

CHAPTER THREE

"I My Own Professor": Ashton-Warner as New Zealand Educational Theorist, 1940-60

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The invitation to contribute to this volume addressed me as a New Zealander who had written about how Sylvia Ashton-Warner's fantasies, theories, imagery, and life-history narratives threaded their way through my own. I had written of my youthful encounters with her work in *Educating Feminists* (Middleton 1993), in which I looked back on reading *Spinster in 1960* at age thirteen and reflected on my teenage dreams of life as an artist and beatnik in Parisian cafes and garrets: confined to an Edwardian boarding school hostel in a provincial New Zealand town, I had plotted my escape to what Ashton-Warner described in *Myself* as "some bohemian studio on the Left Bank in Paris or over a bowl of wine in Italy, me all sophisticated and that, with dozens of lovers, paint everywhere and love and communion and sympathy and all that" (*Myself*, 212). When, in the early 1970s, I began secondary school teaching and read *Teacher*, that book built bridges between the frightening urgency of classroom survival, the enticing theories but alien classrooms described by American deschoolers and free-schoolers, and "what I believed myself to be when a girl on the long long road to school, a vagabond and an artist" (*I Passed This Way*, 307). As a young teacher I, too, had poured my impassioned soul into writing journals and poetry, painting, and playing the piano. Like Ashton-Warner, I had hoped that artistic self-expression could keep the mad woman in my attic at bay, for "asylums are full of artists who failed to say the things they must and famous tombs are full of those who did" (*Incense to Idols*, 169).

I had read Ashton-Warner's other books in the 1980s while juggling the conflicting demands of motherhood, doctoral research, marriage, university

teaching, and artistic dreams. Four decades before me also in her thirties at the time, Ashton-Warner's conflicts had been similar.¹ In *Myself*, she wrote, "This programme I have set myself, or rather that has set itself upon me like an invisible aggressor, this pace at which I live: wife, mother, lover, teacher and what I call my 'work'" (81). Despite her frequently expressed hatred for teaching, Ashton-Warner created a beguiling image of it as a romantic adventure that could, albeit with difficulty, be accommodated in such a multifaceted life: "Not just part of us becomes a teacher. It engages the whole self—the woman, man, wife or husband, mother or father, the lover, the scholar or artist in you as well as the teacher earning money so that a worthwhile teacher is one of the blooms from the worthwhile person" (*Myself*, 10). Although Ashton-Warner would never have used the term "feminist" to describe herself or her writing (Pearson 1984), in effect she provided me with the subliminal beginnings of such an analysis. The style of educational research and writing I crafted in my 1980s doctoral thesis—analysis of life-history interviews and policy texts—was influenced by her mode of writing (Middleton 1985). Then as now, I explored how educational theories do not spring from other people's books or disembodied ideas but rather are rooted in all dimensions of our experience.

My earlier readings of Ashton-Warner's work laid down the strata that underpin my twenty-first-century re-reading of it for this chapter. But I am no longer the wistful teenager, the frustrated high school teacher, or the conflicted mother-wife-teacher-artist and novice writer. Now a fifty-five-year-old professor and grandmother, I find my earlier readings quaint and not very interesting relics of a remote past. The vicissitudes of romance and the conflicts of the working mother are no longer my personal concerns, and they no longer absorb me as a researcher/writer. Re-reading Ashton-Warner now, I feel exasperated by her compulsive infatuations and flirtations when young (*Myself*) and her addictions and cantankerousness when old (*I Passed This Way*; Endeavour Television). As I have aged, my own research has become less directly concerned with questions of embodied femininity, and my writing is increasingly theoretical and conceptual. My initial impulse here was to engage in a postcolonial critique of her work. But Ashton-Warner disliked the language of late-twentieth-century educational writing and feared her work falling "into the jaws of academic analysis in the unintelligible multisyllabic jargon by which so much living [in North America] is programmed to die from verbose manhandling" (*I Passed This Way*, 471). In accordance with her wishes, I shall resist the temptation to express my ideas in the lofty tones of poststructuralism or postcolonialism, although these lurk in the background of the following analysis. If my revisioning of Ashton-Warner's youthful work is post-everything, it is postmenopausal.

When the invitation to contribute to this volume arrived, I had just completed a study of the PhD in education in New Zealand (Middleton 2001). I

did not expect that project and this one to coalesce. But the projects suddenly came together when I found the following passage in *I Passed This Way*, in which Ashton-Warner described her book *Teacher*.

[It was] a thesis though I was the last to know it. I had, after all, studied a great deal since Hortaera [her first school]: Rousseau. Herbert Read, comparative religions, the Bible. Gerald Manley Hopkins. Blake and Coleridge; the English poets, French literature, history and poetry; Russell. Freud, Jung, Adler, and Fromm: Maori mythology. history. culture and the language; the lives of the musicians, music textbooks, and even ploughed through Havelock Ellis, believe it or not. (*I Passed This Way*, 354)

She continued, "My level of learning, experiment and engagement as I see it now, but did not then, probably could not have been too far below a doctorate, with *Teacher* my inadvertent thesis, though it hadn't crossed my mind" (*I Passed This Way*, 354).

When she wrote that, Ashton-Warner had recently returned from a period as a visiting professor at Canada's Simon Fraser University. This was her first, and only, sustained formal experience in a university. She did not hold a university degree. She had trained as a primary school teacher in New Zealand in the 1920s; a period as a pupil teacher in the Hutt Valley (Wellington) had been followed by two years at Auckland Teachers' Training College and a period of probationary teaching. Ashton-Warner said that in formulating her educational theory (her published teaching scheme), she had read "*everything but education*" (*I Passed This Way*, 354, italics added). I was intrigued by her retrospective positioning of *Teacher* as a quasi-doctoral thesis, presumably in education. What would it mean to study Ashton-Warner as an academic writer of her time and place—a *New Zealand* writer of educational theory?

Educational theory is multiply located. It is a body of academic knowledge—a formal "subject" taught and examined in universities. It may also be an object of political contestation, such as in policy-making. Educational theory both emerges from, and gives shape to, teachers' professional knowledge: the sets of rules, maxims, guidelines and hunches that guide everyday practice. Researching the nature and history of educational theory brings into focus what Foucault (1980) referred to as "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories" (83). He asked. "[H]ow are the human sciences possible, and what are the historical consequences of their existence?" (in Gordon 1980. 236). What has made education as a "human science" possible, and what have been the historical consequences of *its* existence? What is the nature of, and what have been the conditions of possibility for education as a field of academic inquiry and professional understanding in New Zealand? What was the nature of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's educational theory, and what was involved in its creation

during the years she lived and worked in New Zealand? To what extent did it struggle against, or flow with, the tides and currents of educational thinking and practice of her time (the 1940s to late 1950s) and place (New Zealand)?

My discussion falls into four sections. "I'm Not a New Zealander!" discusses the common belief that Sylvia Ashton-Warner's educational theory was "in confrontation ... with the time and place in which she lived" (Clemens 1996, 90). "I Am My Own University" places Ashton-Warner's theory in the context of education as an academic subject. In "The Essentially Liberal Spirit," I study the curriculum documents and other professional knowledge available to teachers in New Zealand at the time. In "That Phantom of the Profession," I examine Ashton-Warner's perceptions of, and encounters with, educational authorities. My conclusion draws the threads together by means of a discussion of the transitional readers.

"I'm Not a New Zealander!": Myths and Counternarratives

Sylvia Ashton-Warner often claimed that her works were produced despite New Zealand, where "everything is respectably factory cut" (*Incense to Idols*, 164). Michael Firth's movie *Sylvia* (Reynolds and Firth 1984), as did Sylvia herself, painted a picture of an heroic, isolated, and maligned battler for progressive education in a colonial educational system that stubbornly resisted all progressive influences. At her most vitriolic, when interviewed in 1977 by Jack Shallcrass for a program produced by Endeavour Television, Sylvia went so far as to claim persecution and "spiritual murder" by New Zealand's literary and educational establishments. In that interview, she cried, "I'm not a New Zealander! I'm a landed immigrant of Canada!"

