

# THE SCHOOL'S EMBRACE

What is a school? We think, first, of a space, perhaps a simple one-room school in a village or countryside, or a more sophisticated organization, a building in which children are organized by age, ability, and area of study. But a school has only recently come to denote a place with walls, in which students are packed like sardines in a can, a school of studious fish. A school is more readily a way of organizing people and ideas; thus we have schools of art and thought, schools as university departments, and schools as abstract spaces of learning. It is in this sense that Milton called courts the “best school of best experience,” while Goldsmith thought “the world... the only true school of improvement.”<sup>1</sup> In Old French *escole* could mean a way of speaking, a state of being, a word of advice, or a cabaret.<sup>2</sup> To teach, *escoler*, could also mean to embrace and to seduce.<sup>3</sup> In less-erotic English, *to school* means to chastise, to teach by punishment,<sup>4</sup> though on the lighter side, a *school* can also be “a company of thieves or beggars” or a group of fellow drinkers in a bar.<sup>5</sup>

These tongues, like most European languages, draw their word for a place of instruction from Latin *schola*, itself derived from Greek σχολή, the primary meaning for which is “leisure, rest, ease.”<sup>6</sup> By extension, the word comes to mean a way of employing free time, which for the Greeks was learned disputation. The word had darker connotations in Greek as well: the plural σχολαί refers to “regiments of the Imperial guard,” while σχολεῖον can be a school or a place of burial.<sup>7</sup> Schooling thus represents both the intellectual excesses of leisure and the implements and results of violence. This ambiguity is reflected in Latin *schola*, which kept many of the Greek meanings and added its own: a *schola* could be a gallery for works of art, but *scholae bestiarum* denoted an amphitheatre where animals could be watched tearing each other to shreds.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the base meaning of σχολή is “a holding back,” descending as it does from the Indo-European root *segh-*, “to hold.” Thus, it is a distant cousin of German *Sieg* “victory,” of Siegfried and Hector, of *severity*, *perseverance*, and *calisthenics*, of *hectic* and *eunuch*.<sup>9</sup>

1 Oxford English Dictionary Online (Oxford, 2011) “school” n.1, 4.a.

2 A. J. Greimas, ed., *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français* (Paris: Larousse, 1997) “escole.”

3 Ibid., “escoler.”

4 Oxford English Dictionary Online, “school” v.1, 6.b., 6.c.

5 Ibid., “school” n.1, 6.b., 6.c.

6 H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) “σχολή.”

7 Ibid., “σχολεῖον.”

8 C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) “schola (scola).”

9 C. Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston: HMH, 2000) “segh-.”

## EMBRACE

*Irina Dumitrescu*

*Max Jorge Hinderer  
invited Irina Dumitrescu  
to contribute to this publication  
in his place.*

Let us begin with what seems like a typical school. The University of Poitiers, today a bureaucratic institution of learning like so many others, has its roots in imperial violence as well as education, and stands for both victory in war and the rigid practice of sexual



Birthplace of Michel Foucault, 10 rue Arthur Ranc, in Poitiers, France.

the Archangel Michael and Saints Catherine and Margaret floating above her, the sources of her prophetic urgings. A bench behind her is overturned, as if she had just leapt to her feet, and eleven masters sit and ponder her words, transformed into her students. The



continence. During the Hundred Years' War, Poitiers supports the Valois dynasty, and serves as Charles VII's administrative capital from 1418 to 1436.<sup>10</sup> The city is flooded with refugee intellectuals from Paris, now under Anglo-Burgundian control. While the University of Paris is peopled with doctors sympathetic to the English cause, theologians who will play a decisive though suspect role in subsequent events, the scholars in Poitiers receive a papal bull for the foundation of a new university in 1431 and a royal confirmation from Charles VII a year later. But before this, before the creation of the institution or its “schools,” the men who will make up this university give their most famous examination.

