

Between the Teacher's Past and the Student's Future: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Pedagogical Presence

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INTRODUCTION

The rise and spread of totalitarianism in Europe in the twentieth century would forever haunt Hannah Arendt. She could never stop thinking about the destruction and pain it caused and whether there were political safeguards that could prevent anything like it from ever happening again. The difficulty with trying to secure such prevention, however, as she explains in *The Human Condition*, is that while there is a “basic unreliability”¹ to people as individuals, there is also an “impossibility of foretelling the consequences”² of any collective action. The awkward truth, in other words, is that the past can never guarantee the future.

This year's conference theme calls our attention to this Arendtian “gap” and what it might mean for the philosophy of education today. At first blush it appears to be merely debilitating to our educational hopes (if teaching and learning cannot secure the future, what can?). But in his recent book *The Beautiful Risk of Education*,³ Gert Biesta asks his readers to see both “weakness” and “risk” as not just acceptable, but even necessary, components of education. Given the current obsession with “strong” forms of teaching and learning that require measurable benchmarks for assessment, it is not hard to imagine why readers might be resistant to this request.

Biesta frames his argument early in the text by offering a number of important distinctions. In the prologue he explains his conceptualization of the three “domains” of education. The first is “*qualification*,” the second is “*socialization*,” and finally there is “*subjectification*,” the latter of which he defines as “the interest of education in the subjectivity or “subject-ness” of those we educate.”⁴ In describing his overriding purpose, Biesta writes: “The aim of the present book is to explore different dimensions of what I will refer to as the *weakness* of education,” and by “weakness” he means that “educational processes and practices do not work in a machine-like way.”⁵ He further claims that this “not working like a machine” quality of education should not be viewed as a problem to be fixed, but “as the very ‘dimension’ that makes educational processes and practices *educational*.”⁶

A short personal anecdote might help make clearer what I take Biesta to be driving at here. I once observed a teacher candidate in a grade three classroom teaching a social studies lesson devoted to the curricular outcome of “recognition of individual personal value in democracy.” The students were asked to trace their hands on construction paper. They then had to write on these tracings the answers to a number of direct and prepared questions, such as their favourite foods and movies. Finally, they had to cut them out and tape them to a decorated bulletin board just outside the classroom. The teacher candidate ended the lesson by asking all of the students to stand up and say in unison, “We are all unique.”

If the lack of irony here was not enough cause for worry, I suspect that Biesta's concern would be that lessons like the one just described do little to help children understand their growing "subject-ness" as "unique" beings and how they might contribute to a shared life with others in a democracy. Worse still, the children might be encouraged in the mistaken belief that subjectivity is revealed through the narrow options of consumer choice and the sharing of otherwise insignificant differences. And of course, the entirely predictable and teacher-controlled environment would serve to further diminish the educational potential of such lessons.

Since "weakness" is the very condition of genuine education for Biesta, it follows that "any engagement in education - both by educators and by those being educated - always entails a *risk*."⁷ He recommends that "we should embrace this risk and see it as something positive that properly belongs to all education worthy of the name."⁸ In the prologue he explains further:

The risk is there because, as W. B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility.⁹

Of course, none of the good things named here can happen in predictable or "strong" ways, which means we are inevitably left with education as "dialogical process."¹⁰ On my reading, Biesta's key argument is that if we are committed to the educational "domain" of "*subjectification*," or the growing selfhood of our students, then it behooves us as educators to pay attention to how "weakness" and "risk" can be manifested in educational dialogue in the right ways.

Biesta is explicit that "what is presented in this and the two preceding books should first and foremost be seen as an invitation for further theoretical and practical work."¹¹ In this essay I would like to accept this invitation and offer what I hope will be a contribution, however modest, to our understanding of this dialogical encounter between teacher and student. More specifically, I employ psychoanalysis to argue that the capacity of the student to keep learning and growing through the "weakness" and "risk" of education is somewhat dependent upon the teacher's capacity in turn to be attentive and reassuring.