Yet New Zealand writing and teaching folklore include many alternative accounts. Sylvia's brilliance at what today is termed "spin-doctoring" prompted her authorized biographer, Lynley Hood (1990), to describe her as "a wonderful, profound, charismatic, two-faced con-artist" (282). Neglected and persecuted by the literary establishment? *Spinster*, which took the nation by surprise, was much acclaimed in New Zealand literary circles and popular media (Stevens 1961). Ashton-Warner won several of New Zealand's prestigious literary awards yet usually refused interviews or to meet her New Zealand public. Sainly teacher persecuted for unorthodox methods? Former colleagues and students have described her as frequently absent from school, increasingly dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs, dependent on teaching assistants and others to cover for her, and frequently losing her temper and even hitting children (Hood 1988). Addictions, cantankerousness, paranoia, and professional unreliability do not, however, undermine her importance as a writer of educational theory.

It is not my intention to investigate or evaluate the "truth" of the various Sylvia myths. Lynley Hood has already done so in her biography (1988) and research diary (1990) (see Brookes, this volume, for an examination of Hood's work). But myths themselves have truth *effects*—they provoke and continue to provoke. My own analysis here has been provoked by the fact that, despite evidence to the contrary, the myth of Sylvia as persecuted martyr persists, and she continues to be portrayed internationally (especially in the United States) as a lone light shining in New Zealand's educational darkness. A notable example of this is the 1996 American book, *Pay Attention to the Children*, by Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, a Californian teacher and founder of America's Sylvia Ashton-Warner Society. Describing Ashton-Warner's New Zealand background as an unfortunate impediment, Clemens struggles to understand how such brilliance could have emerged from such a colonial backwater: "Sylvia felt all of the pressures we [American women] felt, and had the additional burden of living in an outpost of the British Empire, expected to do one's duty and conceal one's emotions. Astonishingly, it was in conventional, dutiful New Zealand that Sylvia Ashton-Warner began a lifelong habit of listening to her inner voice, embarking on the journey toward abundant life in 1940!" (1996, 23). Determined to reinforce the myth of Sylvia as persecuted heroine, Clemens dismisses Hood's meticulously researched biography: "Lynley Hood reads Sylvia in a journalist's terms. By contrast, I am trying in this book to examine the texture of Sylvia's life for clues to how we can be sure Sylvia attempted to say the things she must—to tell her stories—but *what was their relationship to facts? Did she report accurately? Should we care?*" (Clemens 1996, 90, italics added)

By "we," Clemens is presumably referring to American teachers. For Clemens, the "texture" of Ashton-Warner's life matters more than its historical, biographical, or cultural "facts." I have never been an apologist for the New Zealand—or any other—education system. But this statement by Clemens rallied me to its defense, provoking me to argue that "our" (i.e., New Zealand's) Sylvia Ashton-Warner—as a person, as a teacher, as a novelist and as a writer of theory—could not have emerged from any other place. In Grumet's (1988) words, an educational theory "grows where it is planted, soaking up the nutrients in the local soil, turning to the local light" (14). Sylvia Ashton-Warner—as a person, a teacher, and a writer—did "grow" in New Zealand. Clemens's cavalier dismissal of New Zealand and its schools of the time led me to the archives at the University of Waikato: the New Zealand Collection, where I pored over curriculum and other education policy documents, and the Education Library, which contained New Zealand teachers' magazines of the 1930s-1950s. I realized that while biographers and literary critics had explored Ashton-Warner's "inner" conflicts as woman, wife, teacher, mother, and writer, they had done little analysis of the "external" conditions of possibility—historical, political,

cultural, discursive—that enabled and constrained her *educational* thinking and writing in the 1940s and 1950s. What was it about New Zealand in general, and its schools in particular, that made Ashton-Warner's early educational works possible?

"I am my Own University": Writing and Publishing Theory

In 1963, *Teacher* was reviewed for the New Zealand Department of Education's *Education* magazine, a monthly publication issued free to schools (Ausubel 1963). In a tiny country with a population of less than three million, there were at that time few publishing venues for high-level intellectual engagements with educational issues. There was no academic education journal; the *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* would not be established until 1966. Until then, demand for such a journal would have been low since the nation's four university education departments employed a combined total of seventeen academic faculty in 1950 and twenty-two in 1960 (Middleton 1989). By 1963, only three PhDs in education had been awarded by New Zealand universities. Educational research was still in its infancy, centered on the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), a progressive organization established in 1934 with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. Educational research and researchers had not yet splintered into disciplines and paradigms. Masters theses and other publications often addressed broad philosophical, historical, or organizational questions and increasingly engaged with the ideas of the new developmental psychologies. In New Zealand education in 1963, hard-edged empiricism was beginning to rise but had not yet gained ascendancy (Middleton 2001).

The review of *Teacher* that appeared in *Education* magazine, however, was written from such a perspective (Ausubel 1963). The reviewer was not a New Zealander but a visiting American. Professor David Ausubel of the University of Illinois. Ausubel had a medical degree and a PhD in psychology. The titles of his books, such as *Ego Development and the Personality Disorders* (1952), give some indication of his medical-scientific orientation. In 1956-1957, Ausubel resided in New Zealand as a visiting Fulbright Fellow, and he wrote a book, *The Fern and the Tiki* (1960), about his largely negative impressions of the country and its inhabitants. Ausubel's review of *Teacher* was scathing. He described it as little more than a "patchwork of scattered impressions, fragmented vignettes, and miscellaneous comments about teaching and Maoris that provides neither a cogent account of her educational philosophy nor an illuminating picture of the contemporary Maori cultural scene" (Ausubel 1963, 30). He scorned Ashton-Warner for her lack of credentials and for her notoriously volatile personality: "True, one could hardly have expected an academically sophisticated pedagogic

treatise from a person of Miss Ashton-Warner's background and temperament (Ausubel 1963, 301). Grounded in the empiricism of medical science, Ausubel asked:

[W]ould it have been expecting too much to find a carefully reasoned and systematic exposition of principles, a clear statement of underlying rationale, and a more detailed description of the method, and some attempts at critical evaluation or comparison with other methods? Recast along these latter lines, the resulting document might have been less artistic, but would have constituted a more useful contribution to the literature of education rather than an exercise in impressionistic autobiography. (1963,30)

But Ashton-Warner identified and wrote not as a scientist but as an artist. Her "experiments" were not formally structured, and her language was poetic. Music, dance, and the visual arts, as well as the printed texts of poets and philosophers, influenced her reading of children's feelings, thoughts, and bodies.

Ausubel's review was emblematic of a mid-twentieth-century splitting of genres in academic educational writing throughout the English-speaking world. In his introduction to *Teacher*, British educationist Sir Herbert Read wrote that "her reports are factual, and this new book is a sociological document rather than a pedagogical treatise" (in *Teacher*, 13). Parts of *Teacher* consisted of diary entries: descriptions of, and thoughts and feelings about, the classroom, community, and children. Descriptive sociological studies had been acceptable in New Zealand educational writing in the 1930s-1940s. For example, Somerset's (1938) *Littledene* was a participant's account of everyday life (including education) in a small New Zealand rural town. But the ascendancy of scientific empiricism in the social sciences and associated struggles to gain status for education as a "proper" academic subject rendered such descriptive accounts unscientific and therefore academically illegitimate. As New Zealand's university education departments grew in size and number, the educational research community began to fragment into "increasingly separate worlds with their own professional identities, journals, conferences and vocabularies" (Watson 1978, 12). There was no room for "impressionistic autobiography," poetry, or fictional writing in the newly specialized fields of educational psychology, philosophy, history, sociology, and administration. In academic writing, the languages of art and science became incommensurable. Autobiographical writing was not allowed in theses until feminist research gained recognition in the 1980s.

