

Unlikely Allies: Hilda Neatby, Michel Foucault, and the Critique of Progressive Education

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Hilda Neatby, the author of *So Little for the Mind*, which stirred up a national debate about education in the 1950s, finds an unlikely ally in Michel Foucault. Both believe that progressive education, grounded in scientific pedagogy, is a means of domination rather than liberation. Both trace its roots to the 18th-century Age of Reason, which, according to Foucault, gave birth to the “disciplinary society” and, in Neatby’s view, destabilized the balance between faith and reason. Although they are philosophically far apart (Foucault, a Nietzschean; Neatby, a Christian), they have a startlingly similar appraisal of the progressive school.

Hilda Neatby, l’auteure de *So Little for the Mind*, qui a suscité un débat national au sujet de l’éducation dans les années cinquante, trouve un allié inattendu en la personne de Michel Foucault. Les deux croient que l’éducation progressive, fondée sur la pédagogie scientifique, est un moyen de domination plutôt que de libération. Ils la font tous les deux remonter au Siècle des Lumières qui, selon Foucault, a donné naissance à la « société disciplinaire » et, selon Neatby, a rompu l’équilibre entre la foi et la raison. Bien que qu’ils soient de deux écoles de pensée fort éloignées (Foucault, un nietzschéen, et Neatby, une chrétienne), leur évaluation de l’éducation progressive est étrangement semblable.

At first glance, the intellectual partnering of Hilda Neatby with Michel Foucault seems improbable, if not perverse. At the time of his death in 1984, Foucault was one of the most famous intellectuals in the world. His books, notably *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Order of Things* (1973), *Discipline and Punish* (1979), and *The History of Sexuality* (1980), translated into 16 languages, made an enormous impact on the work of scholars. His influence continues to be felt in a wide range of disciplines — sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, politics, linguistics, cultural studies, literary theory, and education, to name a few. Hilda Neatby, on the other hand, has a reputation confined mainly to Canada. Her chief claims to fame were membership on the Massey Commission on the Arts, Letters and Sciences (*The Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*, 1951) and authorship of *So Little for the Mind* (Neatby, 1953), a polemic against progressive trends in education that stirred up a controversy when it was published; it sold

about 15,000 copies by 1975, the year Neatby died (Hayden, 1983, p. 34). While Foucault's fame continued to grow after his death, Neatby's reputation faded. Even in their professional and personal lives, the two individuals could scarcely have been more different from one another. Foucault was a distinguished member of the Collège de France, Neatby a professor in the History Department at the University of Saskatchewan; Foucault, a sexual adventurer who died of AIDS, Neatby a devout Presbyterian spinster who expressed amazement at the sexual practices mentioned in Mary McCarthy's novel *The Group* (Hayden, 1983, p. 5).

Despite these disparities, there are startling convergences in their thought. Both are skeptical about the claims of modernity and call into question the allegedly "liberating," "humanitarian," and "democratizing" benefits of the 18th-century Age of Reason. Both view progressive education, based on the principles of psychology and scientific pedagogy, as essentially an instrument of power and domination, rather than emancipation and enlightenment. Foucault is content to trace the effects of power and describe its operations; he makes no moral judgments because he believes such statements are meaningless. He sees power and knowledge as two sides of the same coin, inseparable from one another. There is no such thing as disinterested knowledge that can be used to call power to account. His critique of Western civilization is relentless and complete. Neatby, by contrast, wants to save Western civilization from itself by restoring a proper balance between reason and faith. She believes that we have strayed from the true path and need to find our way back. For Foucault, there never was a path; the categories of reason and faith are artificial constructs that bear no relationship to truth.

Comparing Neatby and Foucault deepens our understanding of the meaning of progressive education and throws new light on the place of *So Little for the Mind* in the history of Canadian educational thought. Pigeon-holed as a conservative, "back-to-the-basics" critic of new trends in education, Neatby emerges as a thinker who anticipated certain post-modernist themes and applied them to an analysis of the philosophy and practice of education. Seen in this perspective, her thought acquires a depth and sophistication that it has not always been accorded. *So Little for the Mind* can be read as an extended commentary on the idea, later developed in Foucault's work, that what looks like progress in the social sciences and pedagogy is really "an insidious new form of social control" (Miller, 1993, p. 113).