In calling this capacity a teacher's *pedagogical presence*, I am aware that I am deviating from Biesta in a significant way. As he explains later on in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, the related idea of "coming into presence" was one he himself "picked up from Jean Luc-Nancy," since it offers "a much more existential way to talk about the subject."¹² In particular, Biesta is attracted to the way it captures the student's learning as "a new beginning."¹³ While I am certainly sympathetic to the idea that the student's learning should be open and that no one, especially the educator, should attempt to prescribe reductive ends for it, I also believe it is possible to usefully describe the psychic struggles of students and how teachers should best respond to them. My primary concern here, in other words, is with the relationship between the teacher and the student and how from a psychoanalytic point of view the teacher can be ideally *present* to the student in dialogue.

To develop this core argument I have organized what follows into two sections. In the first, “Psychoanalysis, Anna Freud, and the *Via Media* of Pedagogy,” I explain the “enquiry” approach to psychoanalysis that I care about and which I believe has important insights to offer our understanding of education. I then turn to Anna Freud’s text *Psychoanalysis for Teachers and Parents*, which Deborah P. Britzman claims provides the basis for “an unfinished project.”¹⁴ I believe it does an insightful job of describing the modern psychic tensions inherent in contemporary education. In the second section, “Doing What is *Needed*,” I explore a poem by the American poet William Stafford entitled “With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach.” I claim that it offers an interesting and compelling example of Biesta’s “*subjectification*,” and that reflecting on it psychoanalytically reveals why the *pedagogical presence* of the teacher, in the form of attentiveness and reassurance, is often so necessary in the dialogical encounter that is education.

PSYCHOANALYSIS, ANNA FREUD, AND THE *VIA MEDIA* OF PEDAGOGY

Anthony Elliot quotes Theodor Adorno’s remark that in psychoanalysis, “nothing is true but the exaggerations,” to argue that “the more outrageous features of Freud’s work - the fictions of psychoanalysis, if you will - actually contain key insights into contemporary social and political realities.”¹⁵ Scholars interested in psychoanalysis today tend to recognize the imaginative boldness of Freud’s initial formulations, but see the specific details as somewhat shaky. What is true, I think, as Elliot indicates, is that psychoanalysis still offers interesting and important insights for us today, and it is frequently the most “outrageous features” of it that point us in the right direction.

In “An Outline of Psychoanalysis” Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis no less, defensively claims in the second paragraph that: “The postulates of psychoanalysis rest on an immeasurable wealth of observations and experiences, and only the person who has repeated these observations on himself and others has set about being able to pass his own judgement on them.”¹⁶ However, he was also very aware of whose disciplinary territory he was then treading on, since in the very next line he says: “Psychoanalysis makes a basic assumption, the discussion of which remains the preserve of philosophical thought.”¹⁷ This “basic assumption” was that between the brain with its associated physiological functions, and the mind with its wishes and fantasies, there was an explanatory gap that the “unconscious” could fill. If true, this would radically alter nothing less than our view of selfhood from the very inside out. In other words, Sigmund Freud could see that the unconscious provided an entirely new view of human nature and development that would have far reaching consequences in terms of how we would consider traditionally philosophical topics such as knowledge, ethics, and what it was to lead a good life.¹⁸

In *The Freud Wars: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*,¹⁹ Lavinia Gomez summarizes the history of attempts to justify psychoanalysis as either a strict science or a form of speculative personal and social interpretation. She claims that it is best to avoid such a false dichotomy and to see it instead as “a form of enquiry which potentially challenges the empirical–hermeneutic divide, by pointing to the unity beneath the scientific ground of matter and the interpretational

sphere of mind.”²⁰ The “unity” here involves the recognition that while not purely “scientific” or “interpretative,” psychoanalysis still draws upon the empirical in terms of the facts of human experience, inside and outside of the clinical setting, and takes a dose of hermeneutic interpretation from a range of different academic disciplines. The result is a form of enquiry more concerned with asking questions and suggesting possible lines of interpretation than with defending overly rigid and narrow formulations.

