

49. Report on Professor Shamus's Course (1994)*

"First Class, September 19, 1994

"A small but crowded classroom. Professor Shamus comes in and sits down. He is casually dressed but with a rather imposing look. He starts to explain why the primary text, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, isn't available in the bookstore. I have difficulty following his explanation. He then tells us that, given the heavy workload, he would prefer to have only those students willing to roll up their sleeves. Anyone who is not prepared to do so should think about clearing out.

"He gives us a couple of handouts. One of them is an unidentified excerpt from a philosophy text. The other is an untitled poem beginning with the line, "Think flesh." He gives us ten minutes to read and think about these texts.

"A discussion follows after the ten-minute break. He focuses on one student who is obviously trying hard to understand the unidentified Merleau-Ponty text. Professor Shamus seems particularly concerned with the student's choice of words. They seem inept to him and he badgers her about this. The student doggedly goes from one explanation to another. An amazing amount of time is taken up by this.

"Despite the difficulty of the Merleau-Ponty text, Professor Shamus at no time makes any attempt to identify it. He seems to think that we should be able to grasp it without any preliminaries.

"Then he gives us a reading assignment for the next class. It is an excerpt from the fourth chapter of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. This text is even more difficult than the first. After class I go to Professor Shamus's office. I tell him that I am perplexed by the way he is proceeding. Instead of showing any surprise or concern, he tells me: 'Give it time. There's no closure.'

"Second Class, September 26, 1994

"Professor Shamus asks us if we have any questions about *The Visible and the Invisible* text. No one is able to do more than raise a few feeble questions. Showing impatience, he then asks, 'How can we have a class if no one comes to it prepared to ask questions?' At this point I ask him why he decided to give us a difficult text without the benefit of any introduction or commentary. He quickly answers, 'Because it's good.'

"He then begins a discussion about the large oak table that is in our room. A number of times he speaks about the importance of respecting this table. One respects it because of the quality of workmanship that went into it, because of its durability, and because of its long service in the classroom. At some point he asks people to get up and lift the table. All of this of course induces as much mirth as mystification. The affair with the table lasts about forty minutes.

"He then gives us a writing assignment. We are all to tell him what we have learned thus far. By now I'm getting the feeling I'm caught in some scene from *Alice in Wonderland*. This feeling becomes even more pronounced when I look around me and see all the serious faces.

"I speak once again to Professor Shamus after class. When I mention the difficulties I'm encountering and my inability to fathom what he is up to, he only keeps repeating, 'Because it's good!' When I ask him why he isn't lecturing on Merleau-Ponty, he replies that he can only do so if students come to class prepared to ask questions.

"Third Class, October 3, 1994

"Professor Shamus asks me to read what I have written in response to his assignment of the previous week. It is essentially the suggestion that each and every student come to class prepared to ask questions. A brief discussion then follows. At some point he decides to have everyone read his or her assignment. Since I have been thinking for some time now I'm the only one having doubts about the class, I'm surprised when a student criticizes the 'Think flesh' poem (written, as I find out later, by Professor Shamus). Two other students complain about this or that. Then one student reads his assignment at breakneck speed. It is full of quotations from, as I find out later, Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*. What this student reads is utterly incomprehensible. Professor Shamus praises it warmly.

"Then he places before us a monstrous candle. While lighting it, he goes into a long story about his father who sold candles. It is never clear to me why the candle is being presented.

"He then gives us another reading assignment. It is the section of the *Phenomenology of Perception* called 'The Body as Expression, and Speech.'

"Fourth Class, October 17, 1994

"The large beeswax candle makes a second appearance. At some point it is lit and passed around. People are invited to smell the candle. Then a cassette player is turned on and the whole class, with lights turned off and the lit candle being passed around, listens to some pop song sung by the Irish singer, Sinead O'Shamus. Professor Shamus gives no indication that the name of this singer has anything to do with his choice of music or the proceedings in general.

"Then there are some more readings from the previous assignment. People discuss how the course is progressing and what they are learning. Neither one of the Merleau-Ponty texts is mentioned or brought up for discussion.

"I once again go to Professor Shamus's office. I tell him that I think his teaching is a sham. Without so much as batting an eye, he takes the pipe out of his mouth only long enough to ask me what is to be done. I tell him that I no longer wish to attend his classes but simply complete the course with a written assignment. He quickly nods and gives his consent.

"Summary Statement, December 30, 1994

"I do not believe that Professor Shamus taught this course in a way that even remotely resembles the description of it in the *Philosophy Course Guide*. I therefore believe that, for this reason and others, I was justified in arranging not to attend his classes."

- *Alice, would you get me a glass of water, please?*
- *It was like something out of Alice in Wonderland.*
- *Can you vouch for the authenticity of this report?*
- *Beyond a few literary flourishes, he put down exactly what happened.*
- *Oh, Ireland, you beckon to me now more than ever!*

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* If there is any one factor that militates against truth-telling, it must be doing harm to others. At the same time, no other factor, apart from doing good, is so implicated in it. It is an immense issue too tangled and slippery and even dangerous to be faced or sorted out. Cioran, in his *Précis de décomposition*, blames every sort of doctrine for fanaticism and bloodshed. I agree with this insofar as there is much in history to justify it. (But holding this view could also be considered a doctrine.) At the same time, I do not find myself metaphysically or epistemologically scandalized by it. For the whole that is characterized as meaningless by Cioran is for me both infinite and infinitesimal – the infinite *in the infinitesimal*. Partaking of both, we have equal reason to be full of conceit and wide hopes as we do contempt and despair.

When it comes to practical affairs, our fishbowl world is enough of an ocean for anyone to swim in. The morality of our social being virtually pushes every other consideration aside when it comes to wanting to be *recognized* as a social being. Something of the sort is operating in me now when I choose not to report all facts as I know them but change one so as to prevent possible harm. Of course I like to think I'm doing this out of a sense of fair play.