Foucault (1979) presents a revisionist interpretation of the penal reforms of the 18th and 19th centuries in *Discipline and Punish*, the book closest to Neatby's concerns. The banning of torture and public executions in favour

of gentler punishments is usually interpreted as evidence of the advancement of civilization, signifying a more humanitarian approach to the treatment of criminals. Foucault calls attention to the displacement that occurred in the object of the punitive operation — no longer the body, but the soul. Punishment now acted “in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (Foucault, 1979, p. 16). It was “intended not to punish the offence, but to supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies . . .” (p. 18). The punishment bore with it “an assessment of normality and a technical prescription for a possible normalization” (p. 21). Moreover, “humane” penal procedures became entangled with a new corpus of knowledge, a science of penology, whose purpose was the “management of the depths of the human soul” (Rose, 1990, p. 7).

Foucault extends the argument from the prison to other prison-like institutions where discipline is administered: the insane asylum, barracks, factory, and school. “The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micro-penalty of time (lateness, absences, interruption of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behavior (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body (‘incorrect’ attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency)” (Foucault, 1979, p. 178). Of central importance to the disciplinary regime was the examination, a technique that combines surveillance with normalizing judgment. The procedure became standard practice in everything from psychiatry and the diagnosis of disease to the hiring of labour. It made possible the science of pedagogy by placing school-children in a “field of surveillance” and “engag[ing] them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (p. 189). The individual is transformed into a “case,” who may be “described, judged, measured, compared with others” and who has to be “trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (p. 191). Foucault asserts that these disciplinary techniques created something new in human history. Previously, ordinary individuality, “the everyday individuality of everybody . . . [had] remained below the threshold of description.” Now “the threshold of describable individuality” had been lowered, and this description was used as “a means of control and a method of domination” (p. 191).

Foucault finds in the *Panopticon*, Jeremy Bentham’s 19th-century architectural design for the ideal prison, an apt metaphor for the disciplinary society:

. . . at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open into the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided

into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. (Foucault, 1979, p. 200)

The inhabitant of the cell can be seen by the supervisor, but the side walls prevent communication with other prisoners. The inmate does not know whether he is being observed at any given moment, but he is always sure that he may be so. The person who is constantly fixed in the gaze of the supervisor begins to internalize the mechanism of power to which he is subjected. He becomes his own jailer.

The Panopticon is also a laboratory. It can be used to carry out experiments, modify behaviour, and correct undesirable attributes. Those in the tower (metaphorically speaking) can experiment with medicines, try out different punishments, employ various techniques, and conduct research. "The Panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them" (Foucault, 1979, p. 204), the very model of the human sciences. The Panopticon must be understood, not as a "dream building," but as "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" (p. 205). It has diverse applications: reform of prisoners, treatment of patients, instruction of schoolchildren, confinement of the insane, supervision of workers, and rehabilitation of the unemployed. The aim is not to repress, censor, or put down; it is to "strengthen the social forces — to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality . . ." (p. 208).

Foucault (1979) suggests that the mechanisms of discipline extended more widely in the modern period to the point that Western society was penetrated through and through with disciplinary methods. The growth in the number of institutions, such as prisons, asylums, and schools, testified to this, as did the increase in the level of surveillance and supervision beyond the walls of institutions. Schools were not content to train docile children, but had also "to supervise the parents, to gain information as to their way of life, their resources, their piety, their morals" (Foucault, 1979, p. 211). The Panoptic gaze fixed on adults in their own homes, detecting "whether they know their catechism and the prayers, whether they are determined to root out the vices of their children, how many beds there are in the house and what the sleeping

arrangements are" (p. 211).

Foucault (1979) speaks of the emergence of a "disciplinary society" (p. 209), an "indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism' " (p. 216). "Much more than architectural ingenuity, it was an event in the 'history of the human mind' " (p. 216). This conclusion leads him to a reinterpretation of the Enlightenment. The 18th century saw the establishment of formally egalitarian legal and political frameworks, embodying the concept of the "rights of man," expressed, for example, in the French Revolution and the American Revolution. But, for Foucault, the development and extension of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the dark side of the process, establishing a regime that took away freedom, rather than extending it. "The general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle was supported by these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines. . . . The 'Enlightenment,' which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines" (p. 222).

The word "discipline" is used here in two senses, referring both to punishment and to an organized body of knowledge. Foucault contends that the two meanings cannot be separated from one another, that they are two aspects of the same thing. Thus, the human sciences are heavily implicated in the disciplinary society. "The formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (Foucault, 1979, p. 224). The power exercised over inmates in prisons, patients in hospitals, pupils in schools, or workers in factories makes possible the disciplines of clinical medicine, psychiatry, child psychology, educational psychology, and personnel management. The knowledge gained thereby is then applied to prisoners, patients, schoolchildren, and workers to refine and multiply the effects of power, a process that in turn leads to further advancements in the various fields of knowledge. The end result is not more freedom, but an ever-more penetrating and pervasive control over the human mind, body, and soul.