Today it is not hard to find compelling examples of psychoanalysis as a form of this enquiry. One such account is provided by Stephen Frosh. In an essay “The Appeal of Psychoanalysis,” he claims that such enquiry begins today with a deep appreciation for “the *reflexivity* of human beings,” which he defines as “the way in which people seek meaning through interpreting their own actions and thoughts and those of others.”²¹ He goes on to say that: “The argument here is that one universal characteristic of people is that they try to find ways to work out what they are ‘about’ and - on the whole - that they do this in the context of their relationships with others.”²² Despite recognizing that there are a number of different schools of psychoanalysis with a range of theoretical emphases, Frosh insists that what brings them all together is: “A shared belief that unconscious phenomena exist.” It is: “A practice that is geared to understanding those phenomena and exploring what happens to them in the context of the live encounter between analyst and patient (or ‘analysand’).”²³ Notice that these two core assumptions are open and flexible and welcome different descriptions of both “context” and “encounter” between real people.

Drawing on empirical data as well as different interpretative approaches, psychoanalysis can help us stay keenly interested in both the “weakness” and “risk” of education in the complex and lived realities of schools, from the perspective of both teachers and students. The classic text that has been influential in promoting such a psychoanalytic interpretation of teaching and learning is Anna Freud’s *Psychoanalysis for Teachers and Parents*, which contains the four lectures she first delivered to teachers. Freud opens it with an expression of sympathy for teachers: “You are obliged,” she writes, “ceaselessly to *act*. The life and movement in your classes or groups demands constant interference on your part.”²⁴ The idea of education as “interference” is an interesting one, and it informs the development of her ideas in the lectures. Freud claims that “Human beings obviously develop earlier than we generally imagine.”²⁵ She even goes so far as to insist that “*the education of a child begins with his first day of life.*”²⁶

Central to Freud’s view of education was not just the immediate and felt conflict between teacher and child, but the conflict between the very institution of education and the child’s most intimate wishes. “Education,” writes Freud, “always wants something from the child.” She elaborates further that in her view “The universal aim of education is always to make out of the child a grown-up person who shall not be very different from the grown-up world around him.”²⁷ Referring to this as nothing less than “the starting point for education,”²⁸ Freud highlights the tension between what education wants and what the child wants by claiming that: “In consequence there arises a kind of “guerrilla war” between educator and child.”²⁹

For Freud, the only real hope for education in this scenario is “to establish from the outside a reasonable agreement between the child’s ego, the urge of his impulses, and the demands of society.”³⁰ This is by no means an easy task, however, and requires constant negotiation. The last lecture in the collection, “The Relation Between Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy,” opens with the famous line, “We must not demand too much from one another,”³¹ and I wonder if this might be an accurate motto for Freud’s view of education as a whole. For, as she tells us: “psychoanalysis, whenever it has come into contact with pedagogy, has always expressed the wish to limit education,” since it “has brought before us the quite definite danger arising from education.”³²

What does it mean to describe education as “dangerous”? According to Freud, if the so-called “guerrilla war” between teacher and student is too one-sided from either direction, the student can be harmed by an education that fails to help them develop in maturity. Freud goes so far as to say: “The task of a pedagogy based upon analytic data is to find a *via media* between these extremes – that is to say, to allow each stage in the child’s life the right proportion of instinct-gratification and instinct-restriction.”³³

In other words, pedagogy as a *via media* or “middle course” would help to address the conflict between the unfolding interior unconscious life of the student and the exterior reality and demands of the outside world. Schematically, it is not hard to imagine how this pedagogy might fail to find the right balance. If it is too consistently indulgent of the student’s unconscious impulses and desires, or too frequently harsh and punitive in terms of demanding an allegiance to societal demands, the student will either fail to appreciate appropriate social boundaries or feel too anxious to experiment with their life and learning. To achieve the ideal *via media* would require the teacher to be properly dialogical in terms of being regularly attentive to the thoughts and feelings of the student, and consistently reassuring in times of difficulty. The overall goal would involve being *present* to the student by recognizing the often intense and confusing feelings that accompany the work of growing up, so that they might better learn to value both their own interior life and their relationships with other people.

