

THE UNCERTAIN ROAD

What is pedagogy after pedagogy? How do we teach when any hope for a system of teaching has been undermined? How does one walk when there is no road? Readers may recognize that last formulation from Antonio Machado's "Wanderer":

Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,

you make the road by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind
one sees the path

that never will be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road—
only wakes upon the sea. (83–85)

Even those unfamiliar with the poem will know the proverb it has spawned: We make the road by walking. The interpretation that produces this saying reverses the notion that principles should produce practice or that systems are the best way to address situations. To make the road by walking is to suggest that how produces what, or that what cannot be understood apart from how, or that the two are manifested together at the same moment. The road is created through walking, democracy through

action, education through teaching and learning. This praxis-oriented interpretation of Machado's point has certainly been reassuring to teachers, who are so often faced with disruptions to our best laid plans. Our designs need not be flawless, for we teach by teaching. Yet the poem seems to undermine this comforting interpretation. Machado suggests that the road is also unmade by walking. The path that trails behind the walker disappears. She may be able to perceive the path: "upon glancing behind / one sees the path," but it is a path "that never will be trod again," either by the walker addressed in the poem or, it seems, by any other. We might be reassured that we can see the road behind us, but Machado denies even this fleeting retrospection. He shifts his metaphor from the solidity of ground to the fluidity of water: "there is no road—only wakes upon the sea." Once again, the sea becomes a metaphor representing uncertainty. Machado's invocation of the waves offers a radical viewpoint on the nature of experience. Looking back, his walker is left to grasp at whitecaps, moments of emergence that quickly tumble back into the grey expanse. It is not just that we make the road as we go, but that the vision of the road we have left behind vanishes as quickly as it comes.

Though he was not talking about pedagogy, Machado's poem nevertheless warns the would-be teacher-reader against two kinds of pedagogy hope—one born of deduction and the other born of induction. We can neither apply principles (i.e., plan the road and then execute the plan), nor, it seems, form future plans (i.e., gather our experiences, remove them from the situation in which those experiences originally unfolded, and then apply them to some later situation—which ends up being another form of deduction). The former has usually been the greater source of trouble for composition. Witness the way in which process's early emphasis on experimentation

and unfinishedness eventually hardened into a “pre hoc” algorithm. But the poem also suggests that post hoc assembly is no more reliable. Our experience of walking one road—which vanishes behind us—cannot be generalized to some other road. Nor can our road be left behind for someone else to walk. Postpedagogical arguments also resist pedagogy from this direction. Invention is too particular, too situated, too surprising; the attempt to learn from walking a road is like trying to capture the waves of the sea.