And, although the universal juridicism of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law. (Foucault, 1979, p. 223)

From this perspective, the pre-Enlightenment, inhumane punishments — beatings, torture, dismemberment of bodies, hangings — were less invasive. They inflicted horrible pain on the body, but left the mind and

soul alone. Modernity, the human sciences, and progress brought with them the indefinite discipline of "interrogation without end," "a file that was never closed, the calculated leniency of a penalty that would be interlaced with the ruthless curiosity of an examination, a procedure that would be at the same time the permanent measure of a gap in relation to an inaccessible norm . . ." (Foucault, 1979, p. 227). With respect to education, the methods of the old-fashioned school — strapping, detention, forced memorization, and relentless drill — at least were not presented as being something they were not. Power relations were naked and obvious. As Foucault points out, the educational psychology that was supposed to correct the rigors of the traditional school does no such thing. "We must not be misled," he writes, "these techniques merely refer individuals from one disciplinary authority to another, and they reproduce, in a concentrated or formalized form, the scheme of power-knowledge proper to each discipline . . ." (pp. 226–227).

Although Foucault gives little attention to the specifics of pedagogy and schooling, other scholars have taken up the task of applying his ideas to the education system. Indeed, the project has given rise to a minor academic industry. A leading practitioner, Thomas Popkewitz, has written and edited a small library of books devoted to elaborating the Foucaultian idea that "particular systems of pedagogical ideas and rules of reasoning" are "the effects of power in schools" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 32; see also Ball, 1990; Popkewitz, 1991; Popkewitz, 1993; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999; Popkewitz, Franklin, & Pereyra, 2001). Much of this material, not only that of Popkewitz but of others working in the same vineyard, is so clogged with jargon that it is almost impossible to read. With due diligence, however, the patient reader can extract bits of information and detect the flow of the argument.

Of particular value for the purpose of this discussion is the application of Foucault's theories to early-20th-century discourse about childhood, the state, and schooling. The pedagogical science of the day, influenced greatly by the ideas of American philosopher/psychologist John Dewey, aimed to create self-disciplined, self-motivated individuals capable of participating effectively and co-operatively in democratic society. Popkewitz (2001) maintains that these pedagogical discourses "connected the scope and aspirations of public powers with the personal and subjective capabilities of individuals" (p. 314). Social progress required the development of a "New Man," a new secular citizen who "would shed the dispositions of religious and inherited social order and replace them with a subjectivity [how one thinks, feels, and acts] that embodied the obligations, responsibilities, and personal discipline embodied in liberal

democratic ideals. The school was a central institution in this form of governance" (p. 318). The state targeted the "self" as a "site of administration" (p. 318), and the social sciences, especially psychology, were enlisted to carry out the project by "giving focus to the micro-processes by which individuals become self-motivated, self-responsible, and 'reasonable'" (p. 321). "Developmental and learning theories opened the child's behavior, attitudes, and beliefs to scrutiny, such that they could be acted upon to effect cognition and affect" (p. 323). The key point is that progressive schooling constituted a power relation — the social administration of the soul.

Popkewitz draws a parallel between Dewey, who wanted to mould children so that they were fit to live in a democracy, and Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and contemporary of Dewey, who tried to devise a pedagogy to instill in Soviet children the attitudes proper to a Communist society. Dewey visited Russia in the 1920s at a time when many Soviet intellectuals considered his philosophy of pragmatism (the notion that assertions are to be evaluated by their practical consequences and bearing on human interests) of some value in advancing the revolution (Popkewitz, 2001, pp. 315–316). The argument here is not that the Soviet Union is the same as the United States, but rather that disciplinary mechanisms were implicit in the pedagogies of both Dewey and Vygotsky. Both employed psychological techniques to measure, classify, guide, direct, and control the individual. Whether the exercise of power was good or bad is open for debate, but in both cases power was deployed. The individual was viewed as an object of "moral orthopaedics" (Foucault, 1979, p. 10) in need of being normalized and made into a well-adjusted, productive unit of society. Moreover, the power of progressive educators, whether of the American or Soviet variety, was rooted in "objective" science and was, therefore, of a totalizing nature that had a tendency to drive out alternative claims to authority based on religion, tradition or parental wisdom. The child was at the mercy of the educational experts; they knew best.