DOING WHAT IS NEEDED

I turn now to a work of literature to illustrate *pedagogical presence* in action. I have always felt that the poetry of William Stafford has a direct simplicity and yet a great depth, which makes it ideal for unearthing basic yet powerful human realities. “Stafford could be characterized as a poet of the ordinary,” Judith Kitchen writes: “What is eventful may be something that is hardly noticed; the poet’s task is to notice, and to listen.”³⁴ This view has been confirmed by Stafford himself, who in *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life*, shares that: “Most of my mental operations might be expressed in simple sentences,” but only, he cautions, “if the sentences were aimed right and sequenced perfectly, with perhaps a few modulations in the tone and pace used in the saying.”³⁵

A poem that achieves these qualities, and that I would like to share and reflect on, is entitled “With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach.” It describes an interaction between

a father and daughter, but I feel there are important psychological parallels between teachers and parents in terms of the quality of their relationships with their students and children, respectively. More specifically, for my purposes the poem is illustrative precisely because it reveals the importance of a certain type of presence and dialogue. It goes like this:

We would climb the highest dune,
from there to gaze and come down:
the ocean was performing;
we contributed our climb.

Waves leapfrogged and came
straight out of the storm.
What should our gaze mean?
Kit waited for me to decide.

Standing on such a hill,
what would you tell your child?
That was an absolute vista.
Those waves reached far, and cold.

“How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?”
“As far as was needed,” I said,
and as I talked, I swam.³⁶

On the surface this poem tells the story of a father and daughter at the beach. What could be simpler? Yet Biesta’s notion of “*subjectification*” asks us to pay attention to the ways that, in dialogue, a student, through “weakness”, is always potentially becoming a “subject,” or is growing in their sense of themselves and their place in the world. From a psychoanalytic stance this poem, I believe, shows how important it can be for the teacher to respond to the student’s concerns with the *pedagogical presence* of both attentiveness and reassurance the student *needs* to keep thinking and growing in the face of inevitable unconscious tensions and conflicts.

The first stanza opens quite positively, with Stafford and his daughter scaling the “highest dune” and, with an untroubled “gaze,” they see the ocean “performing.” They even “contribute” their “climb” to the scene, and there is a feeling of connection not only between father and daughter, but also between them as human beings and the natural world around them. While as readers we might feel quite relaxed at this early point, we also might be speculating about where the narrative arc of the poem is taking us.

In the second stanza the ocean suddenly becomes a “storm,” and Kit “waits” for her father to describe how they feel about the “leapfrogging waves.” Notice that she neither blurts out how she feels, nor runs away. We sense, however, that she is still connected to her father even though she is “waiting.” As Anna Freud pointed out, in psychoanalysis the time of learning for the student is often not predictable and fails to align with the scheduled demands of education.

The third stanza becomes contemplative and Stafford addresses the reader directly in his own voice by asking “what would you tell your child?” The “absoluteness” of the scene, with the waves “racing far and cold,” tips us off to the internal world of both

characters. They have become much more alert, perhaps even a little anxious. Before Stafford has a chance to say anything further Kit suddenly speaks for the first time in the poem to ask: "How far could you swim, daddy, in such a storm?" In a telling reversal of Freud's notion of pedagogy as teacher "interference," Kit "interferes" with her father's reverie when she breaks the silence by posing a difficult question.

Of course, there is an implied symbolism at work here that is not hard to figure out: the "storm" represents for Kit "the difficulties of life." As the poem opens father and daughter are together with no hint of tension or conflict, but as the "storm" appears in the lines that follow, so does Kit's worry. Her initial "waiting" for her father to say something is soon replaced by a direct question. But what does this question mean? Psychoanalysis might suggest that what Kit is really asking is, "How far would you go to help me in the 'storm' of life?" On this reading, the "storm" would serve as both a symbol of "life's difficulties" but also as the unconscious provocation that initiates Kit's nervous question.

