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**The Tightrope of Desire: Lessons from Oscar Browning**

by

Mark McBeth

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**Abstract****The Tightrope of Desire: Lessons from Oscar Browning**

by

Mark McBeth

Adviser: Professor Sondra Perl

Oscar Browning's educational life succinctly (both as student and tutor) exemplifies nineteenth-century public school life and, in addition, offers a rich narrative in which to discuss and analyze the act of teaching, especially the complex dynamics of student-teacher relationships. His learning narrative and subsequent teaching experience illustrate an aspect of Victorian educational contexts and ideals as well as burgeoning practices of progressive pedagogy. From his work with the elite pupils of Eton and King's College to his later directorship of Cambridge's teacher training college for working-class men, Browning's approach to tutoring and classroom practice inform and enrich the discourse about nineteenth-century education. His alternative viewpoints, eccentric personality, and flamboyant behavior further complicate (and enliven) pedagogical issues that touch upon desire in the classroom. His now-remote teaching life offers a context in which to discuss tutor-pupil (teacher-student) relationships and allows educators to revisit and revise issues regarding learning pleasures. By reviewing Oscar Browning's educational narrative along the blurry contours of his desire, this dissertation uncovers a fertile place to discuss issues of pedagogy. It reveals a teaching and learning that for both students and teachers engenders pleasure.

*Back from that void I shrink in fear,  
And child-like hide myself in love:  
Show me what angels feel. Till then,  
I cling, a mere weak man, to men*

Mimnermus in Church, William Johnson Cory

For  
Sanaw in NYC  
&  
Keith in London

## Foreward/Acknowledgments

The study of learning is a study of how individuals attach, displace, forget, and disengage knowledge. And with these moves, the study of learning is inseparable from the study of love. (31)

Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*

I write my foreward and acknowledgments together because I need to thank people for their support as I concurrently show how their teaching perpetuated my learning desires as well as ensured my learning pleasures. I'm guessing that a lot of Ph.D. candidates have a desire to "get done," but don't necessarily receive much pleasure in "doing" it. I don't want to overly rose-color this process; acquiring the license to "smartness" can be trying. Yet, for the most part, I enjoyed this process; sitting in libraries, poking through archives, and finding the right words can be a very rewarding intellectual endeavor. In this opening statement, revealing some of the aspects of my dissertation process while expressing my gratitude discloses what sparked my interests in this project, while also acknowledging who and what kept them aflame.

For nine years, I have climbed the hill at 138th Street in Harlem to the City College of New York, where I have worked in various capacities in the writing program. The hill leading to the college is steep, frequently congested, and always littered with garbage. Increasingly, this incline has become a metaphor for the

college lives of urban students. Learning while working and living in the city can be difficult. It can also be messy and exhausting, especially for those students whose financial situations leave them little time for repose -- let alone, thinking. Moreover, during a period of particularly critical scrutiny about the quality of students at City College, when the school's budgets have decreased and its educational polemics have increased, this climb to a college education has presented quite an uphill challenge.

Yet, even under duress, I have seen students get so wrapped up in their learning that they become obsessed with their projects; I will even dare to say, they become enraptured. As a college instructor and administrator, I've attempted to make their path more tolerable and, frankly, more pleasurable. I want them to enjoy their learning process -- enjoy it so much that they desire more of it. When learning situations are structured so that students are given ample opportunity to engage in their projects and succeed, they will strive to learn no matter how dire their educational situations. I keep going back to the questions: What makes students want to learn? What creates their intellectual hunger? And, as a instructor, I ask myself: How can I unleash these students' natural curiosities and their continued need to explore? The word "desire" appears frequently in educational articles. . . students' desire . . . teachers' desire . . . institutions' desire. There is a lot of wanting in education, yet no one really ever defines or investigates the meaning of desire in terms of learning. We assume that we know what learning desire is, but how does desire occur in the classroom, and how does it help to make meaning there?

I decided to explore these questions by researching the life of a Victorian teacher who seemed to create this type of desirous pedagogy. By piecing together

letters, lectures, publications, gossip, memoirs, newspaper articles, photographs, student writing, and biographies, I reconstruct the teaching life of Oscar Browning. By reexamining his pedagogy, I uncover the intricate dynamics of classroom relationships and how they are created. By recovering mid-to-late pedagogical ideals and practices through Browning, I open a discussion for teachers to reflect upon their pedagogical practices and roles as educators. Ultimately, my final product is less a historical portrait of Oscar Browning and more a portrait of his pedagogy

This process has likewise offered me the opportunity to reflect upon my own teaching performances and learning behaviors. In doing so, I realized how much I relied on the help of others. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire stated, "[N]o one ever teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world" (67). It has been by watching students work together, studying with my peers, talking with my professors, and collaborating with my colleagues that I have recognized how interdependent my learning is with the education and experience of others.

Many people in the Program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center helped me complete this arduous Ph.D. process. Like most students within the City University system, I worked a full-time job, taught extra courses, and often took a full load of course credits per semester. Without the careful consideration and attention I received from faculty and fellow students, I would have never arrived at this consummating educational moment. As I have already mentioned, the reasoning behind why I wanted to pursue this inquiry relates closely to why I want to thank those who supported me. The good pedagogy that I encountered made me want to

write about teaching as well as applaud those who bestowed their pedagogical talents upon me.

As I often raced through the program and my courses, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sometimes reminded me to slow my pace, think more deeply, and actually enjoy the learning process I was pursuing. For someone writing about learning desire and pleasure, these sage reminders were crucial. When considering issues of teaching and learning, Eve's scholarship and insights in Queer Theory launched my thinking in alternative directions. Furthermore, her advice led me to rethink my originally overwhelming prospectus and to reduce the beastly project into something more manageable. Eve's calm, glowing demeanor, focused advice, and resourceful questions have given me opportunity to think more deliberately and mindfully about my investigation.

I would like to thank Jane Marcus, whose incredible knowledge about the British Victorian era drew me to look closely at its educational figures and systems of teaching. In a course she taught, Jane invited me to explore various aspects of the educational system and to challenge ideas about Oscar Browning which I believed were misconceived -- even her own. Although I was never able to convince Jane that her conception of O. B. was flawed, she never deterred me from continuing my research about this man whom I perceived as virtuous and she as villainous. I will always remember during one of our banters about Browning calling Jane a "vulgar feminist," and she halting to smile and to comment that "Mark, only you could get away with such a statement." I only "got away with it" because a distinguished professor allowed me the space to defy her ideas publicly and passionately. Working