching mission requires a nonconformist attitude. Thus, one needs to abide by the regulations and decrees coming from outside Academia only to a certain degree, and – within the boundaries of the law – to take advantage of any existing room to maneu-

ver, for genuinely creating an independent community. This emerging autonomy has to be nurtured and strengthened, with full awareness that its purpose isn't always to give us a monopoly for issuing this or that type of diploma, that simple market success is not the measure of our actions or neglect. We need to be able to oppose our own short-term interests. All kinds of reasonable people will hinder our efforts to defend such an understanding of a teacher's obligations: pragmatic students wanting to be taught the things they believe they will soon urgently need; loving parents demanding

that we guarantee their darling offspring rapid commercial success; our colleagues pointing out that dreams need to be tempered in such hard times; clerks, inspectors, accrediting officials, and auditors, endlessly checking our invoices, programs and words against current instructions, core curricula, textbooks, guidelines etc. Finally, they will say: if you want to be free, what right do you have to receive state funding? Why should the state pay nonconformist teachers, rebellious teachers, and facilitate their activity?

A well-known Polish adage, phrased as a kind of curse, reflects the challenge of the teacher's mission: "May you teach other people's children." A former school teacher of mine, Ireneusz Gugulski, used to say: "I'm not teaching you, God forbid, to be Polish scholars, but to be decent people. Though" – he always added – "most of you will probably become scoundrels anyway – right, sonny?" Nobody else talked to us this way, with an ironic smile pointing out that the world we were coming into could easily make us scoundrels. Gugulski was nonconformist, expelled many times over, and ended up jobless, poor, excluded. He ultimately became an outstanding perpetuator of the tradition of the Polish intelligentsia and Polish teaching. In our region of Europe, this tradition has always meant a readiness to understand the teacher's function as anti-system sabotage on behalf of and for the good of society. Somewhere in the roots of our profession, a model for such a stance already exists: Socrates and his program of civic education in Athens, which ended in his being condemned to death. Today we no longer face the danger of sharing either Socrates' fate, or even that of Gugulski. Our situation is thus better, but also worse – offering no chance of martyrdom, no chance of everlasting remembrance by students and followers. Instead, what we have is difficult, painstaking, missionary work. QFFFS!



Nowadays being a university teacher and a truth seeker is a real challenge

JERZY AXER

OBTA, Warsaw University, PAN Scientific Committee on Ancient Culture