Hilda Neatby attacks this state of affairs with deft sarcasm and sharp logic. "Progressive education in Canada," she writes, "is not liberation; it is indoctrination both intellectual and moral" (Neatby, 1953, p. 42). "Experts talk constantly of training for leadership, but their whole system is one of conditioning for servitude" (p. 236). In support of her bold assertion, she cites chapter and verse from curriculum guides, programs of study, and pronouncements of professional educators. She does a better job of applying Foucault to progressive education than does Popkewitz, even though there is no evidence that she read Foucault or had heard of him (*Discipline and Punish* was first published in French the year she died.)

A good deal of the commentary on *So Little for the Mind* focuses on particular aspects of her critique: the failure to teach the three Rs; automatic promotion of pupils from one grade to the next; inordinate attention given to extra-curricular activities; lack of liberal learning among professional educators; the breakdown of discipline in the classroom; time-wasting activities in teacher-training colleges. Commentators tend to shy away from her main and seemingly most outrageous charge: progressive schools are *totalitarian* in nature; they condition students for *servitude*. She means what she says, and Foucault helps her make her case.

Neatby objects strongly to the unconcealed ambition of the progressive school to intervene in all aspects of the life of the child. This tendency was an outgrowth of Dewey's pronouncement: "education as life and as growth" (Neatby, 1953, p. 55), and the "whole child goes to school" (p. 8). Neatby agrees that, of course, "education is life," but that doesn't mean the school should do everything. She worries that parents are shoved aside or treated in a patronizing manner. School officials in pursuit of information intrude upon the privacy of the family. The role of parents, it would seem, is "to produce the child, provide him with food, clothing and shelter, and then furnish the guidance officer, voluntarily or involuntarily, with such information as he needs for making his decision" (p. 211).

Neatby quotes with dismay from the British Columbia *Programme of Studies for Junior High Schools*, 1948:

When difficulties arise it is the underlying cause that should be discovered and treated rather than the outward symptoms. In other words, the treatment should fit the pupil and not his act alone. The same misdemeanour may have an entirely different significance when committed by two different persons. This is why it is so futile to adopt fixed rules for dealing with specific faults. Successful treatment depends upon thorough knowledge of the case. Teachers should derive a lesson from established clinical practice and make a thorough study of the pupil, his background and history, before deciding upon any course of treatment. In the more difficult cases this will mean studying the home conditions and consulting the parents and others in the school and outside it who have knowledge of the pupil which might prove important. Ordinarily it is the part of wisdom to postpone conference with the pupil until . . . there has been time for careful consideration of the available facts and a reasoned decision as to the most promising kind of treatment. Careful notes should be kept of all the data secured and also of the course of treatment and its results. (Neatby, 1953, pp. 211-212)

This is what Foucault labels the "penitentiary" approach, a method that substitutes for the convicted offender, the "delinquent" (Miller, 1993, p. 230). It is not so much the delinquent's act as his or her life that is subject to discipline and correction. The point of concern is not the offence as such, but rather the deviation of a personality from the norm. Foucault

contends that over the course of the 19th century prisons transformed punitive procedures into a "penitentiary technique," which then "haunted the school, the court, the asylum" as well as the prison (Foucault, 1979, p. 299). Neatby has an intuitive understanding of the process, for immediately following the long passage quoted above, she writes,

The procedure is undoubtedly appropriate for the inmate of a lunatic asylum or a specially organized penal institution. In a school, however, where the children are given the freedom properly accorded to rational individuals, justice demands that each one be equally responsible for his overt acts and that from each be exacted approximately equal penalties, if penalties are needed. (Neatby, 1953, p. 212)

The importation of the penitentiary technique into the school offends her sense of respect for children as moral beings with minds of their own.

Another aspect of the totalizing agenda of the progressive school that Neatby abhors is the effort to teach children correct "attitudes." They are subjected to relentless pressure to accept the approved values of "democracy," "social living," or "effective living." The "social attitudes" to be "constantly nurtured," states the Saskatchewan *Programme of Studies for the High School*, 1950, are "cooperation and social concern; spirituality; honesty and integrity; appreciation of . . . the finer aspects of life" (cited in Neatby, 1953, p. 49, truncation in original). Teachers are not so much teaching English literature, natural science, or history as they are "condition[ing] little boys and girls so that they will grow up to be orderly, well-adjusted, but progressive and forward-looking citizens . . ." (p. 119).

