

JZ: Teaching Desire

Alessandra Capperdoni

Can one even attempt to summarize what Jerry Zaslove meant to the vast cohort of students, including myself, that he met throughout the many years of his teaching? Generations of students can testify to his relentless commitment to the art of teaching, to his capacity to walk together on the trails of research, to his willingness to help them find their own and unique critical voices and to nurture—to use an old adage—the spirit of learning, learning, learning. I think I can speak not only for myself, first as student and then as fellow spirit, but also in the name of the many with whom thoughts about his nurturing presence among us have been shared in time. In gathering these notes for this contribution, I needed to address the personal and the pedagogical, the human bond and the intellectual home. It would be impossible for me to differentiate one from the other. It is still difficult to maintain a formal tone about a relationship that reached deep into the folds of the mind and the heart but which I could define, if a definition is called for, as “teaching desire,” with all the connotations that the phrase brings about.

In a short piece, more of an open letter than a formal article, that Jerry published in the SFU newsletter before retiring, he opened his thoughts with a line that I will always remember: “And here I am, the last Mohican [...]”¹ With the irony and wit that he used to display in tackling the deep issues that permeate our present, Jerry was speaking about the transition of academic culture, which he had witnessed from the time of the opening of Simon Fraser University (the “mythical” time of the radical campus of the mid-1960s) to the time of a pervasive neoliberal ideology that has slowly crept into its folds and transformed the humanistic mandate of that first

¹ Jerry Zaslove, “Imaginary Utopia, Threatened Idea,” *Simon Fraser News* (Sept. 7, 2000), 5.

experiment into the commodification of skills, the production of utility, or the bureaucratization of education to meet the mandates of the market. Jerry belonged to the last generation of teachers that had no room for skills and learning objectives. Coming out of a long intellectual tradition built on the belief in the creative intellectual possibilities of each human being, his teaching truly made room for poesis: the creative act of thought was not a regurgitation of ideas, a recitation of stale formulas, or a branding of “new visions” or fashionable “radicalisms” (despite his own radicalism), but was rather a process of creation at the meeting point of self and others. Jerry’s teaching always aimed at helping students find their own intellectual possibilities, even those still undisclosed to themselves. You will never meet a student from his class parroting or reproducing the word (or ideology) of the master in a process of professorial self-reproduction. Helping students to find and create their own intellectual future was the only way in which he could conceive of teaching—a way that was formed by his own intellectual formation in the many houses of European thought: the practice of dialogism in the spirit of Bakhtin, which so deeply underwrote his early study of Russian and European literature, anarchist thinking, *Kulturkritik*, and that peculiarly slanted mode of walking the intellectual streets of European culture as if walking the passageways of the cities of modernity explored by one of his favourite critics, Walter Benjamin.

Despite the institutional changes and institutional choices that informed his life at SFU, Jerry’s commitment to the study of literature and art permeated every aspect of his (anarcho)thinking and every aspect of his teaching. But walking deep into the pages and along the surfaces of the European literary tradition (a tradition that interweaves the high and the low, the oral and the written, the imaginary and the symbolic, the fantastic and the real, the home and the world) and history of ideas is no easy feat. It is a practice that may be easily misunderstood by the guardians of disciplinary boundaries, worried that a loosening of identity might put the existence

of their field of study within academic culture in peril (a peril which is indeed far from abstract in the increasing neoliberalization of the university of the new century), but it is also seen suspiciously by those demanding a seamless and identifiable transfer of knowledge from radical discourses into concrete social change. Such misunderstandings belong to the same structures of feelings or fallacy in method: they need to turn the production of discourse into utility, be it the utility of commodifiable knowledge or the utility of recognizable social innovation. They both serve what Jacques Lacan (hardly loved by the Freudian Jerry!) called the University Discourse. They represent a coercion of heart and mind, enforcing a closed vision of the world deprived of historical perspective, no matter how enlightened or radical such a vision may appear to be. They hardly leave space for self-growth, discovery, or true dialogue. They hardly leave space for the encounter with the multiplicity of visions and consciousnesses produced by different histories and material conditions (and the positive possibilities that such encounters can engender), or for the free play of struggle between consensus and dissent—the only struggle in which human thought and artistic thought can develop.

