

Book Review

Ellen Rose

On Reflection: An Essay on Technology, Education, and the Status of Thought in the Twenty-first Century

Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

On the uncertain but relatively breezy assumptions that: on the one hand our species survives both the intellectual malaise that festers beneath the shrill accusations and mindless celebrations cluttering the mass media, and the physical hazards arising from everything from ecological breakdown to thermonuclear war; and, on the other hand, that we haven't taken entirely to heart Stephen Hawking's advice (Moscowitz, 2010) to flee to some other planet, then future archivists, anthropologists or archaeologists (depending on what form the available detritus from the twenty-first century might take) may be forgiven if they look with puzzlement at whatever bits and chards of our society that they can reasonably reconstruct.

Even if we manage to avoid the horrors of the past one hundred years (two officially labeled "World Wars," various genocides, unprecedented technological change and all the ethical conundrums it brought, the systemic building and broad-spectrum degradation of political democracy, and more importantly the ecological ravages of climate change all blended with the imminently calamitous consequences of overpopulation), there will be lots of opportunities to ask the simple (but not simplistic) question: What were these people thinking? The equally simple (but also not simplistic) answer will probably be: Not much and certainly not deeply enough.

It's not that we don't *think*. In fact, there are plenty of brains—supplemented by armies of computers churning out artificial unintelligence—operating at hyperspeed in and among the lofty pinnacles of global corporations, the shaky corridors of national governments, the eerie offices of self-congratulatory "think tanks," the ether of cyberspace and even in the allegedly "ivory towers" (but, more likely, the bricks, mortar and poured concrete) of academe. The problem is that, notwithstanding some genuinely impressive research and product development in some domains of medicine, communications and the design and engineering of mental and physical prostheses, most of us do not think *seriously* about much of anything.

Celebrity gossip, natural disasters, *les terroristes du jour*, FIFA football and Olympic Games results and scandals, collapsing currencies and fragile economies and, of course, ongoing clashes of apparent civilizations and the "new big thing" mobile communications devices all pass fleetingly, frantically, feverishly and frenetically through our overstimulated and underdeveloped brains, leaving us awash in so-called information that is immediately misinterpreted, badly processed and promptly forgotten as we flutter from one thing to another without taking time to *understand* anything that we have encountered.

Or so it seems.

Though she wouldn't use such breathless prose to define our collective conundrums (or, at least, the dilemmas that burden those of us with the great good fortune to live in places where bombs aren't falling and where we have confidence that the water we drink and bathe in is not contaminated with deadly bacteria), Ellen Rose is concerned about us. She is a university professor who teaches in the Faculty of Education in the University of New Brunswick, a respectable institution in Fredericton, the (almost) bucolic capital (pop. 60,000) of the small province of New Brunswick (pop. slightly more than 750,000), in the large but largely empty and mainly inhospitable, but comparatively safe and comfortably secure country called Canada.

Professor Rose worries about the fact that we don't think quietly and contemplatively. We don't meditate, ponder or brood over complexities. We face deadlines, we seek "quick-fixes," and we believe that flexibility and nimbleness of thought are not so much preferred as essential to survival mechanisms in our fast-paced, high-tech environment of nasty personal and ruthless global competition. Only hares are welcomed; tortoises need not apply.

"The rapid flitting from one topic to another, from one country to another, one activity followed by another activity, not only reflects the hyperkinetic quality of contemporary life in the technical industrialized world, but also the lifeworld of the learning atmosphere oriented toward a profound superficiality, to say which is not oxymoronic."
– David Geoffrey Smith, 1999.

It would be easy to reduce Professor Rose's message to a common bromide such as, "just chill," meaning "relax," "take it easy," "wake up and smell the coffee," "enjoy the moment," "take a few deep breaths" and other banalities which we all agree to be pleasant coping mechanisms in our otherwise frenzied lives. That, however, would do her a disservice and would merely reveal how little we truly want to know about the thought behind the title of her book. She provides a meditation *On Reflection* and we do ourselves no favour if we notice its elegantly unpretentious cover, glance at a few pages, nod knowingly, and rush off to our next "interaction" or "transaction."

On Reflection is a slim volume. It is just 109 pages long with a concise five-page introduction plus twelve pages of notes, bibliography and index. Teachers and scholars are her most likely audience, and you may well ask if this affable and accessible work is appropriate for you—particularly if you are employed directly or indirectly in the public sector where you are professionally engaged in the quest for innovation in practical research, policy development, administration or in "front-line" public service provision. The answer, in my opinion, is an unqualified yes!

Ellen Rose takes thinking *seriously*, but she does not take pride in obscurity substituting polysyllabic verbosity for profundity. She muses helpfully about the importance of communication technologies, providing a restrained version of Marshall McLuhan's arguments about the transition from a spoken to a written and now to an electronic culture. She reminds us that the printed page was not just a useful way to preserve text, but wholly altered our thought patterns and the social context of communication. It mattered that we no longer relied on story-

tellers for knowledge and orators for persuasion. She also explains we are currently experiencing a vast shift in social relations because of the Internet, email, texting and tweeting. What we think is structured by how we think, and the effects are not always salutary. We are experiencing the “thought revolution” in what we call “real time” and, although the social, political, economic and *neurological* implications are being vaguely felt—and already causing no small amount of anxiety—we will not comprehend fully the results for our entire civilization for decades to come, if, indeed, we come to comprehend them at all.

