

Erotic Study: Fortune, Baby-Talk, and Jazz

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My inability to study fills me with despair.

—William James, in a letter to G. Stanley Hall, on August 1, 1887

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INTRODUCTION

How is it that the ability to study comes and goes even as we long for it? If I desire to study then, according to conventional wisdom, all that is left is to *do* it. In schools “study!” is an often-heard command and “study skills” are techniques to be acquired in remedial classes for the (supposedly) less able. In this essay, I will investigate the phenomenology of study with the growing intuition that conventional understandings of study in schools and elsewhere are incomplete. Study cannot be a simple matter of will, volition,¹ or even learning, pure and simple. In addition to those things, study must also have something to do with the inarticulate, primal desire to be, to live, and to exist. To dwell. To be *present*. Study, like most things, cannot be wholly determined by a strong will, generated from a singular voluntary ego. In this essay, I hope to show that the art of study only comes through *eros*, desire, the desire for Desire.²

If the descriptions to follow are illuminating, then two points should become apparent. First, deterministic volition — what I will call “nonfortune” — does not rule the day when it comes to the art of study; fortune, chance, and uncertainty do. Second, study itself is an erotic force that comes and goes, but never leaves us altogether; it lingers in a way that is simultaneously preparatory and performative. In other words, despite our inability to execute it as a technique, study remains in our desire for it. This not only adds to conventional notions of study in schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy, it also describes an erotic dimension of study. Erotic study, then, is like other forms of *eros*: a wild thing, partly this and partly that, teeming with potentiality.

Emerging from this erotic description of study, we might begin to see a corrective suggestion to curricular and pedagogical ways of thinking about study that are inattentive to “the thing itself,” and only offer disenchanting, thin accounts of study. In place of purely voluntary or prescriptive accounts of study, I will describe study that exists erotically — artistically even! — living in and through desire, vulnerable to chance, the passions, and the unconscious. This should not only avoid certain well-known critiques of phenomenological methods but, more importantly, it should provide a lens into the aesthetic ontology of study, a crucial aspect of education and an all-too-often ignored assumption of schools and their curricula. The social consequences of ignoring these assumptions are well documented by our field.³ This essay hopes to show how the practice of phenomenology (that is, attempting to give thick descriptions of things, especially descriptions that are

attentive to and embedded in the arts) can provide an aesthetic, ontological foundation and practical suggestions for the praxis of study.

FORTUNE AND NONFORTUNE

Fortune. Fortune is an ontological designation, not an axiomatic, moral, or ethical one. When I wish someone I love “fortune” I am wishing that person “good fortune.” This is exactly what I mean when I tell my family, “Wish me luck!”: I am asking for *good* luck, not just any kind of luck. On its own, however, fortune (and its synonym, “luck”) simply is the case. Nothing more, nothing less. Lady Fortuna is not an ethical superstition; she is an unpredictable and unshakable reality. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre describes her as “that bitch-goddess of unpredictability,” and goes on to say that “we cannot dethrone her.”⁴ A fortunate life, then, is not a qualitative statement; it is neither good nor evil on its own. It just is. There is no disputing it: fortune cannot be qualified; it can only be suffered.

Nonfortune. Nonfortune is not the same as *misfortune*. Misfortune is a qualitative description of fortune; it is axiomatic, moral, or ethical. Nonfortune is a different thing. Whereas misfortune implies something like a bad influence or bad luck, nonfortune fundamentally lacks the ontology we find in fortune; it is the absence of fortune. Like fortune, nonfortune is not a good or evil, healthy or ill thing on its own. It simply lacks the ontological vulnerability to chance, randomness, and unpredictability. Literally, nonfortune is not-fortune. Therefore, a nonfortunate life is the exact inverse of a fortunate one. Nonfortune recasts the world in the image of a strange otherworldliness: predictability, certainty, the total exile of chance, potential, and hope.

The effect we might imagine from a nonfortunate life would be a sense of the world and an approach to it that would be quintessentially superstitious and deterministic. In other words, it would rely on things that are not in the world to determine worldly outcomes. Like a person who sees tarot cards, astrological signs, or standardized test scores as reliable reasons to feel secure about things and predict wagers on them, so too with nonfortune: it is certain to subvert the ontological uncertainty of fortune with certainty. It is an attempt to sterilize and domesticate beauty to the very edge of annihilation. Nonfortune is nihilistic and disenchanting.