And yet, here he was, truly the last one of a generation of thinkers who at every step undermined the neoliberal restructuring of higher education around commodification and disturbed its attempts at the accumulation of capital. Teaching was at the heart of it. Like the psychoanalyst interrupting the expectations built around a session, he extended and refracted time onto itself, diving his speech in an unravelling of thought while never reducing it to monologue or “ego-talk.” The speech of the other could easily nest itself into his own and spin the discussion into unforeseen possibilities. But you had to be able and be willing to take your chances in this practice—a practice which bore the traces of the “poetic.” You had to be willing to tap into its fluctuations, its shadows, and its migration from text to text, from discourse to discourse. It could

be disorienting but, like many others, I always found such disorientation to be enriching because it alerted you to the proliferation of visible and less visible signs to which we need to become alert. Without falling into exaggerations, his classes had the feel of Kafka's novels. It was an experience of language and in language (could it be otherwise for a professor who remained, to the very end and despite his anti-disciplinary stance, a professor of literature?). You walked in a direction—but you were never sure which one because the detours of questions and problems kept extending the terrain of inquiry—only to find yourself at a destination of your own doing, different from the destinations to which your peers were arriving and yet infused with their own speech.

This was the case for his classrooms, to which students of all stations and institutions were attracted in large numbers, as well as for the public events or reading groups in close circles that brought us together. One could hardly count the number of students and former students who regularly visited Jerry to speak, to discuss, to clarify their own ideas, to find a way for their own projects of so many kinds. He always made time and space for each one of them. Could it be otherwise for the professor who had made of *dialogism*—the encounter of voices and the space made within oneself for the voice of the other—his first object of study in the pages of Russian literary and cultural criticism? And as I leaf through the notes that he left behind—the handouts, the rich exchanges by mail of the two or three or four of us (I am sure many more have known him through these small email groups), the class notes, the drafts and the articles, the notes in the margins of books and the notes about books—I can still hear his voice, moving through the questions that preoccupied his lifelong work: cultural memory, trauma, time, loss, the past and what he called “the unpast,” the city, myth and history, exile and censorship, the homelessness of literary philosophy and the critique of philosophy as system, radicalism in culture and the arts,

social thought and the unconscious, utopia ... But every list is bound to fail, except for pointing at the impossibility of its completeness.

He worked, and perhaps lived, at the frontier and at the intersection of different disciplines. The “thought at play” that characterized his teaching as well as his private conversations showed at every step his willingness and capability to respect the voice of the other (whether the other was an individual, a text, a discourse, an idea, or a social group), even in disagreement, and *in the radical non-coincidence with himself*. I often thought his intellectual work showed a remarkable similarity to Dostoevsky’s novels—at least in Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky—which he loved to teach: the flow of language, the passionate dialogue of many voices, the movement, the impossible completion of thought, where the author does not set a determined solution to the problem at stake and does not aim at closure. Don’t we all remember his struggles with keeping to a set time in his interventions? And yet I loved those extended times because they acted as a reminder that it is only in such encounters in language that humanity can exist and can hope to keep existing.

The sadness and mourning for his passing cannot be closed either. They reach deep into the flesh. A hole in the heart. But the richness of the language that his beautiful mind left behind will always be living with us, for those fortunate enough who have met and worked with him. Those who found in him a fellow soul and a fellow traveler. Or, as he once said, a fellow animal.

Alessandra Capperdoni was born in Italy, where she studied Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures (English, German, French, and Italian Studies). She came to SFU in 1999 with a Government of Canada Award for Foreign Nationals to work on a one-year research project on North American “open poetics.” Her PhD in English focused on experimental writing in Canada in the long poem genre and the politics of form in relation to space, nation, and global capital. She has taught a wide range of courses in the departments of English and Women’s Studies at SFU, where she was Ruth Wynn Woodward Lecturer in 2009–2010, before joining the Department of Humanities. She is currently working on a manuscript on post-1960s Canadian poetics in the context of the social imaginaries that emerged at the intersection of nationalism and globalization and a second manuscript on women’s avant-garde writing and feminist phenomenology in Canada. A third project on culture and violence is at the early stages, fostered by the research cluster on Memory and Trauma with Eirini Kotsovoli and James Horncastle.