The year is 1429, and the place is the house of Master Jean Rabateau, the *auberge de la Rose*, on what is now the rue de la Cathédrale. A young woman named Jeanne with a tendency to hear voices and wear men's clothing has approached the French king and offered her assistance. Skeptical, he sends her to be interrogated by the theological doctors at Poitiers. A stained-glass window on the Église Notre-Dame-la-Grande offers an idealized portrait of the proceedings: Jeanne, the tunic over her armour embroidered with fleur-de-lis as golden as her halo, points knowingly to

questioning seems to be taking place in the church itself, giving no sense of the intimate surroundings of the *auberge*. For, after Jeanne la Pucelle had satisfied the Poitevin examiners (the “book of Poitiers” recording their questions and her answers has unfortunately been lost, but is rumoured to be hidden in the Vatican), she was due for another test. The queen's mother and her ladies carefully examine the virgin's “secret parts” and affirm there is no “corruption or violence.”<sup>11</sup> This is Jeanne's second schooling, a feminine embrace that assures she can fight like a man. Her next σχολεῖον will be at Rouen. Transferred from an English prison to the warm reception of the Inquisition, her condemnation fervently urged by the doctors of the University of Paris, she will temporarily forswear her voices, and fail her final examination.

If Jeanne's last school embodies the eristic and thanatotic urges already present in its Greek root, an earlier medieval clerk was schooled in the French and English senses of the word: seduced, disciplined, inebriated. His name is Guibert of Nogent, he is born in 1053 and loses his father at the age of eight months. Noticing the boy's intellectual gifts, his mother hires a grammarian to tutor him in Latin verse and prose. The tutor is at first

10 D. Clauzier, *Petite histoire Poitiers*, (La Crèche: Geste, 2009) 71.

11 R. Pernoud, *Joan of Arc* (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 59.

unwilling, but a visionary dream in which the young Guibert kisses his face repeatedly convinces him to take the job. And, indeed, little Guibert does fall in love with his teacher, with his stern moral purity, with the harshness of his school exercises. His teacher, for his part, is incompetent: a late learner of Latin, he has forgotten much of his education and makes up for it by mercilessly beating Guibert.

Guibert, even as a child, recognizes this, but it does not deter his devotion. One day, when his mother discovers the skin of his back puffed from blows and his arms blackened, she cries and declares he will no longer be educated. The child exclaims that he would rather die than stop his training. After all, what is he without his inept teacher? His master is so fully dedicated to his care that he has become the guardian of Guibert's body and soul. And the little boy loves him back: "I conceived much love for him in response, in spite of the many weals with which he furrowed my tender skin, so that not through fear, as is common in those of my age, but through a sort of love deeply implanted in my heart, I obeyed him in utter forgetfulness of his severity."<sup>12</sup>

Guibert's teacher is both absent father and absent God, deeply loved even as he lashes out to conceal his mediocrity, his nonentity. Perhaps this explains some of Guibert's later obsession with another absence, that of the eunuch. Thus his horrified fascination with Thomas, Lord of Coucy, who was said to hang prisoners by their testicles or by the

doctrine, but an encounter in a prison cell, on a pilgrimage, in a dream. It is a no-space where teachers speak with the voices of demons, demanding their students' kneeling subjugation, their fervent caresses, and their willing dismemberment. In her Inquisition, Jeanne d'Arc is asked if she ever "kissed or embraced Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret," and avows that she embraced them, that she felt and touched these saints whose guidance she would later, for a while, abjure. This is not to say that Jeanne was impudent, for, "asked what part she embraced, the upper or lower, she said it is more proper to embrace them below than above."<sup>16</sup>

As a community of people joined through their common pedagogy, the school is also an embrace across time. Here is the story of a second, less typical school. On a hot July day, I was pulling my suitcase up a dusty road to the center of Poitiers, cursing myself for not hailing a taxi at the train station. At the top of the hill, I turned onto the Rue Arthur Ranc, hoping to be on the right way to my hotel. I had one night to rest before my talk at the Centre d'Études Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale—at the University of Poitiers, of course. As I rolled my little valise along, sweat dripping off my brow, exhausted after twelve hours of train travel from Berlin and one bomb threat in Paris, I found my reward. My eyes, tired but curious, kept skimming the surfaces of the sun-greyled walls along my path until they stopped on a brown plaque: I was standing next to the birth house of Michel Foucault. On the other side of the door another plaque marked the

*Direction de la Protection Judiciaire de la Jeunesse* sees itself as a primarily educative body, offering a variety of services to its young wards: group housing with cultural, athletic and professional programs, home placements, and the "centre éducatif renforcé," in which small groups of juvenile delinquents are educated constantly and in all aspects of daily life, deliberately torn from their usual existence and brought into a space dedicated to their observation and the careful pedagogy of society's rules. The *Direction* is a "total institution," in Erving Goffman's phrase,<sup>17</sup> but one Foucault would especially adore, since its purview moves far beyond walls. For youths who have been incarcerated, the *Direction* offers a full curriculum of observation and socialization after the sentence has been served. It is penitentiary and university, asylum and panopticon. It is fitting, then, that this perfect modern classroom should inhabit the space where Michel's mother likely experienced both the agonies of labor and the ecstasy of his conception. It joins a constellation of pedagogical spaces in Poitiers: the *auberge de la Rose* where Jeanne endured her examinations, the Église Notre-Dame-la-Grande a few steps away where her results are inscribed in the stained-glass windows, the medieval houses where centuries of little Guiberts suffered and desired their teachers' philological ministrations, and two university dormitories where the newest generation of Poitiers' students awaken their minds and bodies—the Cité Jeanne d'Arc, and the Pôle Michel Foucault.