Anyone who denies fortune and attempts to embrace nonfortune outright could only do so for reasons that would be extremely hard to imagine and intuit as beautiful, real, or true. It may be the case that some might seek consolation by pretending to escape reality altogether, but even they must at some point admit to this nonfortunate strategy. This may only be a failure of my own imagination, but I do suspect it is more than that. As far as I know, there is no place in the world where things are really and truly predictable or certain from the bottom up or the top down. Everything is filled with things that are elusive and excessive, that surprise, delight, and terrorize us — or remain mysterious. However, if someone holding to a nonfortunate view could admit to a certain amount of chance in things, she would nonetheless argue that the fortunate side of things is proportionally miniscule and unimportant when compared to the nonfortunate one.

This strange ideology of nonfortune is an attempt to guard against the inevitable winds of fortune. Yet the hubris of nonfortune is not a moral lesson; it is an ontological reminder of the fortune of nonfortune. Even while facing claims to certainty there are still ghostly whispers of death and fear of the unknown. This is not theoretical: anyone nowadays can see this in schools and society at large. In those ghostly voices we begin to realize that nonfortune is only the case because fortune begets it. Nonfortune is a fantasy born from the womb of fortune. Without the immovability of fortune in the world there would be no fearful reasons to want to tame or escape it. Nonfortune is a defensive and reactionary thesis that, to the person who endorses it, may seem to hold on to things that are true and real. But in its attempt to hold on to the true and real, nonfortune holds too tightly: it strangles, suffocates, and distorts the vulnerability of the world. It attempts to cage and domesticate the wild fecundity of things out of fear of mystery and the unknown.

Nonfortunate certainty could never be called foundational or universal. After all, if there was, were, or could be anything that we could regard as foundational or universal, it would be the ontological fortune of things. It is fortune then — not nonfortune — that shows a world that is sufficiently mysterious and unpredictable to be called foundational or universal. Yet, despite this fortunate unreliability of things, nonfortunate theories abound. (Again: this is evident in the politics and curricula of schools and beyond.)

Even after the grand randomness of science after Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Kurt Gödel, and Werner Heisenberg, among others, there is a disturbing trend to see a particularly nonfortunate form of scientific rationality as a way to neutralize or eradicate fortune altogether in social institutions — especially in schools. This is crystal clear in the proliferation of standardized testing. Standardized tests are considered to be effective ways to domesticate the wild mystery of education with the predictability of so-called “science.” (And, in many ways, they are!) Supposedly this ontological domestication will produce effects that vindicate the messianic gospel of modern compulsory schooling, and its ecclesial sponsor, the nation-state. Invariably, it contributes to a description of contemporary schooling that is predominantly, and problematically, superstitious, ideological, and deeply disenchanting.

It is for this reason that the dialectic between fortune and nonfortune should be revealing to this study of study: while the sometimes-overestimated “testing taboo” is well known these days — but all-too-often ignored by policy makers, to be sure — it is the preparation for, and performance of, these nonfortunate tests that should be equally alarming to us for ontological and aesthetic reasons, not moral or ethical ones.

Thus, fortune brings us back to the ontological question of study: *taking into account the fundamentality of fortune, what, then, is study?*

ON CONVENTION

Before offering concrete examples, a potential misunderstanding should be clarified. However critical I have been about conventional views of study, this

critique should not be taken too far. Since my reasoning is largely based upon conventional ways of thinking, it would be unwise to believe that all convention is useless here. After all, phenomenological objections do not rail against convention pure and simple. Rather than a facile, complete rejection of convention, a worthwhile apophatic phenomenological critique should reveal that the “conventional” thing is not sufficiently conventional (or *thingly*) to be taken at face value. Phenomenology cannot deface things gratuitously: it can only *unmask* to reveal the actuality and potentiality of a face.

For this reason, I think there are many aspects of study within the conventions of schooling that hold rich signs of a deeper, hidden reality of study. Time and time again I have seen a disfigured thing that still holds fundamental signs that remind me that the thing in question is *there*, at least in potentiality, despite how totally hidden it may appear at first glance. A thing can never depart from itself entirely. Thin forms of study cannot detach themselves completely from thick, erotic study. For this reason, no matter how deformed and disenchanting they may be, the conventions of study are not to be discarded: many of their subtle characteristics might simply be in need of radical recovery, of unmasking.