The teacher arranges the facts so that they lead to the politically correct result. Neatby cites the Ontario high school curriculum guide for world geography, which requires pupils to gain "a sympathetic understanding of other peoples," and then she asks, "Are the teachers to tell them nothing that might detract from this sympathy?" (Neatby, 1953, p. 167) The Ontario social studies course (grades 7 to 10), a mishmash of anthropology, sociology, economics, and history, has as one of its chief aims to show that democracy is the crowning achievement of civilization. Neatby remarks that such a mangled approach to history does no real good to the cause of democracy. "If all that is desired is to say that democracy is good and absolute rule is bad, why not just say so in winning tones, and leave the history out? After all, in spite of generous assumptions, history offers no logical proof of anything . . ." (p. 168). She defends the right of the teacher to teach without being told what the students are expected to believe at the end of the course (p. 171).

Dewey recommends that students participate in group projects, the better to absorb the spirit of democracy and co-operative endeavour. He

puts forward the principle that children learn best when they solve a problem of their own devising and when the project involves manual activity (Neatby, 1953, p. 172). While the teacher may inspire the project, the children must accept it as "theirs." The Quebec *Handbook for Teachers*, 1951, advises, "The skillful teacher will set the stage as it were, in such a way that the pupils will accept the purposes and aims as their own" (cited in Neatby, 1953). "In short," Neatby observes, "their aims better look a lot like the teacher's" (p. 182), or in the words of "a perceptive child who had been exposed to the 'newer school practices': 'Cooperation means you gotta' " (p. 183). Neatby considers the manipulation and trickery practised in the progressive classroom an insult to the intelligence of the students. Dictatorship masquerades under the cloak of democracy, giving the latter a bad name.

She makes the same point about the progressive injunction that the teacher must constantly attend to the pupils' motivation, and at all costs refrain from forcing them to learn material they are not interested in. Dewey assumes that children are naturally curious about subject matter that is directly relevant to their day-to-day lives, but that abstract knowledge or information remote from their immediate environment is of much less interest or value to them. Thus, teachers are expected to employ various stratagems to awaken curiosity by showing pupils how school lessons relate to life outside the classroom. The Saskatchewan *Elementary School Curriculum*, 1945, suggests that the study of electricity should arise out of a "situation," such as the burning out of a fuse plug. Neatby (1953) writes:

It would not do merely to ask, "What is known about the nature of electricity? How is it produced and transmitted?" That would not "interest" Grade VII and VIII pupils. Instead the teacher must begin by surreptitiously shorting a circuit so as to blow out a fuse, and then exclaim: "Well, well, isn't that interesting? A fuse has blown! Doesn't it make you want to study electricity? Wouldn't you like to learn all about it, so that we can produce a play about the life of Edison?" What would happen if the pupils were honest and courageous enough to say, "No, not particularly," we are not told. (p. 193)

Neatby is repelled by the phoniness, the insincerity, and the attempt to conceal the exercise of power. Moreover, she is sure that students are canny enough to see through the elaborate ruses. The traditionalist teacher who required pupils to learn something and rebuked or punished them when they failed to do so, "showed a truer respect for them than those who regard them only as inert wax to be moulded with patience and skill" (Neatby, 1953, p. 201). The whole point of the modern school, as far as Neatby can see, is to assure that children do what they want to do or want to do what they are doing — the perfect image of a suffocating totalitarian

regime (p. 203). Neatby distrusts the progressives' repudiation of externally imposed discipline because she regards the alternative — contrived spontaneity and socially engineered conformity — as fraudulent and dangerous. Slick human relations management practised on the young is, in her opinion, a far more serious threat to democracy than the old-fashioned system of rules and punishments.

The progressive school insists that pupils feel good about themselves and that they never fail or fall short of meeting an absolute standard. The goal is to make school life as pleasant as possible, which, according to Neatby, leads to a uniformly low standard, easily obtainable by almost all. Progressive educators promote the lie that all children are equal, or almost equal, in ability. Democracy demands that this be true. Neatby states that children know full well that their capacities are not the same "and, if they were not so indifferent, would doubtless be highly diverted at this elaborate adult conspiracy to conceal the facts of life" (Neatby, 1953, p. 332).

And what of the children who fail to absorb the correct democratic and co-operative attitudes, the ones who are incompletely socialized? The Saskatchewan *Elementary School Curriculum Guide*, 1952, recommends that the teacher keep a record of the pupil's progress.