In *Sylvia!* Hood (1988) notes that Ashton-Warner did not approach the NZCER as a possible (academic) publisher for the manuscript of her teaching scheme. Instead, she first published it in one of the New Zealand teachers' professional journals. Two years before her first book, *Spinster*, was published in

1958, Ashton-Warner published a series of eight articles in *National Education*, the journal of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary school teachers' union/professional association. These were published under the name "Sylvia" (1955, 1956a, 1956b, 1956c, 1956d, 1956e, 1956f, 1956g). Like most primary school teachers, Sylvia and her husband Keith were members of the NZEI, and in a rare acknowledgment of the intellectual life of other teachers, she later alluded to the stimulation of social evenings after NZEI meetings in Ruatoria: "Cascades of music in some poky little residence to the domed silence of night. Philosophy in and out of the hours, metaphysics on the beach and sensational tales of inspectors" (*I Passed This Way*, 323). Barring one brief section on the Maori transitional readers, the significance of which I shall explore later, the manuscript that would (in a slightly edited form) be published in 1963 in the United States as the first half of *Teacher* (the teaching scheme) was serialized in *National Education* in 1955-1956. These articles were the first systematic exposition of her theory.

As a published educational theorist, Sylvia Ashton-Warner also left us with a remarkable record of the biographical or experiential affinities or underpinnings of her theory—what Britzman (1998) refers to as the processes by which educators "come to attach ourselves as well as to ignore particular ideas, theories and people" (16). For example, Ashton-Warner's book *Myself* was published in 1967. An edited version of the diary she had kept a quarter of a century previously in 1941-42, during World War II, this account of "the care of the self" (Foucault 1985, 1986) records her struggle to claim physical and mental space—away from her family and school—to dream, create, or obsess over her latest romantic obsession (she "ceased to exist when not in love" [*Myself*, 9]). She wrote:

I mean to recover and keep the things I did while single; I mean some time to be what I had meant to be—in the first place a worthwhile person, not just for myself but for those who love me. I mean to so organise my loaded time that I'll retain some for myself to paint, do music, read and even learn to write. I'm not one of those people who were born for nothing. (*Myself*, 20)

In *Myself*, "It isn't art that matters so much as the life of art, the process" (Stead 2002, 102). Learning to write involved struggles between the warring facets of her life and personality, between "wife, mother, lover, teacher and what I call my 'work'" (*Myself*, 81). As Foucault (1985) described it, the crafting of the scholarly self involved "processes and events that took place between oneself and oneself. The adversaries the individual had to combat were not just within him or close by, they were part of him" (66).

The "adversaries" Ashton-Warner had to "combat" included children and teaching. Often these appear in her text *as an* obstruction to art. They "intrude on

my inner thoughts, hack at my inner feeling," she writes (*Myself*, 100): later she describes teaching as "sending down stiff taproots into my heart" (150). Ashton-Warner began to connect what she read in her hard-won private space ("everything but education") with the vibrancy of her "intrusive" pupils and classroom. She could reconcile the artist and the teacher (as she much later, in 1977, admitted on Endeavour Television) by conceptualizing the children as the raw material for her art and the classroom as a kind of living canvas. Sometimes she also represents her "work" as academic: "tentatively, reluctantly, I'm becoming interested in no less than my infant room. From the reading I do in the early hours before the household wakes, how could I not become interested? Freud, Adler, Lipmann, Scheirer [sic]², Jung and Bertrand Russell explaining life and children, and all the poetry at night. I am my own University, I my own Professor" (*Myself*, 42).

During the early years of World War II, when she wrote the diary that would become the *Myself* Ashton-Warner was in her second stable teaching job, as the assistant teacher at Pipiriki School up the Whanganui River. As was common practice in the Native School system of the time her husband, Keith Henderson, was headmaster (Simon 1998). She was recovering from the nervous breakdown she had experienced at their previous school in the roadless East Coast settlement of Horoera. As part of her treatment her Wellington "neurologist"³ Dr. Allen, had urged her to write. He taught Sylvia that her own lack of concentration when reading resulted from a mind "too packed with native imagery to allow room for anything else in" (*I Passed This Way*, 283). Through self-expression—writing, music and the visual arts—she could "discipline dreaming" (*I Passed This Way*, 288).

In *I Passed This Way*, Ashton-Warner described how Dr. Mien had shown her "the nature of the mind as he put the pieces together again in their normal places" (281). It was, she said, her therapy with Dr. Allen that had taught her about the two major drives that lurked in the unconscious, "These two great powers in the personality which qualify all living: fear and sex" (*I Passed This Way*, 281). These "two great powers in the personality" became the core of her theory of organic teaching, as she learned to elicit from infants the key words that captioned them: "Out press these words, grouping themselves in their own wild order. All boys wanting words of locomotion, aeroplane, tractor, jet, and the girls the words of domesticity, house, Mummy, doll. The fear words, ghost, tiger, skellington, alligator, bulldog, wild piggy, police. The sex words, kiss, love. touch, haka" (Sylvia 1955,392).

Her therapy taught Ashton-Warner that, by releasing her own native imagery, she could discharge the "violence that was in my character ever lapping and threatening near the surface, showing up in my nightmares" (*Teacher*, 9). Her own violence, she came to believe, was symptomatic of a universal law:

"Violence. The word beginning with a capital V widespread across the world. The violence I believe to be in all of us is subdued in the undermind, waiting, but which blasts out on occasion depending on how near the surface it is, or on the rigidity of the surface" (*Teacher*, 32). She formulated this idea during wartime and later wrote, "[The design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war. To me it has the validity of a law of physics and all the unstable, irrepressible emotion of beauty" (Sylvia 1956c, 295).

In essence, Ashton-Warner's pedagogy involved "taking the lid off" repressed emotions, giving vent to the destructive impulse through the alternative "crater" of creativity. In New Zealand, she taught in rural and at that time reasonably stable Maori communities. In *Myself*, however, Ashton-Warner muses about the teaching of the urban poor and, since the kind of scenario she is describing was not characteristic of New Zealand in the 1950s, one assumes she was referring to second-hand accounts of the United States:

I suppose that schools in the big city slums ... If I were teaching them I ... And if I were allowed to I ... I mean children from criminal homes, starved and that. Throats cut in the night and that sort of thing, hungry, stealing ... I'd give them words like "knife" and "cutthroat" and ... "jail" and "police" and "blood". I'd give them words they lived with. (*Myself*, 110)

One wonders what might result in today's classrooms if "ordinary" teachers without training in psychotherapy attempted in this vein to "take the lid off" infantile traumas resulting from events such as terrorism, sexual abuse, or domestic violence (see Jones, this volume). In addressing her students' repressed emotions through her approach to key vocabulary, Ashton-Warner's pedagogy mimicked—was a reliving of—her own therapeutic process. Here it is useful to think in terms of the psychoanalytic notion of transference. Britzman (1998) writes:

Transference is perhaps the most central dynamic of time and space that organises and stalls the practices of learning. The compromised and condensed time of transference catches the "then and there" of the past and the "here and now" of the present. As a mode of address, the message is derivative of something else, reminiscent of another scene but uncanny in its present urgency. (33)

During World War II, the time Ashton-Warner was formulating her ideas, official New Zealand government policy acknowledged the traumas of children and their families (Middleton 1998; Middleton and May 1997). "Taking the lid off" these, however, was regarded as a matter of professional judgment, and teachers were cautioned that their role was to "act as a buffer between the world of the child and the warring world of the adult, to pass on to the child only such

of the jarrings and the jostlings of the adult world as he feels the childish mind can cope with at this stage. It is for the skilled teacher to say what burden of knowledge the child at each age can and should bear" (Beeby 1992, 129).

