

## BOOK REVIEW

**Massimo Recalcati**

**The Class Hour: For the Eroticism of Teaching**

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In the book *The Class Hour: For the Eroticism of Teaching*, dedicated to teachers, the author reflects on how being a good teacher means opening new worlds for students, transforming knowledge into the object of their desire, and broadening their horizons. It also expresses gratitude to those teachers who already do this intuitively. This book is intended for teachers, educators, and students at teacher training colleges who wish to reflect on their vocation. The author is the Italian psychoanalyst and essayist Recalcati, who examines family relationships, education, and social reality in his works. The main thesis of this book, as he states, is the understanding that “what remains of the School is actually the irreplaceable role of the teacher. Their purpose is to open the student to culture as a place for the humanization of life, making possible the encounter with the erotic dimension of knowledge.”

Recalcati is one of the most renowned and accomplished Italian experts in the field of psychoanalysis. He has authored over 60 scientific and popular books. Due to his dedicated efforts, in 2021 he received the prestigious Italian philosophy prize, *Premio Udine Filosofia*. He serves as a professor of Dynamic Psychology at the Academy of Education of the University of Milan. His thesis that each of us carries a calling, that we are created for this journey, and when we lose sight of that essence, psychoanalysis or religion intervenes—speaks a lot about his attitude towards education. He perceives school as a place of recognition and identification, like a best friend who guides us to ourselves and, perhaps, for the contemporary audience, somewhat unrealistically attributes an identity leader to school precisely during formative years. As the author himself says: “In life, we can be or not be fathers and mothers, have or not have lovers,

but we cannot—and this is one of the great lessons that comes from Christian culture—not be children. The fact that I am a child is a condition for me to be a human being.”

Being a child is a right and a privilege, the subject of reflection in this book through the prism of education undergone by all generations, all races, and all nations, uniting us in all our diversity.

The book features two inside covers—one displaying the subtitle “For the Eroticism of Teaching” and another, which follows the dedication, that includes a short quote from the Italian philosopher and educator Riccardo Masse, “ignite the desire.” This beginning clearly indicates what is important to the author and sets the tone of the book, which is actually an encouragement to ignite the desire for knowledge. He emphasizes that “class hour, which should be the living heart of the School, marginalizes activities unrelated to didactics in the true sense of the word, primarily assessments that are increasingly reduced to measurement.” In a school where everything seems measurable, Recalcati laments that the same pace of learning is imposed on all students, leading to a cult of numbers and quantification. It comes as no surprise, then, that schools produce generations of young people disinterested in knowledge and their own education.

The book is written in an exceptionally readable and straightforward style, spanning 175 pages and divided into five chapters, along with an epilogue and acknowledgments presented below.

The author examines schools through the complexes they suffer from or have suffered in the past, naming them after the heroes of antiquity and discussing them in the chapters of the book. This includes the Oedipus complex, Narcissus complex, and Telemachus complex, which the author analyzes both diachronically and synchronically. Consequently, the earlier school, marked by the Oedipus complex, disintegrated under the strain of the historically tumultuous years of 1968 and 1977. Following this, the Narcissus complex emerged, which also defines today’s school, and if we envision a different, future school, it would be shaped by the Telemachus complex. When explained synchronically—schools are always under the watchful eye of all three overseers. This is no coincidence, considering that Freud once viewed psychoanalysis, management, and teaching as equally impossible professions.

The first chapter, “The Lost School,” discusses the School of Oedipus, which is based on the strength of tradition, the authority of the Father, and the alliance between parents and teachers. Education is seen as a moral and authoritarian correction of individual distortions, while critical as an unacceptable submission to identity uniformity. In the School of Narcissus, students find themselves

trapped in a mirror that erases the differences between them and their teachers. In the School of Telemachus, the discomfort experienced by children does not stem from intergenerational rivalry but from the loss of difference and the absence of adults who can provide educational guidance. In such a school, the teacher does not aspire to be the ideal master teacher who always has the final say on the meaning of life; instead, they aim to be a teacher – a witness who, through the seductive power of words and the knowledge they bring to life, knows how to open up new worlds.