Keeping this view in mind, allow me to present two examples where I think we can see erotic study. As I move along, there will be many parts to these examples that mirror the conventions we find in the scientific testing-fetishes of schools, embedded in the poverty of “practice tests” and “study skills.” These signs are useful and complimentary, not troublesome or contradictory. Most notably, we will find practices of preparation and performance through memory and repetition that apply to both the erotic reality and its more common conventional (mis)understanding. In my view, none of these fairly conventional aspects of study should necessarily be abandoned as practices; they simply need to be seen as more than cheap masquerades. They need to be re-imagined and re-enchanting. That is what, in my view, the examples to follow possess that “study skills” classes lack. It is also what we find in William James’ despair on the occasion when he deceives us into thinking that he cannot study.

BABY-TALK AND JAZZ

Babies and jazz musicians have a lot in common. They are both trying to say something. Their ways of speaking are simultaneously preparatory and performative. It is this unity of preparation and performance that sets them apart as articulate examples of what I mean here by “erotic study.” Before illustrating the examples themselves, consider this preliminary formulation: *erotic study allows no distinction between preparation and performance.*

BABY-TALK

Years before formal instruction, infants begin to speak. There are wide variations from child to child, but certain aspects seem to be fairly constant. To begin with, long before formal speaking and imitative word and noise associations, and even before the earliest mimicry of infantile *echolalia*, there are purely acoustic prerequisites: bare vocal noises and sounds. A sign of life in a hospital delivery room is a

good, loud cry. Noise is also a sign that infants have the potential to speak vocally. Without the acoustic ability to make vocal noise, vocal speech is impossible (although the possibility for language remains). Perhaps it is for this reason that infants vocalize at random, for very unexplainable reasons. It often seems, at least to me, that these noises — low intonations, high intonations, rapid stutterings using the tongue or the hand, strong yells in echo-prone places, and more — are fascinating and experimental to them. This much seems to be true about baby-talk: it verifies the earliest, unconscious “am” of a person and mediates between that and the conscious existential “I am.”

This acoustic proto-speech is an event in which we can witness erotic study. I believe we can see erotic study in these sacred moments of infantile vocal experimentation. Prior to the events of speech and the ordering of language, there is a strange thing that happens with no direct instruction or technique and very questionable degrees of rationality and even consciousness. There is nothing other than what seems to be there to begin and end with. What is this first and last thing? The least we can say is *eros*, desire, the desire for Desire.

JAZZ

Consider a more developed example: mastering an instrument — in this case, the guitar. I focus on the mastery end of the spectrum to show that this notion of study is not only to be found in the earliest moments of life. Much like the effortless experimentations of a noise-making infant, a master guitarist plays with an organic wildness that is the hallmark of her craft. Without this wild, effortless character, this so-called “master” is discovered to be a fraud. And as much as it may seem that this mastery is gained from a self-directed program and routine of practice — which most certainly is a vital *part* of the process — the master will most likely describe the experience in reverse order.

To spend years of repetition, imitation, and experimentation on the physical space of a guitar’s neck, body, strings, frets, and so much more — using the finite limits of physical dexterity and technique; all the while remaining constantly in-process, never finished yet extremely proficient and confident — to do this is not to try to *possess* the instrument. A master guitarist is not trying to domesticate her guitar. This is why “mastery” is a misleading term: it is not so much that an expert guitarist has *mastered* the instrument, but that the instrument and the artist have become one. A true master of any instrument would likely describe the process as being possessed by something else, beyond the finitude of the person or the instrument: an intense *desire* for rich, communal love; a genetic *curiosity* about melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic colors and shapes; a religious *thirst* for beauty and magic; and many other things.

To “study” guitar in this way is not simply to take lessons. Many guitar masters never took lessons. (Wes Montgomery never did.) To study is more properly understood as to never stop taking lessons from everything, and simultaneously to perform and prepare during these abundant lessons. This may sound opaque, but if you listen carefully to a master musician warm up, you will hear the simplest practice

scales performed beautifully. The expectant chaos of a tuning orchestra is not the same thing as the ear-grinding wails of an amateur violinist. While playing the guitar — an instrument you cradle in your arms, like a child — the master guitarist cannot take that intimate posture for granted. It is said that Andrés Segovia once spoke these words: “Lean your body forward slightly to support the guitar against your chest, for the poetry of the music should resound in your heart.” The master guitarist never studies in the cold, isolated sense of routine practicing. At the same time, the master guitarist is always at study, a thick, warm, erotic, and endless form of study — even when the instrument is in its case and while someone else’s music plays.