American teacher Sydney Gurewitz Clemens (1996) has argued that Sylvia Ashton-Warner developed her theories "not only in the fact of her own emotional undercurrents, but in confrontation, as well, with the time and place in which she lived" (90). I have briefly looked at her "emotional undercurrents," but they are not my central concern here (see Robertson, this volume, for further discussion). I am more concerned with contextual questions about "the time and place in which she lived," What were the tides and currents of educational thinking in the teaching profession at the time (1940s and 1950s) and place (rural New Zealand) in which Ashton-Warner lived, taught, formulated her ideas, and wrote her first educational texts? Were her ideas "in confrontation with" those of New Zealand's education academics, policymakers, and practitioners? To explore this, I now introduce some key New Zealand curriculum and other educational policy documents of the 1930s-1940s.

"The Essentially Liberal Spirit": Curriculum Policy

With few opportunities for high-level study or employment in education at universities, much of New Zealand's higher-level scholarship and theorizing tended to be "out there" in the wider education profession. Some leading educational thinkers and writers could be found among the ranks of school inspectors, education department officials, teachers' college lecturers, and classroom teachers. Therefore, some of the country's best educational thinking and writing surfaced in official curriculum or other policy documents. In 1928, the year Ashton-Warner entered the Auckland Teachers' Training College, advance copies of a revised primary school syllabus were distributed to all teachers, and the following year the New Zealand Department of Education gazetted its new *Syllabus of Instruction for Public Schools* (1929). This was popularly known, and still is referred to by historians, as the "Red Book." Written by a committee, this 223-page book, hardbound in red covers, included 63 pages of "syllabus," a 12-page bibliography, and 148 pages of appendixes written by inspectors.

I do not know if Sylvia Ashton-Warner ever read the Red Book, but it was the official curriculum until rolling revisions of the various school subjects from the mid-1940s to the 1950s replaced it bit by bit. These revisions retained what Ewing (1970) described as its "essentially liberal spirit" (209). Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Keith Henderson would have been obliged to comply with the syllabus, and the inspectors would have checked that their plans of work reflected its intent, if not its detailed content.

The Red Book and the postwar revisions that succeeded it were influenced by the core assumptions of the progressive educational movement of the 1920s-1930s (often referred to as "the new education"). The new education wove together psychoanalytic and psychological notions about the "normal" developmental stages of children with more "sociological" theories about the school's role in fostering democracy. The Red Book's twelve-page bibliography recommended many of the progressive texts of the time, including *The Dalton Plan*, five works by Dewey, a number of texts about Montessori methods, and Caldwell Cook's *The Play Way in Education*. (Ashton-Warner would later refer to Caldwell Cook in *Teacher*.) It also listed works by international authorities on "mental testing" such as Terman, Burt, and Thorndike. The technology of "scientific" testing was viewed as an adjunct to good "developmental" pedagogical practice (Walkerdine 1984).

The Red Book curriculum encouraged teachers to create their own curriculum and to tailor it to the "needs" of their pupils on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of the individual children and the wider school community. It was intended to provide guidelines rather than serve as a prescription:

The Department particularly desires that the present syllabus shall be regarded both by Inspectors and teachers as mainly suggestive. Teachers are to consider themselves free to make any alteration or rearrangement of work they think desirable, and the Inspector will approve any reasonable scheme that appears to meet the needs of children of a particular type or of a particular locality. (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 5)

Although the Red Book contained prescriptions for each subject, this "classification and framing" (Bernstein 1971) of school knowledge was not mandatory, and curriculum integration was encouraged:

The teacher may with the approval of the Inspector base his instruction mainly on one subject. It is recognised also that the pupil as well as his teacher has a right to a certain measure of freedom, and that the most carefully planned schemes of work may not satisfy the pupil's desire to pursue a course of study that appeals to him. The Inspector will recognise that it is not always possible for a teacher to adhere closely to his daily plan of work. (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 5)

Sylvia Ashton-Warner taught infants (the preparatory division). In light of Ashton-Warner's later claims about the "the rigid silence of the orthodox infant room" (1958, 199), it is useful to see how the "syllabus of instruction" for this level was conceptualized in the Red Book, which informed teachers, "No particular method of teaching reading is prescribed, but it is suggested that the reading material should consist at first of words as names of things or actions,

then of simple sentences arising from the conversation lessons" (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 9). Phonics might then be taught by means of "the interpretation at sight of words and sentences on the blackboard, on individual reading sheets, or in reading books" (9).

In the teaching of written expression, the Red Book noted:

[I]t is the custom to send the children to the wall-boards to illustrate stones, etc. Why should they not be asked to label the component parts of their drawings and write sentences about them? In both cases the children should be required to read to the teacher the sentences they have composed. Not only does the reading benefit the child but the teacher ascertains what is the actual vocabulary, and how far the command of language has grown. (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 71)

The Red Book encouraged teachers to draw on a child's own vocabulary: "The labelling and matching of words associated with real objects and pictures illustrative of home and school interests and activities are always popular, and afford the necessary opportunities for recognising a large number of nouns" (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 76). It argued that a child's interests should influence the topics and pace of lessons: "It is hoped that the new Syllabus will usher in a new conception of the oral lesson, and that the pupil and not the teacher will be the more active agent in the acquisition of knowledge" (70).

Other subjects were given a similar treatment. The Red Book's approach to the teaching of arithmetic in the preparatory division drew on progressive ideas about curriculum integration and learning through play:

In this class no formal instruction in number should be given. Pupils should, however, *be* afforded opportunity to develop some conception of number through stories and play activities in which there is free access to varied and suitable materials—e.g. blocks, beads, sticks, etc. To assist this development the teacher should take advantage of such opportunities as arise in rhythmic exercises, kindergarten games, nature-study, and other lessons. (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 1)

Nature study aimed "To awaken and deepen the child's interest in nature, and to stimulate the curiosity which is characteristic of all children"; to achieve this, the New Zealand Department of Education noted,

It should be considered a fundamental principle that nothing should be regarded as Nature-Study in which the child is not observing by investigating Nature at first hand. From this it follows that work will be done mainly outside the classroom and it will be necessary in all cases for teachers to have a full knowledge of the possibilities of a district. School walks or rambles should be frequently arranged. (1929, 43)

While there was to be no formal instruction in history or geography until standard two (year four, or fourth grade in the American system) for infants, teachers were encouraged to explore and learn about their local area, for most parts of the country "are rich in historical incidents. And these both the teacher and the pupil should take a pride in seeking out and recording" (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 31). Teachers were urged to become familiar with and to teach "tales of the Maori" in their classes. The purpose of school music was described as "to awaken the imagination of the children and widen their capacity for artistic self-expression" (57). Musical education in the preparatory division was to include "free bodily movement to music" as well as "listening without effort to music sung or played by teacher or gramophone" (9). The infant was also to engage in free drawing and handwork to help "express in concrete form his impressions of form, size, and beauty" and this would enable "him to realise not only the joy of using the creative power but also the satisfaction of doing something for others" (51).

The appendixes to the Red Book, written by inspectors, contain advice, examples, and rationales for the classroom practitioner. They are introduced with Carlyle's question, "How shall he give kindling in whose own inward man there is no live coal, but all is burnt out to a dead grammatical cinder?" and followed by a lament:

There still survives in schools a great deal of the old-fashioned formalism that regarded education more as a mechanical process than as a means of securing for every child the fullest possible spiritual, mental and physical development. It is hoped that the present syllabus will give encouragement to those teachers—and fortunately there are many of them—who regard the child not as inanimate clay in the hands of the potter, or as an empty vessel sent them for filling, but as a soul, a personality, capable of being developed and trained for the wider service of humanity. (New Zealand Department of Education 1929, 65)

This was the "essentially liberal spirit" of the mandated syllabus of instruction at the time Sylvia Ashton-Warner completed her training. The text was liberal, but in practice, teachers' freedom was restricted by the requirements of a proficiency examination in standard six, the final year of primary schooling (year eight, or eighth grade in the American system). One of the first educational reforms of New Zealand's First Labor government (1935-1949) was to abolish this examination in 1936. Labor's agenda of educational reform was strongly influenced by the progressive educational theories of the day (Middleton and May 1997). In 1937 Labor supported the New Education Fellowship (NEF) Conference. Schools were closed for a week to allow teachers to travel to Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, or Dunedin—the cities in which public sessions of the conference were held. Fourteen speakers from Britain, Europe, the United States, Canada, and South Africa included leading progressives such

as Dr. Susan Isaacs from England and Dr. Harold Rugg from Columbia University, New York (Campbell 1938). The NEF public lectures had generated unprecedented interest among teachers and the general public and as Ewing (1970) notes, it "helped to revive the essentially liberal spirit of the Red Book, no longer subordinated to the demands of 'proficiency'" (194).