Ministry of Justice, 10 rue Arthur Ranc, in Poitiers, France.



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male organ, beating them until they died or promised him ransoms.<sup>13</sup> Thus also his tale of a pilgrim to Compostella who, sullyng himself with his illicit lover's sash, was compelled by the Devil, in the guise of St. James himself, to cut off his own member.<sup>14</sup> Guibert can leave the school of his childhood, but the pedagogy of blows seems to have marked itself permanently on his scholarly thought. Later, he will rail against the relics of saints, and especially against one cherished at Charroux Abbey, near Poitiers: the Holy Prepuce, or foreskin, of Christ.<sup>15</sup> The school, then, is not only a room or a

building's current inhabitant: the Ministry of Justice, and not just the Ministry of Justice, but that department of it responsible for the "judicial protection" of youth. Needless to say, despite my fatigue, despite my desperate need for a cool shower, and despite the bemused looks I received from passersby, I dropped my suitcase on the ground, threw it open, and pulled my camera out from under my conference clothes. No one would believe me without proof. For if the building at 10, rue Arthur Ranc did not exist, it would have to be invented, preferably in scribbled marginalia to a manuscript essay by Borges, lost deep in an archive in Austin or Buenos Aires. The

12 J. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 49.

13 *Ibid.*, 185.

14 *Ibid.*, 219.

15 *Ibid.*, 29–30.

16 D. Hobbins, *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 113–114.

17 E. Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1961).



“Depending on where one ends up as a free producer of art, procedures based on the hegemonic forms of division of labor are nothing other than a corset that forces one into a pre-given attitude. However, in contemporary, liberal societies such constraints are particularly difficult to see, and the majority of people are so caught up in what they are doing that the question regarding Why? is no longer posed. The dominant forms of division of labor are themselves aimed at a specific goal, and personal narcissism is anything but individual. It is structural. In relation to this, I consider it to be an especially important task as an artist, curator or producer of art to intervene in processes of institutionalized divisions of labor: to collaborate with people who do not come from the art world who see themselves in a position beyond the representational logic of the art system itself, in order to make clear that art exhibitions can primarily be a format, an expansive format to boot, which can contribute to the distribution of knowledge in a wholly functional way, and, ideally, even serve the production of knowledge and not merely be a creative spectacle of private enterprise. To a certain extent, an art exhibition has the same emancipatory potential as a school. In this regard, we know that school is most boring when everyone is doing what is expected of them within a liberal common sense: being clever, being creative, being representative, etc. However, the analysis starts to get interesting at the point when the punishment delights the person being punished the most and not the other way around. When I look at art and the precarious status of cultural producers at present, given that self-exploitation seems to be the rule, then it strikes me that a good starting point would be to go back to the beginning again with all the Whys? and Wherefores? In this respect, the story of Guibert of Nogent gives me the creeps.”

**Max Jorge Hinderer**

#### PASCAL'S WAGER

Let us then examine this point, and say, “God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? ... A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions ... “for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all.”

Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

— Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, No. 233.

**Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz** is a writer and cultural critic based in Berlin. He frequently contributes to international art magazines and publications. Currently he is working on a book about Hélio Oiticica's *Block-experiments in Cosmococa* (with Sabeth Buchmann) for the Afterall One Work Series and researching for a publication by Kunsthaus Bregenz about *Art and the Critique of Ideology after 1989*. As an independent curator he has worked in collective curatorial constellations and presented *TO SHOW IS TO PRESERVE—figures and demonstrations*, 2008 at Halle für Kunst Lüneburg e.V., and *The Potosí Principle*, 2008–2011 at Museo Reina Sofía Madrid, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin and MNA/MUSEF La Paz. In 2010, he presented a lecture on the latter for *With With: Everything but an Artist Talk* in Zurich. He invited Irina Dumitrescu to write a contribution for this publication.