It extends from antiquity, beginning with Socrates. The second chapter starts with *Socrates' gesture* and a discussion about whether it is possible to create a vital relationship with knowledge for the subject. Learning does not happen by passively pouring from a full glass into an empty one, because the established learning pattern is never a model of emptiness needing to be filled (needing to pour knowledge into the empty heads of students) but rather an emptiness that should be opened. This opening of cognitive emptiness, creating holes in regular discourse, making room, opening windows, eyes, ears, the worlds—this is the gesture that makes teaching purposeful.

Chapter three, “The Law of School,” elaborates on comprehending education as an expansion of knowledge where its infinite ongoing development is a pernicious myth of our time. According to the author, no educational process can be assimilated to a program that aims to accumulate previously acquired knowledge, nor can it or should it be discussed as a moral guide that leads children onto the right path. To educate can mean (and often does mean) to take along, to lead along the right path. However, to educate can also mean to be drawn away, carried along, or led beyond an already routine and known path. Entering education is actually a transition from a family language to a social one. This is also a transition from speech to language, as everyone engaged in linguistics knows that speech is meaningless without language. However, when it comes to the educational process, speech and language represent two fundamental poles around which this process occurs. Just as language organizes speech, the unique act of speaking, when alive and energized by participation, transcends the boundaries of language. Therefore, every educational or didactic process flows between the pole of individual speech and the general pole of language.

Chapter Four, “The Class Hour,” emphasizes that true teachers are not those who fill our heads with established and, therefore, stagnant knowledge but those who create gaps in it to ignite a desire for new insights. The author notes that according to Safouan, a good teacher is recognized by how they respond when they happen to stumble while approaching the podium. This very act

of stumbling symbolizes the unpredictability of life that knowledge must face. Where authentic pedagogy thrives, there are no barriers between education and teaching, or between cognitive content and emotional relationships.

Chapter Five, “The Meeting” of memories, focuses on the teachers who have profoundly influenced the author. In contrast, the epilogue, “The Beauty of Distortion,” concludes that school no longer aligns with the illusion of strict control over life and suggests that the concept of ability has emerged as a new social norm.

Books like this are incredibly important to remind us of what a school lesson can be— a journey to another place, another world, a feeling of exhilaration, being catapulted to another realm, an encounter with the unexpected, the miraculous, the unknown. The author argues, and anyone who has engaged with various levels of education will agree, that this can occur anywhere, from primary school to university. It may not be coincidental that the view of a school lesson as a reflection of the entire educational system is not presented by an educator or teacher, but rather by a psychoanalyst. This may suggest a potential intellectual pathology, a general societal neglect of the process of formation and education, or perhaps, an objective perspective on that aspect of life that we all, regardless of our differences, still share. In reflection, the author’s thesis is that this book provides a portrait of a lost school. The school is shaped by society and is the result of numerous political, economic, and value-based decisions made at a specific time. These decisions do not always align in the same way. The value system shifts, and this book serves as a kind of lament for the school from a bygone era for those who remember it, while offering insights into something different for those who have not had the opportunity to experience it but have read books about it. School, as both an institution and an intimate, emotional force, resides in each of us in its unique way. The passion—and even eroticism—found in teaching are not merely clever promotional strategies; they are a true delight to read about and witness, reflecting the genuine calling and dignity of the teaching profession.

The book is not written in scientific language; instead, it adopts a completely simple, accessible, and engaging style. For this reason, it can reach numerous readers, especially those who share the author’s passion for knowledge, conveying it, and discovering new ideas. The popularization of science does not diminish its value; on the contrary, it brings it closer and shares it with others. Isn’t that a significant scientific contribution? Sometimes, from such books that naturally draw on textbooks and scientific journals, we find inspiration, motivation, and

the impetus for new or revived ideas in our teaching work that we have either forgotten or conveniently suppressed.

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