Anecdotal notes are possibly the most reliable. The teacher observes the behavior of the students in the classroom, on the playground, and in places away from the school. She records behavior incidents which she believes are indicative of the pupils' attitudes, interests, and appreciations. These anecdotes are collected from time to time, and are usually written into the cumulative record of the students. From these notes the teacher makes estimates of progress. (cited in Neatby, 1953, p. 221)

Here we have, Neatby says, "the vision of the coming police state." The Panopticon comes to the playground. She avows that no self-respecting teacher would consent to this type of surveillance of his or her pupils. Those who do might as well "hire out their work to an eager little band of spies and *agents provocateurs*" (p. 221).

Neatby's accuses educational experts of having "magnified . . . [their] office" (Neatby, 1953, p. 55) to the point where they become totalitarian in their approach to schooling. The remedy is for schools and teachers to "back off," to give up their mission of socializing the whole child, and to try to do one thing really well: feed the child's mind. This would open up some space, give the pupil relief from the unrelenting gaze of the school, and make room for the home, church, and other organizations to exercise influence over the child's development. Neatby does not consider the possibility that these agencies, too, can be taken over by social-science-driven disciplinary mechanisms. This is Foucault's nightmare — there is

no escaping Panopticism. Neatby's vision is not as dark.

She holds that intellectual training is liberating in a way that "socializing" is not. The child who learns the basic skills of reading and writing is empowered; he has more freedom than the one trapped in illiteracy or semi-literacy. Progressive educators continually make excuses as to why, after 12 years, a high school graduate cannot write a sentence, much less a paragraph. It is impossible to teach such skills, they say, because now everybody goes to school, not just the elite as in the old days. Or it is not important because grammar and spelling are overrated as "life skills." Or it is actually being done; the evidence to the contrary is anecdotal or based on shoddy research. Neatby's point is that schools might do a better job of the three Rs if they stopped trying to do everything and focused on giving pupils the basic tools required for self-education.

Secondly, she asks that children be expected to master a well-defined and systematically organized body of knowledge — the despised "facts." She rejects what she calls the false antithesis between learning facts and thinking about them, between content and process. How can a child think without facts to think about? One might as well say, she writes, "The important thing is not to consume food, but to digest it" (Neatby, 1953, pp. 44–45). Facts, even those learned by memory work or the rote method, provide material for thought and a starting point for critical thinking. Moreover, the mastery of a field of knowledge is intrinsically empowering. It gives students the confidence that they know something and that they have the ability to refute statements, if only inwardly, they know to be false. They have a foundation for standing up to the teacher, who must bow to the facts, if only in the child's mind. When the facts are disdained and replaced with vague understandings, cloudy generalities, and correct "attitudes," the teacher must always be right.

Neatby states repeatedly that the progressive educator's fascination with process at the expense of content does children a terrible disservice by depriving them of a rich, full, and intellectually rewarding curriculum. They are cut off from "any real enjoyment or understanding of the inheritance of western civilization" (Neatby, 1953, p. 16). "The material which would enable the individual to work out his salvation [what Foucault would call alternative discourses, 'the best of our civilization in literature, science, history, art'] is practically withheld in order that he may be made more receptive to the ready-made solutions that are handed out" (p. 59). Neatby demands that the teacher not have exclusive control over the flow of information and not pre-select the facts so that they lead to the right conclusion, however laudable it might be ("democracy," "tolerance," "the importance of sharing"). The central purpose of formal education is "to

dispel the ignorance that leaves one helpless" and "to train the mind for control and power" (Neatby, 1954b, p. 12). By giving students access to the intellectual and cultural heritage of Western civilization, obliging them to master a coherent body of knowledge, and making sure that they can obtain meaning from the printed page and express themselves clearly and effectively, the teacher confers power on the student. Education is liberation, not therapy. Education interpreted as conditioning leaves the young "weak from lack of nourishment and blind from want of vision" (Neatby, 1953, p. 125).

Neatby offers one other suggestion to promote the power and freedom of the individual — the curtailment of Dewey's cherished group work and shared activities. Some group activity is fine, but it should be kept within strict bounds. "In the enthusiasm for joint activity, how easy it is to forget that thinking, if it is done at all, must be done alone! All real mental training is an individual process. There is common ground on which rational minds can meet, but each must find its own path there" (Neatby, 1983, p. 234). She admires those individuals, who without denying their membership in society, stand alone — "the genius, the martyr, or perhaps just the eccentric or the crank" — all those who endure solitude "in order to witness to what they thought they saw" (Neatby, 1954b, p. 47).