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, says Ewing (1970), most teachers "adapted themselves to the idea of giving less time to formal arithmetic, grammar, spelling and oral reading, and more to arts and crafts, music, nature study and physical education" (194). In an early issue of *Education* magazine, the progressive educator H. D. C. Somerset (1948) commented on the impact of the progressive and "scientific" theorists of the 1940s: "The best way for teachers to create a good school is by way of child study. The biggest change *in* education of late years does not lie in buildings or equipment but in the contribution to our professional knowledge through the work of such people as Dewey, Nunn, Burt, Susan Isaacs, Schonnell, Gates, Terman, Alexander, and Duncan" (171).

Others told of a gulf between policy and practice. In 1948, *Education* magazine included a symposium in which teachers wrote about their ideas on "modern education." A contribution from a junior teacher stated, "The new education, as yet, is still largely theoretical and exploratory" (Higgin 1948, 125). The explanation he offered was largely demographic: "Most of our inspectors, headmasters and older teachers developed their educational philosophies before the First World War. To them, the way out of the confusion is a return, in some form, to the stable formalism of the old order, with its emphasis on subject-matter rather than on the child" (Higgin 1948, 125).

Writing in the 1980s, Stuart Middleton (1982) commented, "The curriculum context with which Ashton-Warner worked, while having some claim to being liberal in intention was, in all probability as dull and, for Maori children especially, as disastrous as she puts it. Teachers in classrooms tend to be markedly more conservative than the curriculum they claim to serve" (29). However, more recent studies based on interviews with teachers who trained and taught at the time have supported the argument that the progressive ideas and practices as expressed in the Red Book and elsewhere were widely debated and that, while some resisted them, they were widely practiced in classrooms around the country (Middleton and May 1997).

So, although the grassroots culture in some schools was resistant to the new education, the dominant discourse of the wartime and postwar curriculum and other policy texts was in many ways consistent with Ashton-Warner's theory of organic teaching. Like her, they drew on psychoanalytic/ developmental theories of child development and also viewed schooling as a means of achieving a more just society. Ashton-Warner usually refused to acknowledge or engage with the

works of other educationists. She insulated her program of self-study and her writing, locating herself within a literary/artistic, rather than an educational theory, genre. She claimed to draw on "[m]usic, art, philosophy, the mind and Maori mythology but nothing on teaching" (1980, 288). Sylvia's accounts of her encounters with the education profession—inspectors, academics, and publishers—were often tales of persecution. However, on other occasions, a submerged narrative of passionate attachment to educational authorities also surfaces in her texts, and to these I now turn.

"That Phantom of the Profession": Fear, Sex, and Authority

In *Teacher*, Ashton-Warner encapsulated her thesis as follows: "Education, fundamentally, is the increase of the percentage of the conscious in relation to the unconscious. It must be a developing idea. None of this is new, of course. It's the understood design of today's education" (207). Her statement is highly significant for two reasons. First, it encompasses the twin dimensions of mainstream progressive education: the psychoanalytic/psychological and the mastery of personally and socially relevant knowledge. Second, it acknowledges that *she knew* that her theory *was* consistent with this "design of today's education." Was she referring to overseas (British and American) education? Could she possibly have remained unaware that both dimensions of the international progressive movement—the psychoanalytic/psychological and the sociological/political—were being *encouraged at* the highest levels of New Zealand education policymaking at the time?

To address this question, I need to return to my earlier discussion of the biographical underpinnings of Ashton-Warner's theory of organic teaching and the key vocabulary. Earlier I described how Ashton-Warner claimed that fear and sex, the two "great instincts," were the key to reading, psychotherapy, and education more broadly. In her infant room, they erupted to the surface by means of captions, the most powerful of which were "ghost" and "kiss," which represented "the two main instincts. Any child, brown or white, on the first day, remembers these two words from one look" (Sylvia 1956g, 11). She released her own pent-up native imagery through creative arts. Ashton-Warner claimed to have discovered a "law of physics," but her pedagogy can equally be seen as a projection of her own psychic conflict. Or as Britzman (1998) puts it, as a "teacher's own counter-transference of her or his childhood conflicts onto the screen of the student, the curriculum, and pedagogical strategies". (35). What were these "childhood conflicts"? How were these projected, transferred, onto others? How were her encounters with authorities mediated by her own struggles with the twin drives of fear and sex?

In *I Passed This Way*, Ashton-Warner described how her mother had also been her primary school teacher. Caring for an invalid husband and nine children during the post—World War I Depression years. Mrs. Warner had struggled financially, professionally, and personally. As a child, Sylvia adored her invalid father and later described him as a fallen English aristocrat with literary leanings who told wonderful stories. As an adult, Sylvia always identified the artist in her as male. "Papa." however, also appears in Sylvia's writing (e.g., as Pappa in *Greensome*) as a victim of his working-class wife's emotional and physical violence. As an adult, Ashton-Warner would always have difficulty relating well to other professional women (Pearson 1984). The family moved frequently, and the young Sylvia attended fourteen different primary schools in which she often also had to endure the "rigid orthodoxy" of her own mother's teaching methods.

As a child, Ashton-Warner learned that "inspector trouble" explained the family's financial instability and residential insecurity. The inspector was therefore to be feared, and this apparently external threat was inextricably blended with her childhood experiences of her mother's power. Ashton-Warner's mother had also suffered miscarriages and infant deaths. Sylvia herself had been named after one of the dead babies and felt, as she said in *I Passed This Way*, that she was named after, and sometimes felt like, a ghost. The "ghost" was therefore a key word not only in the "underminds" of the children she taught but also in Sylvia's own psyche. Years later, Anna, the protagonist of *Spinster*, would draw together Sylvia's childhood specter of the ghost with her adult terror of the inspector: "just as in the minds of the Little Ones all goes down before the Ghost, so in my mind all goes down before this, this ... shall we say ... this Phantom of the Profession" (*Spinster*, 227).

As an adult, despite her therapy and her avenues for artistic expression, Ashton-Warner's childhood wounds continued to fester. In *Sylvia!* Hood (1988) argues, "As time passed she aired the old wounds under the more comfortable cover of fiction and found counterfeit relief in denying the old wounds in herself but discovering them in others. Such measures kept at bay the ever-present risk of emotional collapse, but the wounds never healed" (90). When manifested as the phantom of the profession, the inspector can be seen as a personification of Sylvia's fears. As Hood describes it, "this omnipotent being was not a real person but a monster from Sylvia's undermind; welded from the most fearsome qualities of Mama, God, and the inspectors of her childhood, he clung to her shoulders and tightened the grip of guilt around her throat whenever she defied him" (1988, 99). In Ashton-Warner's own writing, the "frightening inspector shade in the rafters, limiting and aborting all I do" (*Spinner*, 190) is occasionally acknowledged as a fantasy-figure, "a ghoul from the past that haunts, I think, all teachers of my generation, from those five-year-old days when we felt the

tension of the teacher and the foreboding of the Inspector himself' (*Teacher*, 197).