To be more concrete, let us look to the bare fact of what happens. When music is played, any decent player can attest to this: what we call “music” is the product of a relational event where the player, the instrument, and the context itself — the other musicians, those who might be present and/or listening, the acoustics of the room, the muse, the ghosts of memories and desire — become one thing. In a more radical way, whenever the score is not predetermined, as in jazz improvisation, we find no line dividing the preparation from the performance. In a jazz soloist’s voice, we can literally see and hear, as in the infant mentioned before, erotic study. I say this for the following reasons:

In order to solo over a set of melodic and rhythmic changes, or even over a single, continuous note and rhythm (a “vamp” is the musical term), a jazz soloist cannot play willfully extracted memories from a previous lesson or isolated repetitions that are somehow disconnected from the past or present. If she did, her performance would be exposed as an amateurish façade. She relies on a thicker memory that is the sum total of things voluntary and involuntary, determined and free, that she has accumulated and somehow remembered — even if for the very first time. She absolutely *must* be present. This presence — to dwell in total, ecstatic excess — is the single most difficult, impossible thing to do. This is because one cannot *execute* presence; one can only *be* present.

She repeats things that simply are the case to her because she has been immersed in them for so long that they are present to her. Like a chef seasoning an entrée, she does not look at her instrument to measure out what she is doing. Her eyes are closed. She does not deliberate. Often there is no time to do so. She imagines and plays in a stroke. Sometimes, she plays nothing at all. Other times, she plays every note she can find — even ones that have never existed before. If she is right-handed, then her right hand’s fingers strike, pick, or pluck this string and then that one, in this and/or that certain way, phrasing according to this and/or that sense of rhythm; sometimes one at a time, other times in bold strokes or careful bunches, all depending on what she imagines and what the music requires to speak, to tell its story. The fingers on her left hand go from this fret to this other one, or rest in clusters together on different strings and frets (or on different strings on the same fret) to form chords, or leave the strings open: all of it in a fit of expression that is as new as it is old, as deliberate as it is random, as preparatory as it is performative. Whether she is willing to believe it or not, the form of life that sustains this rich experience requires the full

consideration of the voluntary and the involuntary with the constant variable of fortune always in and around it. By the way: this is not all to be found under dim lights and critical acclaim. Most of it is located in a rehearsal studio, a living room, or even in a daydream.

The artist — a cooing baby, the master guitarist, a curious physicist, the passionate teacher, a confused student, the tragic lover — knows how to perform/prepare through erotic study because, like Zarathustra, she understands that “Higher than love of the neighbor is love of the farthest and the future;” and declares with him, “higher yet than the love of human beings I esteem the love of things and ghosts.”⁵ Erotic study, then, is to be found in a jazz guitarist’s solo because it too, like baby-talk, can only come from those who love that ghostly thing, *eros*. And the love that this love begets reveals the person at study. We know love for reasons often inexplicable, ineffable, and mysterious to us, but we *can* say this much: erotic study — like other forms of being in love — cannot be either prepared or performed. It is always a preparation *and* a performance.

MEMORY AND REPETITION

What these two examples show is not exceptional to the conventions of and about “common sense” notions of study in schools and society at large. Erotic study is not altogether beyond what is ordinarily referred to as “study.” As we have seen in baby-talk and jazz improvisation, the acquisition of memory through experimental repetition is an ordinary and common trait of study. And for good reason: it works. That fact alone — the fact that memorization and repetition work — is a pragmatic, cautionary tale not to reinvent the wheel. If we take this warning to heart, then alluding to the aesthetic, ontological contours of erotic study will prove insufficient on its own. I must now describe how erotic study functions without a rash disposal of all conventional notions of study.

It would be a reactionary mistake to think that erotic study absolves a person from the need to do anything or that it gives license to do everything. At the same time, as I have described, it is also too simplistic to think that study can happen through a naïve, voluntary gesture of the will. As with most things, the answer lies elsewhere. Although I would not call this alternative a “middle way,” it does seem to recover what is true in both directions. Erotic study requires a more rigorous consideration of both memory and repetition.