In the last chapter of *So Little for the Mind*, Neatby asks the question: Why and how did the sorry state of affairs embodied in the progressive school come to pass? She knows it is not all John Dewey's fault. He is but a symptom of a deeper ailment. Like Foucault, she locates the root of the problem in the 18th-century Enlightenment. Foucault argues that the supposedly humane and progressive character of the Age of Reason masked a dark side that gave rise to the "disciplinary society." Neatby posits that the Enlightenment's too-exclusive "worship of reason" produced disastrous consequences. "As a result," she writes, "in the twentieth century some two hundred years after the 'enlightenment' we encounter the new barbarism" (Neatby, 1953, p. 316). "What is needed is a renewal of faith and a renunciation of the false rationalism which implicitly denies the power of faith for good or evil in human society" (p. 324). This statement correlates with her repeated insistence that one of the main purposes of education is to bring students into contact with the heritage of Western civilization, which she describes as a product of Judaic morality, Christian love, Greek philosophy, Roman law, and modern humanism. The problem is that undue emphasis has been placed on the last term in the list. Modern humanism, taken by itself, is *not* liberating; the unfettered human sciences lead not to freedom, but to enslavement.

On this point, she is in agreement with Foucault, but then they part

company. Foucault merely describes and dissects power relations; he makes no comment as to whether the exercise of power in any particular case is good, bad, or indifferent. His presentation of the Panopticon as a metaphor for the disciplinary society is brilliant, but his philosophy, which is essentially Nietzschean, does not permit him to criticize it on rational grounds. He does not think there is any such thing as reason and truth in any fixed, absolute sense. Nor does he think, for that matter, that there is any such thing as "humanity" in any fixed, absolute sense. In his conclusion to *The Order of Things* he predicts that the normative ideal of "man" will soon be "effaced," "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault, 1973, p. 387). His rejection of the foundations of Western civilization is complete and profound. It is almost comical to see educational experts attempting to extract some kind of progressive lesson from Foucault. Apparently they do not understand how subversive he is. As far as Foucault is concerned, those who are subordinated or oppressed may deploy power against the power being exercised upon them, but they have no good or rational basis either to do so or not to do so.

This is very far from the intellectual world of Hilda Neatby. She affirms the worth of Western civilization taken as a whole and seeks to rescue it from the distortion that has occurred because of the importance given to one aspect of it. It seems doubtful that she can make her case on rational grounds alone. In a letter to Frank Underhill written shortly after the publication of *So Little For the Mind*, she said that she thought she could, but that "it seemed to me insincere to write seriously about the most serious of subjects without making clear my own convictions. At the same time I was most anxious to make a purely rational case" (Hayden, 1983, p. 34). She may have been anxious to, but she did not. In her other essays, it is evident that as soon as the argument "hits the wall," that is, each time she comes to define the irreducible essence of education, she invokes the transcendental. In "The Group and the Herd," she borrows Matthew Arnold's formulation that the social motive for education is "to make reason and the will of God prevail" (Neatby, 1954b, p. 41). In *The Debt of Our Reason*, she quotes Sir Thomas Browne to the effect that man in exploring the wonders of the world is "paying the 'Debt of our Reason we owe unto God, the homage we pay for not being Beasts'" (Neatby, 1954a, p. 3). The God she is talking about is not necessarily the Christian God. She allows some latitude on this point, averring that it is difficult to conceive of humanity in other than a degraded state "apart from reason . . .; or even apart from the will of God if only in the sense of the power of the mystery of human destiny" (Neatby, 1954b, p. 46). It is her conviction that if God is dead, so is man.

She defines education in one passage as “the discovery that the world is more interesting than oneself,” (Neatby, 1953, p. 232) and elsewhere as “the gaining of a humble conception of the greatness of human nature and human society, and of the vastness and complexity of the universe in which its place is set. . . . It is learning the love of, and the pursuit of, perfection” (Neatby, 1954b, p. 37–38). Neatby displays an unmistakable reverence for knowledge that cannot be dissociated from reverence for God and His creation. She says that a teacher needs only two things: to love his subject and to love his students. All the rest will follow. This explains her criticism of Dewey’s narrow understanding of self-realization. The beginning of wisdom and freedom is to realize that the world is more interesting than you are, and to submit humbly to the greatness of God. The teacher is privileged to lead students “into the company of the great in history, in literature, and the arts; and into the mystery and the beauty of the world in which they live. Self-realization comes most surely by losing oneself for a time in the contemplation of something greater than and beyond oneself” (p. 25).