“It doesn’t matter *what* you think; it only matters *how* you think.”
– Christopher Hitchens, 2001

In *On Reflection*, we are urged to appreciate ways of thinking and to link thinking to other aspects of our culture. Technology is an important determinant, but it isn’t everything. It meshes with prevailing neoliberal political and economic doctrines, with the monetization of human relationships, the commercialization of social practices and the dominance of instrumental values that (to say nothing of moral and ethical considerations) actively prevent long-term social analysis and planning to meet the “challenges” mentioned at the outset of this review.

Ellen Rose does not address such specific problems and she certainly offers no concrete solutions. She offers a primary document only; however, her advice is of tremendous practical importance for it provides a foundation for all those who possess the power and authority to make public decisions. *On Reflection* is also an “indictment” not of individual decision makers or of particularly bad choices, but of the entire dominant category of thought which “devalues reflection by privileging product over process and superficial coverage of ... content over in-depth exploration. It does this,” she continues, “by demanding that knowledge be fragmented and learning quantified.”

Let us not fool ourselves. All of us, including those who think professionally, as it were, are often enough thought-poor; we are all far too easily thought-less. Thoughtlessness is an uncanny visitor everywhere in today’s world. For nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly.”
– Martin Heidegger, 1966.

What happens in schools, which remain her primary focus, also happens in what passes for real life—in personal choices, family dynamics, workplace environments as well as in municipal, subnational and national governments and even in massive international summits wherein “bad faith” bargaining is not merely the result of the character flaws of the participants, but also the product of systemic exclusion of the possibility of minimal reflection. Attention is focused on the closing communiqué and not on the content of any agreement that is reached. In fact, it is not uncommon for a sturdy outline of the results to be written before the palaver begins. Details about applications can, after all, be worked out later ... though they almost never are.

Ellen Rose explains herself toward the end of the book in a way that will be maddening for everyone who is so invested in a toxic system of hollow cliché mongering that alternatives appear quite abstract, impractical and unattainable. She does not present an unambiguous path to a pay-off. To anyone asking “So, what good is it? What is my “take-away,” she says this:

“... reflection as I define it is neither a tool nor process, neither an approach to problem solving nor a form of professional navel-gazing. It cannot be reduced to definitive steps and algorithms; indeed, ... it cannot be taught, because it is not simply a way of thinking but a way of being.”

Reflection does have some essential components, of course. It involves being attentive to language. It requires commitment to constant questioning (including self-examination) and, therefore, an attending modesty. It assumes the importance of interdisciplinarity, but without the discomfiting absence of rigor that all too often reduces intellectual cross-fertilization to an exchange of shallow platitudes, mixes versatility with incoherence and yields far less than the sum of its parts (Harris, 1980: 287-289). It is nonetheless prescriptive. It rests on the assumption that “reflection *can* be cultivated [emphasis in the original],” but only if it is understood as “an *ethical* commitment [emphasis added].”

Reflection cannot be inculcated using PowerPoint slides. It is not compatible with interactive technology. It doesn’t benefit from role-playing exercises. Instead, it is something that happens in the privacy of your own mind and your own space.” It is integrative, summative and evaluative. It is both sceptical and affirmative. It requires care and attention. It “unfolds in its own good time” and, while the opposite of “hasty thought, it emerges as the only authentic basis upon which to take action. Reflection leads naturally to action or, better, to *praxis*—the realization of theory in practice. Everything else is spasm.

Rose says that reflection is the exception to the admonition to “think on one’s feet,” “hit the ground running,” and “make rapid-fire decisions.” It is the opposite of what I chose to call AADD (administrative attention deficit disorder) which compels people in positions of influence to be besotted with the next “new big thing,” and to discard it before implementation so as not to miss out on the even newer next big thing.

Students of language have made the convincing case that semantics (so contemptuously dismissed by proponents of a no-nonsense enthusiasm for action) is essential since, if we are not careful about the meaning of our words, we literally won’t know what we’re talking about. Likewise, reflection is essential to taking right action. If we don’t take the proper time to reflect, we literally won’t know what we’re doing.

I have read *On Reflection* three times over the course of three months: first quickly, then intensely and, most recently, slowly and patiently. It is not opaque or abstruse. It is clearly and plainly written. Perhaps for that reason alone it deserves the time needed to let its wisdom sink in. I have a few problems with it, but they are minor, tangential and not worth print. I have benefitted from all three readings. Ellen Rose has invited us to reflect upon her reflections on

reflection. I am pleased to have accepted her invitation. I recommend strongly that others do as well—especially those who claim that they don't have time for philosophical language-games and mind-games and jump to the false conclusion that such time-wasters might be what this book is about. That we don't have time *is* the problem. We need to take more of it.

I understand that people have been socialized to avoid printed pages that aren't riddled with "bullets." I realize that there are people who follow the inane instructions once given to me by a College Dean; namely, "if it can't be said on a single sheet of paper, then it isn't worth saying." If, however, we remain subservient and submit to such instructions, then we will continue rushing to judgement, witlessly trying to fix problems but merely compounding them, and therefore only accelerate the speed with which we will not only dig our various holes deeper, but (again literally) lose sight of which end is up.

Incidentally, for anyone who has read the work of "progressive" philosophers from John Dewey onward and found them vaguely wanting, Ellen Rose clears up that enduring sense of dissatisfaction. I am in her debt for that alone.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches Cultural Anthropology and Modern Political Thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

References

Harris, M. 1980. *Cultural materialism: The struggle for a science of culture*. New York, NY: Vintage.

May, E. 2015, December 10. COP21/Day 10. Retrieved December 11, 2015 from <http://elizabethmaymp.ca/cop21-day-10/>

Moskowitz, 2010, August 10. Stephen Hawking says humanity won't survive without leaving Earth. Retrieved November 8, 2015 from <http://www.space.com/8924-stephen-hawking-humanity-won-survive-leaving-earth.html>