As an object of fear, the inspector makes an early appearance in Sylvia's writing. In *Myself* she remembers Horoera School, where she had experienced her breakdown, as also a place that had afforded her freedom from inspectorial surveillance. In contrast, Pipiriki School could be reached by road: "Back on the coast I'd been getting somewhere, I think, far from the haunts of inspectors, out of range of the Education Department--out of reach of criticism. I even taught the Maori language there--heresy! But here, with roads and bridges and no tidal rivers, an inspector could walk in any day" (*Myself*, 67). To use Foucault's (1977) metaphor, the nets of bureaucratic power could more easily enmesh her in their threads. The imagined threat of the inspector's panoptic gaze frightened her into teaching the way she thought "He" wanted her to: "One is obliged to return to orthodox methods" (*Myself* 18). Similarly, in *Spinster*, her heroine, Anna Vorontosov, says: "In the safety of the world behind my eyes, where the inspector shade cannot see, I picture the infant room as one widening crater, loud with the sound of erupting creativity. Every subject somehow in the creative vent. What wonderful design of movement and mood!" (*Spinster*, 45); when confronted with an inspectorial visit, Anna exclaims, "[I]f only I had kept workbooks and made routine schemes and used orthodox timetables, and stood up and taught from the blackboard with a pointer, and insisted on silence like other teachers, then I should at least have the confidence of numbers" (227).

In her writing and in interviews (e.g., Endeavour Television), Ashton-Warner constructed a binary opposition between "the rigid silence of the orthodox infant room" (the New Zealand education system she taught in) and her own vibrant classroom: "this frightening, inspiring, beating of the child-heart in the raftered prefab" (*Spinster*, 199). As I've noted, this binary has been broadcast around the world in print (e.g., Clemens 1996) and on film, Hood (1988) argues that Michael Firth's film "shows her innovations taking place in a turn-of-the century education system" (247). However, writes Hood, while this might have been inaccurate as historical "fact," the film "got it right" at the level of a psychological truth, since "the system Sylvia was really rebelling against was not the one she taught in but the one that was raked over by her harsh mother and a succession of rigid, petty and disapproving inspectors during her primary schooling in the early years of this century" (1988, 247).

Occasionally Sylvia herself glimpsed this insight. In *Myself*, she contrasts her mother's methods with those taught to her during her training. When young, she was taught "that strict traditional way: spare the rod and spoil the child and that"—but she goes on to say that "we didn't learn that at college. I've got to relearn what I was supposed to have learned" (*Myself*, 20). Learning to teach involved "beginning to extricate myself from the only conception of teaching I

remembered since I resumed on the Coast—the manner in which I was taught myself' and "recollecting what I learned in college" (*Myself*, 42). Ashton-Warner claims to have taken little account of the academic side of teachers' college, although one essay she had written there on Rousseau had left a lasting impression:

With astonishment I'd gathered that I agreed with the views of Rousseau.... He would take his pupil Emile roaming the countryside for his lessons in the way that we'd roamed when young: playing in the creeks, climbing the trees and examining the birds' eggs, carving steps in banks, exploring round corners, asking questions, answering them and talking about the creatures on our way. (*I Passed This Way*, 194)

When she had to repeat Education Two (now termed Education 200) after completing college and during her probationary teaching year—it was a compulsory course in order to become a qualified teacher—she had been "astounded to find education the most fascinating subject I had ever avoided. Now why hadn't I discovered this in college ... too busy chasing Keith Henderson I suppose. It concerned itself with my favourite interest, the minds of people" (*I Passed This Way*, 194).

So Ashton-Warner *had* encountered progressive educational theory by the time she started teaching. Progressive strands were threaded through the official school curriculum documents, many of them written by the inspectors. Inspectorial examination of teaching practice would result in a grading (a numerical score according to fixed criteria). As a process of monitoring, this exemplifies the disciplinary technology described by Foucault (1977) as "the examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance [and] also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them" (189). If inspectors were the surveilling eyes of the Department of Education, would they not be encouraged to read, evaluate and record teachers' work according to the current progressive rhetoric?

In *Myself*, an inspector's visit is described as an "enlivening breath from the outside world, the professional world, encouraging and giving us status to ourselves" (111). In an entry for May 1942, Ashton-Warner described how, after observing her classroom, one inspector commented that her teaching method was "what we go about trying to inspire other teachers to do" (*Myself*, 111). Here, as in many other passages, Ashton-Warner's own accounts of her encounters with education authorities are *positive*. For, just as with the key words that erupt as an infant's organic writing, the images of authorities (such as inspectors) in Ashton-Warner's own writing are generated from the *two* great drives or instincts, fear and sex. It is important then to explore how sex manifests itself in Ashton-Warner's educational writing, especially in relation to educational authorities.

Ashton-Warner seldom wrote directly about adult sexual intimacy, in the sense of bodily intimacy. However, as already noted, as a result of the ideas "taught" to her by Dr. Allen in the course of her own therapy, combined with her reading of psychoanalysis, she placed the "sex drive" firmly in the center of her educational theory. Of her own creativity, she wrote, "Inspiration is the richest nation I know, the most powerful on earth. Sexual energy Freud calls it; the capital of desire I call it; it pays for both mental and physical expenditure" (*Myself*, 168). Somewhat uncharacteristically she used a phallic metaphor in *Myself* to delineate the boundaries between "the phantom of the profession" and her own passionate pedagogy:

Think of a room where we all come running in first thing in the morning to plunge into creativity! Ah ... tense orgasm! so that, detumesced, we could settle for number later. But you won't find that in my teaching scheme. The curriculum would be a wounded marine—it would die on its way to hospital. A teacher could be dismissed for such outlawry, sacked for sheer insanity. (168)

But this reference to the sexually aroused body is unusual. Matters of the flesh are given voice only off-stage, even in her flamboyant novel *Incense to Idols*. In this, a French concert pianist, Germaine de Beauvais, wreaks havoc on a small New Zealand city by living life according to her bodily desires:

I still cultivate my depravities and venerate my idols to indulge every sense I've got. People like me need reality and dare not question it. We believe in the flesh and the appetites and the senses are our miracles. It is I who am divine inside and out and I make holy whatever I do. The scent of my hair is finer than prayer and my face more wonderful than churches. Bible or any creed. If I worship one thing more than another it is my own bamboo body. I'm mad on myself I'm so luscious. (*Incense to Idols*.75)

While Ashton-Warner apparently remained faithful to her husband, the promiscuous Germaine is also a staging of one of Ashton-Warner's fantasized personae (McEldowney 1969; Stead 2002). De Beauvais acts out her fleshly fantasies, but like Ashton-Warner, she needs evidence of her own desirability reflected back from the eyes of her admirers.

Throughout her writing, Ashton-Warner's narcissism reveals itself in a constant need for approval. While her corporeal body may have remained technically faithful to Keith Henderson, she wrote quite openly about her (chaste) love affairs. In *Myself*, she explained that "it's a matter of note that after the years on the Coast the friendships I make harbour heartache. It seems I cannot love moderately or even singly, and I look for a mother in men and women the moment they reveal a regard" (72). In the introduction to *Myself—the*

journal that she (perhaps) edited and published twenty years after it was written—she described:

Love was my big trouble when I was young.... My need and dependence on it. I couldn't breathe without love in the air. I'd choke. I ceased to exist when not in love. The radiance within blotted out so that nothing would happen inside, nothing exploded into action, I can quite truthfully say that I never lifted a hand unless for someone: never took up a brush or a pen, a sheet of music or a spade, never pursued a thought without the motivation of trying to make someone love me. (*Myself*, 9)

Consummation of the affair would be, not intercourse, but a kiss. "Kiss" and "ghost" were her most powerful key words, or captions, for the two great drives that lurked in the/her undermind. So needy was she for positive affirmation from others that much of her time was spent wondering, "Does he love me, does he not." The merest perceived slight—a glance, a silence—could be read as a sign of betrayal. Her moods alternated between ecstasy and despair according to her loved ones' current conduct toward her. Like the other drugs she depended upon, addictive love kept fear and depression at bay (Hood 1988). It was this emotional dependency that made Ashton-Warner so vulnerable to inspectors. *Spinster*, *Myself* and Firth's film depict Ashton-Warner's flirtations with and intense crushes on those progressive inspectors who encouraged her. As shown in Firth's film, Ashton-Warner was erotically aroused by "inspections" if the inspectorial eye reflected back an image of her own irresistible (physical, intellectual, artistic) beauty. The ultimate consummation, an inspectorial kiss, would set her world ablaze.