Her father answers her by saying "As far as was needed." Suddenly it is hard to shake the conclusion that everything up until that point in the poem has been a set-up for this response. Stafford's answer is really what this poem is about, and this reading is supported when we as readers speculate about what else he might have said. If we think about a spectrum of possible replies, on one end there would be an attempt to lighten the situation through overstatement. Stafford could have said something like "I can swim forever!" or "No storm can get me!" And if he raised his voice and made animated swimming gestures as he spoke we might wonder if he was trying to deflect Kit from the emotional gravity of her question. One could also imagine Stafford being quite serious, and perhaps even sullen, as he points out to Kit that "storms can be real trouble," or "you always have to be careful in life." He might imagine that he was helping Kit by bracing her for the more trying realities she will face as she grows up.

The problem with both hypothetical responses is that they might not really help Kit to deal with her feelings. She might anxiously wonder why her father has to exaggerate so much, or why he is so gloomy every time a "storm" comes. In either scenario she might worry that there really is something to be afraid of, but she would be no closer to realizing what that might be or how she should deal with it.

As the poem stands, I believe Stafford achieves the right Freudian "middle course." His answer, "as far as was needed," is neither a jocular overstatement nor a depressing retort. In truth, of course, his arms might get "tired" in any particular "storm," and as Kit grows up she will have to learn to deal with such "storms" on her own. There is even a scenario where her elderly father may need her to help him deal with the "storms" of old age. But for now, her father is patiently with her in dialogue and, if she is lucky, she will remember this moment of tenderness and it will sustain her in her father's absence.

The last line, "and as I talked, I swam," has a self-reflective quality that folds the poem in on itself. We are left to wonder how his response to his daughter was itself a form of the very "swimming" he alluded to a few lines earlier. Clearly, Stafford

wants us to appreciate how the very act of responding to his daughter's question was not separate from the content of the answer, but an embodiment of it.

From a psychoanalysis conceived as a form of enquiry, I conclude that because the "weakness" of education at least partly results from the unconscious conflicts of students, the "risk" of education unavoidably involves psychic tension and negotiation. Here is where the teacher's psychic "past," or their own internal history of growing up and attempts at mature integration, meets the inevitable doubts and confusions of the growing student. What the teacher should consider in this meeting is the importance of educational dialogue as establishing a *via media* or "middle course." Being *pedagogically present* to the student, through both attentiveness and providing reassurance, can ideally help them keep learning into an uncertain future.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 244.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Gert J. J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).
 4. Ibid., 4, (emphasis in original).
 5. Ibid., x.
 6. Ibid., (emphasis in original).
 7. Ibid., (emphasis in original).
 8. Ibid., xi.
 9. Ibid., 1.
 10. Ibid., 3.
 11. Ibid., xi.
 12. Ibid., 143.
 13. Ibid.
 14. Deborah P. Britzman, *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 95.
 15. Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.
 16. Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psychoanalysis," in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London, UK: Penguin, 2006), 1.
 17. Ibid.
 18. See John Hanwell Riker, *Ethics and the Discovery of the Unconscious* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) for a sustained argument that the unconscious makes the achievement of "maturity" a worthy personal ethical goal.
 19. Lavinia Gomez, *The Freud Wars: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 15.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Stephen Frosh, *A Brief Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4, (emphasis in original).
 22. Ibid.
 23. Ibid., 11.
 24. Anna Freud, *Psychoanalysis For Teachers And Parents*, trans. Barbara Low (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), 12-13.
 25. Ibid., 18.

26. Ibid., 39, (emphasis in original).
27. Ibid., 45.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 57.
30. Ibid., 84.
31. Ibid., 92.
32. Ibid., 95-96.
33. Ibid., 104-105.
34. Judith Kitchen, *Understanding William Stafford* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 13.
35. William Stafford, *The Answers Are Inside the Mountains: Meditations on the Writing Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 14.
36. William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), 120.