

T. WILSON DICKINSON  
Transylvania University

## INTRODUCTION

**O**n the first day of class, as I am introducing myself to a new group of students I say, as an aside, "...my academic training is in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology." I overhear myself, and wonder: What exactly do I mean by "trained"? For what was I trained? And for what end am I offering to assist in the students' training? There are obvious *disciplinary* answers to these questions. I am going to introduce students to a certain *body* of knowledge in my *field*. And yet, there is a strange sense in which this cluster of words—"discipline," "body," and "field"—do not evoke active, visceral, and ecological connotations. They seem, instead, to be matters of the mind. The practices that accompany their pursuit are quite likely obscured because of their proximity and familiarity.

Admittedly, I am overstating my point. All of us teach for an end that is not simply the replication of knowledge. Even the most conservative academic reflects on the activities that frame the classroom. At the very least there is a desire to raise awareness about an issue, or to change what a student thinks about a topic. But I suspect that institutional pressures and the habituations wrought by our academic training often inhibit a deep attention to the practices that shape our classrooms.

Specifically, I suspect that in focusing on the content of our disciplines, we might lose sight of the disciplines and exercises that undergird them. In attempting to address *what* a student might think about an issue, one might lose sight of *how* they are thinking. For example, by testing for terminological memorization or comprehension of information we might be training students to develop habits of reading in which they passively glean information or go beyond details to grasp ideas. While these are certainly basic functions, they do not serve to train students to develop the kind of attention in which one subjects oneself to the particularity and specificity of another. Furthermore, these practices of reading do not assist students in the kind

of active analogical thinking that moves one from comprehension to compassion, conviction, and action.<sup>1</sup> To simply raise awareness about the ills of our world without cultivating sympathy or responsiveness would seem to be a recipe for cynicism and apathy.

This special issue of *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* addresses this dynamic through an interdisciplinary engagement with theories of practice. Bringing together scholars from philosophy, theology, the study of religion, and anthropology, this issue examines both the politics of the classroom and the pedagogy of scholarship. In addition to this interdisciplinary approach, it also has a multidisciplinary scope, as a wide range of pedagogical exercises are both employed and considered—ranging from recitation, reading, writing, service, reflection, ethnography, translation, collaboration, and performance.

While there is a varying focus in each of these articles on the activities of scholarship and those of teaching, each one is concerned with the pedagogies that underlie our intellectual disciplines. Furthermore, the relationship between the two is not that of abstract theory and applied practice, but it is instead a matter of mutually illuminating complementarity. As the practices of the classroom remind us of the disciplines of scholarship, scholarly exercises assist us in looking at the formative and transformative exercise of teaching.

By contrast, theories of practice often have read actions as texts in need of articulation and exposition. As Michel de Certeau narrates, for this kind of theory, “knowledge is already written in practices, but not yet enlightened.”<sup>2</sup> Turning our attention to the practices of the scholar, and the formative spaces of the study and the classroom, the dyad between reflective thought and mute action is undermined. Attending to the habitats and habits that shape academic life makes it difficult to presume that our *field* of inquiry exists in the abstract domain of a *body* of knowledge. But most of all, it brings to the fore the active aspects of our *disciplines*. Here the boundaries and methods that we are each trained in can no longer be taken as the neutral means for accumulating information, but they are received as exercises of formation—shaping our selves, our relationships, and our world.

Part I (Conversing with our Teachers) begins our examination of the scholarly habitat, through interviews with figures who continue to shape their respective disciplines and whose work has provided insight into the formative character of intellectual practice. Each of these figures is interviewed by one of their former students. Therefore, the conversations move back and forth between the classroom and the study, and the intellectual and the personal.

In Part II (The Performative Power of Texts) and III (Reading, Recitation, and Reflection) analysis and theorization are intertwined with the practices of speaking, reading, and writing.

<sup>1</sup> I am drawing here on Michael Fishbane’s account of the hermeneutical Jewish spiritual exercises of *peshat* and *derash*. Michael Fishbane *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 64–86.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 68.

Rather than seeing practices as texts, texts are charged with a practical and performative valence.<sup>3</sup> On this approach, a text might not simply serve as a representation of a state of things, but it can also serve as a model for patterns of activity (like a blueprint). Furthermore, reading and writing can be exercises that cultivate dispositions and capacities (like attention or patience) or they might be enactments that do things (producing the desire they describe or frustrating the expectations and patterns they oppose).

Parts IV (Emancipatory Pedagogy and Jacques Rancière) and V (Bringing the Classroom to Life) focus on the creative and transformative possibilities of the classroom. Placing special emphasis upon imagination and media, sympathy and plasticity, these essays examine the insights and forms of emancipation that are possible in a transformed classroom. The articles explore the possibility that moving from a paradigm of expertise into the space of a poetic workshop, from ideas to material objects, and from observation to service might provide the means to avoid the cynicism and apathy that pervade our institutions.

This emphasis on transformative performances marks a shift from an earlier generation's work on theories of practice. Rather than an emphasis on the implacable institutions that define and confine action, which characterizes the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (at least his work prior to the 1980s), the attention to exercises here illuminates the ways in which change is possible. All of our acts are not doomed to being mere repetitions of prewritten social scripts. Nor is contrarian resistance the only alternative form of action. But as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have argued, even in the most tired of habits, there is always an opening for transformation.<sup>4</sup> The activities of the classroom, then, might give shape to micropolitical emancipation; the pedagogies of our scholarly work might be directed toward the cultivation of capabilities of attention, patience, and compassion.

And yet, this work does not claim to be entirely novel or revolutionary. It is telling that so many of these articles turn to pre-modern practices, traditions, and exercises. These traditions are compelling not simply because they hand down the wisdom of the past, but also because they illuminate the disciplinary constraints of specific modern methods and institutions. The examination of theories of practice and pedagogical exercises that follow do not, then, demand that we discard our training or forget our disciplines. Instead, they propose that these theories and exercises might be transformed and practiced anew, and that they might shape new forms of life.

---

<sup>3</sup> These insights are consonant with much of the recent proliferation of work that thematizes practice as performance. As Catherine Bell observes, "one could argue that the influence of performance terminology in religious studies has come full circle from seeing action as a type of text to seeing the text as a type of activity." Catherine M. Bell "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Jacques Derrida "The University without Condition," in *Without Alibi*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 233-237. Judith Butler *Excitable Speech: Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 145-163.

T. WILSON DICKINSON is the Associate Dean for Religious Life at Transylvania University. He holds a PhD in Religion from Syracuse University. His research and teaching take place at the crossroads of Christian theology, continental philosophy, and ethical issues surrounding globalization. He is currently completing his first book entitled *The Wisdom of the Cross: Transformative and Scandalous Exercises from Corinth to Paris*.

©T. Wilson Dickinson.

Dickinson, T. Wilson. "Introduction," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 2 (Fall 2012): 1-4.