In *I Passed This Way*, Ashton-Warner positions herself as a wide-eyed child as she gazes adoringly up at Douglas Ball, "the new senior inspector of native schools," when he visited the isolated school on the roadless Pacific coastline at Horoera in 1940:

He rode out on a mighty-boned horse, ploughing through rivers and signing the beaches like a Viking in the latest Jodpurs. He turned out to be very fair-haired and fair-skinned with extravagantly large blue eyes, all inquiry in them and comprehension, and when he dismounted and hitched his sweating horse, before me and my young Ash in arms, two at knee, he was so tall and so big that we nearly broke our necks looking up at his face. (273)

At the time he visited the Hendersons in Horoera, Ball was encouraging teachers in the Native Schools to work according to the liberal spirit of the Red Book curriculum. His personal philosophy of education was very similar to Sylvia's. Her classroom "loud with the sound of erupting creativity" (*Spinster*, 45) seems identical to Ball's "pulsating life of the classroom" (Ball 1948, 114). Like Ashton-Warner, Ball saw good classroom teaching as

the product of three main forces—the child, the teacher and the subject matter, and the first two are the most important. Once the emphasis has shifted from subject-matter to personality, then the integrating bonds elude the pen of the curriculum-maker and cannot be set down in any printed syllabus of instruction. They are the intangibles of education, strengthened by the day-to-day relationships between teacher and children at what Glover calls "the point of contact." (Ball 1948, 115)

By the time he visited Horoera, Ball had introduced policies "to retain in the schools all those features of the old Maori culture which are worthy of preservation, thus developing a pride in their own race, whilst bringing to the pupils the best features of European culture" ("Historical Survey of Maori Schools" 1948, 75). In keeping with a shift from an overtly assimilationist racial policy, the Native Schools would be renamed Maori Schools (Barrington and Beaglehole 1974; Simon and Tuhiwai Smith 2001). Ashton-Warner was aware of Ball's ideas: "His view of Maori education accommodated racial temperament and characteristics and their particular needs in the curriculum and the daily timetable and he proclaimed there was a Maori culture worth preserving" (*I Passed This Way*, 272). Yet, one year after this time on the East Coast when she had gazed adoringly up at this Viking with his "extravagantly large blue eyes, all inquiry in them and comprehension" (*I Passed This Way*, 273), she could write, "Back on the coast ... far from the haunts of inspectors, out of range of the Education Department—out of reach of criticism. I even taught the Maori language there—O heresy!" (*Myself*, 67).

Conclusion: Transitions and the "Inadvertent Thesis"

From her earliest years as a teacher, Sylvia Ashton-Warner had criticized schooling as a "plastering on of foreign stuff" (*Spinster*, 45). She sought alternatives to teaching's "homicidal intrusion of one upon the other ... especially the reading, intrusion upon their inner thoughts and feelings" (*Myself* 100). Organic teaching and the key vocabulary were techniques for educating from the "inside" rather than imposing from the "outside." Sylvia had "discovered" the key vocabulary while teaching at Fernhill School, near the small city of Hastings in Hawkes Bay (1951-56). Earlier I noted that one short portion of the scheme in *Teacher* had not been included in Ashton-Warner's first published version of her scheme in the eight articles published in *National Education*. This missing portion concerned the Maori Transitional Readers. The local omission of what had been an important component of her educational theory, and its later reinstatement for her overseas audience, is intriguing; I use this to tie together the strands of this chapter.

While lifting the lid off the child's repressed emotions and drives (fear and sex) was somewhat radical, since the 1930s New Zealand's highest educational

"authorities" had encouraged teachers to experiment with methods and to draw on the child's "actual vocabulary" (New Zealand Department of Education 1929,

Many teachers in the Native Schools, as in other public schools, had made their own reading books (Middleton and May 1997; Simon and Smith 2001). In 1947, T. A. Fletcher, who had succeeded Ball as the senior inspector of native schools, wrote in his annual report:

It must be admitted that the primer readers as supplied to the schools, have serious deficiencies, but so far there is nothing better available to supplant them as textbooks. They were not written for Maori children, and contain words that are unnecessary for a Maori child's vocabulary. The need is all the greater, therefore to supplement these books by suitable reading material. (as cited in Pearson 1984, 62)

Fletcher advised that "a study of the words needed by the Maori child should be one of the first points to consider" (as cited in Pearson 1984, 62).

From 1948, the locally produced Progressive Readers that had been introduced with the Red Book (as well as the American Beacon Readers used in some schools) were replaced by a locally revised version of the American Janet-and-John series (Price 1997; Wevers 1997). A handbook, *Reading in the Infant Room: A Manual for Teachers* (New Zealand Department of Education 1956), accompanied the Janet-and-John books and reminded teachers that "no reading scheme can anticipate the problems of every individual, or even of every class or every school" (2). Teachers were to "take account of differences" (2) and ensure that a child's reading matter contained "a large number of words from his spoken vocabulary" (3). A buzz of activity was envisaged in classrooms, since "freedom to move about, and freedom to talk, discuss and argue are essential preparations for reading" (15).

In *Teacher*, Ashton-Warner explained to her American audience, "The Maori Transitional Books are used not as a substitute for the American books but as a lead up to them. They condition a Maori child to be able to use the Janet and John series more wholly" (71):

In word recurrence, sentence length and page length I have only open admiration for the American work. And I follow it respectfully and slavishly in the Maori books. The framework, like so much that is American, is so good. It's only the content that is slightly respectable for Maoris and me, (*Teacher*, 71)

The transitional readers were described as a bridge "out" of Maori culture and "in" to a Western worldview. There is a whole book yet to be written on themes of transition and race in the works of Ashton-Warner. In *Greenstone*, the published version of part of her first (unpublished) novel written in Pipiriki in 1941-42, Ashton-Warner had seen the radical potential of cultural hybridity (see Moeke-Maxwell, this volume). But twenty years later, when *Teacher* was

published, she described schooling as a transition "out" of Maori culture. A deficit model of Maori was implied. Perhaps when she left the relatively insulated and intact Maori communities of Horoera and Pipiriki (early 1940s) and moved to the more urbanized areas of Hawkes Bay and the Bay of Plenty (1950s), Ashton-Warner witnessed the disintegration of Maori language, traditional leadership, and patterns of life (Sylvia 1956d). Maybe her ideas about cultural maintenance changed. Whatever the explanation, the section of her teaching scheme that had not been included in the original New Zealand version was reinstated in *Teacher*. How, then, did the two versions differ?

While the account written for Americans extolled the value of transitional readers as a "bridge" to Janet and John, the original *National Education* articles had adopted a very different stance. There the transitional readers were described as a failed experiment. In the article entitled "Organic Reading," "Sylvia" (1956a) described how she had

tried to meet this division between the climate of a room and an imposed reading book by making another set of hooks from the immediate material, but all I did was to compose another dead vocabulary. For although they are closer to the Maori children than the books of the upper English middle class, their vocabulary is static too, and it is not the answer to the question I have asked myself for years: What is the organic vocabulary? (97)

Similarly, in "Organic Writing," she explained that no published text could take the place of a child's own writing:

The drama of these writings could never be captured in a bought book. It could never be achieved in the most faithfully prepared reading books. No one book could ever hold the variety of subject matter that appears collectively in the infant room each morning. Moreover it is written in the language that they use themselves. (Sylvia 1956f, 54)

This attitude toward her transitional readers in the *National Education* articles was identical to that of New Zealand's educational authorities.