MEMORY

“Remembering” can be quite different from “memorizing.” I can try to remember where I left my keys or I can experience memory by remembering something at random. I can even remember things that I desire not to remember or things I am not sure whether I have remembered or imagined for the very first time. Memorization, on the other hand, is not as multifunctional. And yet, there are times when knowing something by heart requires memorization. When we put semantics aside and move beyond this word or that one, I think we can begin to see that memory, in all its facets, is a thick thing that bears all the complexities of our bodies, (un)consciousness, and the world. For this reason, erotic study does not abandon memorization. Instead, it

thickens it up. We need to remember things through our weak exercises of will *and* from the depths of our repressed memories that go as deep as the unconscious. As described through the jazz guitarist, we remember with our *whole* being: our bodies, our minds, our souls, our desires, our desire for Desire...

The common distinction between short- and long-term memory is basic enough, yet both forms of memory assume that memory is an external, thin act of memorization. Erotic study does not favor short- or long-term memory because each misses the mark. To remember something in a thick way is fundamentally unquantifiable, deeply and ontologically embedded in *eros*. In fact, the memories that stay with us are always those that awaken desire. This cultivation of thick memory occurs through the usual process: repetition.

REPETITION

The world is on repeat. Repetition is the norm, not the exception. Things repeat, however unrepeatable those repetitions may be. For this reason, repeating ourselves is something we do all the time. We constantly repeat ourselves, which is why from year to year we are mostly recognizable to others and even to ourselves. Again: the world is repetitive. Although each repetition is uniquely situated, there is something *repetitious* about it nonetheless. Consequently, the sum of repetitions is a large portion of what we remember or recall. Other times, it is the *contrast* to the normative repetition of things that raises something to the surface of our memory. I will never forget when I saw the Rocky Mountains for the first time: literally, they rose above the surface of what I was repetitiously used to in my topographic vision of things. Despite this ever-presence of repetition, many treat it as exceptional instead of normal. This is surely an ontological mistake.

It is this link between thick memory and normal repetition that distinguishes erotic study from conventional study, without abandoning what is conventional altogether. While erotic study and conventional study both carry many of the same traces and signs, erotic study expresses a more accurate ontology — an ontology that recognizes the fortune of the world and the aesthetic improvisations of study. When we cultivate a thick memory within the normativity of repetition, we realize that in the end, *study is beyond our control*. For this reason, James' studious despair is more complex and instructive to us than we might think.

CONCLUSION

Despite his "inability to study," James' despair is potent with study, teeming with desire for it and the ghostly desire of study for him. It is a similar despair (also expressed in the exercise of writing) that has guided this essay's study of study. In short, there is no convention that can escape *eros*. Erotic study offers more than a way to pass a test: it is a way to be and exist within Being and among ghostly forces. To dwell. To be present. Erotic study offers us less than the grand mystery of education but more than the embodied existence of the human person. Erotic study mediates between the person and the world through the ghostly *eros* of desire.

In schools, the practice of erotic study is most obvious in the arts: in music, dance, theater, welding shop, and more. For one, they are *very* hard to standardize.

At their *core* they, like everything else, are brimming with fortune. If we want to recover this thicker sense of study in literacy and numeracy curricula, and in schooling in general, we might be well advised to begin looking for help in the arts — especially the art of teaching. There is much to be learned from the discipline and existential presence required to throw clay, get into character, find a blue note, and imagine the real. This act of looking for something, for the thing itself, is what phenomenology tries to do, again and again. In this sense, phenomenology becomes an artistic, descriptive tool for education, and the method for this erotic study of erotic study.

1. I am not using the term “intention” in this essay to avoid mistaking the phenomenological notion of intention (see, Edmund Husserl: *directedness*) with the analytic one (see, Michael Bratman: *plans*).

2. I am referring to *eros* within the phenomenological tradition, borrowing from Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of the “erotic phenomenon.” See Samuel Rocha, “A Return to Love in William James and Jean-Luc Marion,” *Educational Theory* 59, no. 5 (2009): 579–588.

3. See David Gabbard and Wayne Ross, *Education Under the Security State* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008). The canon of critical pedagogy and numerous other books show this too.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 94.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 173.

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