Fictions of Authority: on Pedagogical Scepticism

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(Here are some passages I will reflect on in the above talk which will seek to pursue a theme through Rousseau’s Émile, C. M. Wieland’s History of Agathon, J. W. von Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister novels, Friedrich Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra and the literary criticism of F. R. Leavis)

I will follow the example of my predecessors and take up, not the task, but my pen; and instead of doing the right thing I will try to say it.

I know that in such an undertaking an author, who ranges at will among theoretical systems, utters many fine precepts impossible to practise, and even when he says what is practicable it remains undone for want of details and examples as to its application.

I have therefore decided to take an imaginary pupil, to assume on my own part the age, health, knowledge, and talents required for the work of his education, to guide him from birth to manhood, when he needs no guide but himself. The method seems to me useful for an author who fears he may stray from the practical to the visionary; for as soon as he departs from common practice he has only to try his method on his pupil; he will soon know, or the reader will know for him, whether he is following the development of the child and the natural growth of the human heart.

J. J. Rousseau, Émile, [1762], trans. Barbara Foxley (Dent, 1914.)

What I truly know, I know only for myself: it is seldom useful to speak of it as that usually excites contradiction, deadlock and standstill. (vol. vi, p. 132.)

The genuine pupil learns how to develop the unknown out of the known and so to approach the master. (vol. vi, p. 20)

Aphorisms from Makaria’s archive in Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Travel, J. W. von Goethe, [1829], trans. H. M. Waidson, (Calder, 1977)

Education would be defined by its adherents as the insight by means of which, through demand and its satisfaction, one becomes time-bound through and through but at the same time best acquires all the ways and means of making money as easily as possible. The goal would then be to create as many current human beings as possible, in the sense in which one speaks of a coin as being current; and, according to this conception, the more of these current human beings it possesses the happier a nation will be. Thus the sole intention
behind our modern educational institutions should be to assist everyone to become current to the extent that lies in his nature, to educate everyone in such a way that they can employ the degree of knowledge and learning of which they are capable for the accumulation of the greatest possible amount of happiness and profit. What is demanded here is that the individual must be able, with the aid of this general education, exactly to assess himself with regard to what he has a right to demand of life; and it is asserted, finally, that there exists a natural and necessary connection between ‘intelligence and property’, between ‘wealth and culture’, more, that this is a moral necessity. (pp. 164-5)

For that is how the fashionable greed for beautiful form is connected with the ugly content of contemporary man: the former is intended to conceal, the latter to be concealed. To be cultivated means to hide from oneself how wretched and base one is, how rapacious in going for what one wants, how insatiable in heaping it up, how shameless and selfish in enjoying it. (p. 168)

‘Schopenhauer as Educator’ in Untimely Meditations, Friedrich Nietzsche (1874), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

He gazed long into the face of the disciple who had interpreted the dream, and shook his head. (p. 139)

‘But why do I speak where no one has my kind of ears?’ (p. 193)

[Zarathustra to Zarathustra’s Ape]: ‘But your foolish teaching is harmful to me, even when you are right.’ (p. 197)

‘One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil.’ (p. 203)

‘…what was once called a secret and a secrecy of profound souls, today belongs to the street-trumpeters and other butterflies.’ (p. 204)

‘They have learned badly and the best things not at all, they have learned everything too early and too fast: they have eaten badly – that is how they got that stomach-ache. (p. 223)

When the animals had spoken these words they fell silent and expected that Zarathustra would say something to them: but Zarathustra did not hear that they were silent. On the contrary, he lay still with closed eyes like a sleeper, although he was not asleep: for he was conversing with his soul. (p. 238)

Thus Spake Zarathustra, [1884], trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1969)