I have argued that, as an academic, professional, and administrative discipline, education in New Zealand constituted Ashton-Warner's theory and method as innovative, progressive, and "what we go about trying to inspire other teachers to do" (*Myself*, 111). Her work in Fernhill attracted considerable interest among the Hawkes Bay inspectors. The director general of the government Department of Education, Dr. Beeby, had stated that Ashton-Warner and her work were to be encouraged (Hood 1988). Her theory also came under academic scrutiny when the chief inspector of the region, Rowland Lewis, invited two professors of education, Fieldhouse and Bailey from Victoria University of Wellington, to review her methods. They found the children's levels of literacy

impressive: "They could read like mad" (Fieldhouse as cited in Clemens 1996, 50). But what might be the wider social impact of "lifting the lid of the underminer"? Fernhill was in an urban area and, as Fieldhouse put it, their stories made public "all the gossip of the pa" (as cited in Clemens 1996, 55). Bailey wrote, "Their stories were full of violence and four-letter words" (as cited in Hood 1988, 143). What if one of the tabloids got hold of this?

A potential community problem arising from scandal-mongering and erupting violence was not the only reservation of officialdom. There seemed to be a contradiction between the practice of eliciting key words "from the inside" of a child and solidifying these into published readers for "other" children. Beeby commented that "the discrepancy between her theories and her insistence that we publish the books for wider use nagged at me" (as cited in Pearson 1984, 88). Similarly, Bailey told Sylvia "quite strongly that no reading books published in advance, and lacking the immediacy of the children's freshly remembered experiences and feelings, could take the place of her own method" (Hood 1988, 143). Beeby asked the Hawkes Bay senior inspector, Rowland Lewis, to discuss this with Sylvia Ashton-Warner. He wanted to see her theory and teaching method encouraged but was uncertain of the value of yet another set of "imposed" readers (Pearson 1984). In other words, would the key words of others, when congealed as commercially printed texts, become yet another "plastering on of foreign stuff"? (Ashton-Warner 1958, 45).

In her New Zealand *National Education* articles, "Sylvia" agreed with these ideas of the surveilling authorities—inspectors, university professors, and the director of the state education department. In her local publications, she agreed that the transitional readers contradicted her theory of organic teaching. But when writing for Americans in *Teacher*, she wrote of these as both a bridge to, and based on, the American material. All her life, Ashton-Warner had struggled against her own "incredible tendency ... to imitate those I admire," her habit of "patterning myself on other people" (*Myself*, 201). She tried, she said, to become someone "no longer enslaved by the fear of the responses of those I love to my intransigent ways" (*Myself* 182). But throughout her life, Sylvia continued her narcissistic need for the kiss of authority and was inclined to put on a show for potential admirers.

In *National Education*, and later in *Teacher*, Ashton-Warner quoted Beeby, the director general: "[L]ife as a whole is too complicated to teach to children. The minute it is cut up they can understand it, but you are liable to kill it in cutting it up" (Sylvia 1956f, 54). Here, as in other occasional references, she was clearly aware that the thesis advanced in *National Education*, in *Spinster*, and in *Teacher* was in tune with the "understood design of today's education" (*Teacher* 1963, 207). Through her reading, her pedagogy, and her writing she explored connections between psychoanalysis, art, and (albeit to a lesser extent) social

theory. These were also the threads of mainstream progressive education during the 1940s and 1950s, the time she taught in New Zealand primary schools. But Ashton-Warner did not engage in open discussion of her ideas: in *National Education*, she used a pseudonym. She saw herself as an artist, not a teacher, an artist forced by circumstances into teaching; she used teaching and children as "raw material" (Endeavour Television). When writing about education, she wrote in a literary style—novels (*Spinster*, *Bell Call*) or a combination of diary entries, poetry, reconstructed classroom scenes, and references to poets and philosophers (*National Education* articles, *Spearpoint*, *Teacher*). In the 1950s and 1960s her educational writing fell into the widening chasm between literature and science. The novels were didactic and her nonfiction fictional (McEldowney 1969).

During the 1970s, Ashton-Warner's work was read, particularly in the United States, as compatible with the more politically motivated progressivisms of the 1960s-1970s (see Connor and Radford with Robertson, this volume). But Ashton-Warner's ideas were not compatible with the "free schools" or "deschooling" favored by many 1970s activists (*Spearpoint*). She believed in compulsory attendance, and she believed in formal school discipline. In *Bell Call*, one of her lesser-known novels about education, Ashton-Warner defends compulsory schooling against a "hippie" mother who refuses to send a child to school: "Come ye wild ones, call the bells, and learn the true freedom of the spirit to be found only within the framework of discipline and order" (*Bell Call*, 231). Ashton-Warner's view of the purpose of schooling would sit equally comfortably within a conservative framework: "Come all children, call the bells, the length and breadth of the land. Come and receive education. Education to understand, to sort out the good from the evil, the truth from propaganda, and to preserve the heritage of the past" (*Bell Call*, 231).

As I conclude this chapter, I fear other women's responses to it. The narcissistic, "other-centered" personality so evident in Ashton-Warner is also characteristic of many of us who do academic work. In my interviews with PhD graduates, I heard many statements like "I've got my PhD, but I still feel a fraud" (Middleton 2001). Despite my years of experience I, too, am sometimes generally devastated by rejection by publishers or poor reviews. But my anxieties run much deeper than that. Will my chapter be an anomaly in an anthology of "other" women who celebrate and adulate Sylvia as one of feminist educational writing's international foremothers? Have I committed some kind of matricide? Am I an undutiful daughter? Have I been disloyal, and will I be pilloried by New Zealand colleagues for desecrating the reputation of one of our own? In late mid-life, have I become an ingrate, a traitor, a character assassin?

This was not my intention. My argument was fueled by indignation that Sylvia Ashton-Warner's claims of rejection by, and rejection of, New Zealand

and New Zealanders had been unquestioningly accepted overseas and that this international "had press" had constructed a distorted view of education in my country. This pushed me into the unfamiliar and somewhat uncomfortable position of "devil's advocate" for New Zealand education in the 1940s-1950s. Accordingly, my central concern became the historical, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions of possibility for her theory's production at the time and place. In my work with student teachers, my emphasis is similar. I want them to understand the constraints and possibilities of the historical, political, geographical, and cultural settings in which they live and teach. In my classes, I sometimes use Ashton-Warner's writing as a model of "situated" educational theorizing. When I discuss questions of narrative "truth" with the students in research methods courses, I use as examples some of the conflicting accounts of Ashton-Warner's life in film, biography, and autobiography. And so her teaching and writing continue to enter mine.

But re-reading Ashton-Warner as an older woman, I have felt less sympathetic toward her personally than I did in my more youthful readings. I am irritated by a lack of generosity in her response to her literary success and by a denial of her encouragement by education officials. I become increasingly impatient with the tantrums, addictions, and bitterness that characterized yet were forgivable in her youth; they seem to have intensified and are no longer tolerable in her old age. When I re-read her final book, *I Passed This Way*, I wanted to shout, "Grow up!" On the basis of this postmenopausal reading, I no longer find her example or her fictional writing personally seductive. In fact, I intensely disliked her later novels. That would be another story, if I felt inclined to write it, but I do not. At last I have laid her ghost to rest. I doubt that I shall pass her way again.

Notes

¹ *Myself* was written in 1941 but not published until the early 1970s.

² Editor's Note: Sylvia means to refer here to Olive Shreiner, a South African socialist, anti-establishment radical, and also a writer. Shreiner's discourse against imperialism, colonialism, and women's oppression grew, like Sylvia's, out of arduous years of struggle with the writing establishment. Sylvia spelled Olive's name in her diaries as "Olive Schieinen", and this confused rendering from quick jottings and memory is clearly at work in a slightly altered form in the line from *Myself*. Her personal papers include diaries of quotable quotes from major theorists, and Olive had her own rather large section in this material, as evidenced in MS 3432 Commonplace Book 1942 in the Sylvia Ashton-Warner Archives at the Alexander Turnbull Library.

³ There is a lot of informal (albeit usually unpublished) discussion as to whether Dr. Allen was a neurologist. Normally one would see a psychiatrist, but at the time there would have been few psychiatrists in the country.

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