Neatby makes it clear that humility must not be confused with servility, docility, or passivity. Life is arduous, a struggle, nothing comes easily, and intellectual attainment is hard won. It demands “the intellectual equivalents of worship and dedication, the complete and disinterested devotion to an exacting discipline” (Neatby, 1954a, p. 21). This is one of her main objections to progressive education, which is too easy, too soft, too accommodating, allowing neither confrontation with failure nor challenge to greatness. “Happiness,” she writes in one of her most revealing passages, “is a by-product of effort and achievement. The purest happiness may be quite inseparable from pain” (Neatby, 1954b, p. 24). But at least pain is real. She writes to her sister that “Christianity is not very comfortable. It creates as many problems as it solves, but it has that quality of being alive which it is impossible to help associating with the truth” (Hayden, 1983, p. 20).

Hayden (1983) observes that it is too early to make a judgment about the originality of Neatby’s ideas because the intellectual history of her generation has not been written (p. 320). Dewar (1990) argues that her views were “not unusual in university circles of the post-war era” (p. 37). Ross’s (1989) doctoral dissertation places her writings in the context of educational debates occurring in the United States in the 1950s, as well as in the context of the conservative philosophical tradition in Canada. He suggests that her contribution was a “major re-statement” of the conservative position (p. 251), a statement executed with enough panache to spark a vigorous, though short-lived, national debate. This assessment understates Neatby’s achievement. Although it would be going too far to

say that she anticipates post-modernism in its entirety and delivers a pre-emptive strike, her work displays an acute understanding of what Foucault (1979) calls "the disciplinary society" (Foucault, p. 209). She criticizes the social sciences, especially psychology, at a time when most of her contemporaries in academia were uncritical enthusiasts (see Owsram, 1986). Her openly expressed religious faith, far from being a quirky "add-on" detracting from her reputation as a rigorous intellectual, is revealed as integral to her argument. She understood better than did most Canadian academics the gravity of the attack on Western civilization, and she mounted a vigorous, thorough defence.

Neatby's depiction of the product of the progressive school — "morally flabby, intellectually cloudy, and creatively sterile" (Neatby, 1953, p. 131) — bears a passing resemblance to Nietzsche's "last man." In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the philosopher wrote: "'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?'" thus asks the last man, and he blinks" (Nietzsche, 1966, p. 17). Nietzsche turns his back on Western philosophy and Christianity, which he blames for enshrining a moral code fit only for slaves. To "become what one is" under such circumstances was no easy task. It necessitates a "will to power," a rediscovery of the chaos, violence, and cruelty buried within oneself. Nietzsche's "new man" or "super-man" is a creature of destructive creativity, a figure beyond good and evil, "uninhibited by the yearning of ordinary mortals for happiness, justice or pity" (Miller, 1993, p. 174).

Biographer James Miller (1993) portrays Michel Foucault as a man deeply under the influence of Nietzsche. The philosopher both provided intellectual inspiration and gave direction to Foucault's personal life, one that was consumed by the search for the Nietzschean "limit-experience" (p. 117). Miller gives an account of Foucault's fascination with the ecstatic mingling of pain and pleasure, his obsession with the sado-masochistic eroticism of the San Francisco leather scene of the 1970s and early 1980s, his deliberate flouting of AIDS warnings, and, finally, his death from the disease in 1984. Miller discovers something strangely heroic in what he calls Foucault's Nietzschean quest. He summarizes the "ethical point of view" of Foucault's (1965) first major book, *Madness and Civilization*, as holding that "it is not immoral to be convulsed by singular fantasies and wild impulses: such limit-experiences are to be valued as a way of winning back access to the occluded, Dionysian dimension of being human" (p. 117). According to Miller, Foucault lived out what he wrote, heeding Nietzsche's invocation of primal energies as the only means by which man can transcend himself and "give birth to a dancing star" (p. 70).

Hilda Neatby, by comparison, seems to belong to a totally different world: prim and proper, naïve, living a sheltered, provincial life, restricted in her intellectual range, author of a minor book criticizing progressive trends in education. And yet the history professor at the University of Saskatchewan wrote a book about education that is grounded in contemplation of the fate of Western civilization, the relationship between faith and reason, the nature of humans, and the meaning of life. Her insights into the defects of progressive education run parallel to those of Foucault and are equally profound. A passage from *So Little for the Mind* brings one up short. Progressive educators, she writes, “have got out of the traditionalist rut, perhaps, but only to jog around a mysterious pragmatic circle, their eyes fixed on the mud beneath their feet because it is a real situation. The stars still shine over their heads but stars are under suspicion; there is about them more than a touch of the transcendental” (Neatby, 1953, p. 131).

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