

Pedagogy of Perplexity: Reimagining the Role of the Poetic in Education

Rachel Longa

Teachers College, Columbia University

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives its proof in turn.

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

If we are to imagine education as the practice of turning the soul, we must have some point of orientation in mind: it cannot be merely a turn for turning's sake. For Socrates, this point is the form of the good, which "gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower."¹ It is for this reason, perhaps, that Socrates found himself compelled (if begrudgingly) to banish poetry from the *kallipolis*: our engagement with the poetic rarely yields the kind of propositional knowledge that might be attained via the exercise of the faculty of reason through the practice of dialectic. This project, following humbly in the footsteps of Eduardo Duarte's *Being and Learning*, is an attempt to resist that compulsion by thinking about the role of the poetic in education, specifically in terms of its capacity to orient the soul in a different direction. I will argue that an encounter with the poetic can both incite and sustain an experience of puzzlement, which might engender a state of waiting, and can cultivate the practice of meditative thought. In doing so, I hope to free the poetic from the demands of reason and open up an educational space, external to the sphere of "truth-as-certainty," in which the poetic might dwell. In other words, it is an attempt to imagine what it might be like (and perhaps even suggest that, in our commodity-oriented world, increasingly fraught with a pervasive and pernicious anthropocentrism, it might indeed be time) to expand the purview of education such that it encompasses not only the practice of calculative thinking, but also the practice of meditative thinking as well. It is an attempt to welcome poetry back into the *kallipolis* with open arms.

In characterizing truth as the guarantee of knowledge, Socrates precludes the possibility of an apprehension of truth that is not subject to the machinations of the intellect. Because the reality that is made manifest in the realm of the forms is accessible only to the intellect, the proper function of truth is to tether the soul to that reality by certifying the representations of the forms within it. Thus, the acquisition of knowledge about reality might be characterized as the development of a comprehensive taxonomical system, or infrastructure, within the intellect that organizes these representations. This model of truth is functionally almost identical to the one Martin Heidegger refers to as "truth-as-certainty,"² which, he argues, has been the dominant conception of truth since the dawn of metaphysics as we know it today. The main difference between Socratic truth and truth-as-certainty is that, in the former, the locus of the guarantee of truth is in the transcendent realm of the forms, whereas, in the latter, that guarantee is built into the infrastructure of the intellect itself: it is

no longer transcendent, but merely subjective. In truth-as-certainty, it is precisely our ability to situate the contents of our experience within the infrastructure of the intellect that renders them true.

Fundamental to the possibility for any kind of access to truth in both the Socratic and Heideggerian models is a kind of orientation, and, in both cases, a state of puzzlement, as distinct from an act of immediate cognition, serves to catalyze a turn. According to Socrates, “If the one is adequately seen itself by itself or is so perceived by any of the other senses, then ... it wouldn’t draw the soul towards being” (*Republic*, 524d). If the data presented by empirical experience do not elicit any “sundering confusion,”³ there will be no need for reorientation, as the intellect will be able to situate them seamlessly and fluidly within its conceptual infrastructure. If, however, “something opposite to it is always seen at the same time, so that nothing is apparently any more one than the opposite of one, then something would be needed to judge the matter. The soul would then be puzzled, would look for an answer, would stir up its understanding, and would ask what the one itself is (*Republic*, 524e). In both the Socratic model and truth-as-certainty model, the state of puzzlement necessitates some act of judgment. And in both cases, the active force of that judgment is the faculty of reason. The difference lies in the way the question of “what the one itself is” is ultimately resolved. In the truth-as-certainty model, this resolution comes in the form of an explanation that situates the representation of the perception within the organizational taxonomy — the data is accounted for by the intellect, and the turn that puzzlement elicits is merely reflexive. In the Socratic model, however, the resolution comes from the realm of the forms. While reason is the force that can propel the quest for truth along the circuit between the realm of intellect and that of the forms, it is ultimately the transcendent reality, not the intellect itself, to which the question is being posed and by which it can be answered. Therefore, this puzzlement, for Socrates, would “lead the soul and turn it around towards the study of that which is” (*Republic*, 525a). It would orient the soul toward the realm of the forms and propel reason beyond the circuit that is bounded by the realms of perception and the intellect.

While the Socratic reaction to puzzlement may be structurally different from that elicited within the model of truth-as-certainty, insofar as it extends beyond the realm of the intellect, it is functionally the same insofar as it is ultimately driven by the will to understand — to gain guaranteed knowledge. Thus, in the Socratic model, the role of puzzlement is instrumental: it invigorates that will. This is nicely illustrated by an image that Socrates himself presents at a moment in the *Republic* when he and Glaucon find themselves at a dialectical impasse, unsure what the next step in their argument will be. Socrates says to Glaucon, “We must station ourselves like hunters surrounding a wood and focus our understanding so that justice doesn’t escape us and vanish into obscurity, for obviously it’s around here somewhere” (*Republic*, 432b). We can picture Socrates and Glaucon, each crouching on one side of a wood, training his attention on its contents, bearing aggressively down on it, intent on catching up something that lurks inside in order to situate and implement it within the argument.

The “wood” they surround might be imagined as an analogue of the Heideggerian notion of an “object-sphere” (*QCT*, 121). In subjecting the contents of our experience to a process of intellectual organization, we necessarily objectify those experiences because we have to represent them to our consciousness in order to effect this organization. The truth of the *object* is the only truth that can be verified, and Being is, for man, ossified into the object-sphere, which becomes the purview of all inquiry into truth. Our relation to this sphere is one of control and domination — we can surround it, rather than it surrounding us. According to Heidegger, however, this stance not only fails to guarantee the apprehension of truth, but in fact prohibits it:

Nature, man, history, language, all ... remain that toward which at any given time [the sciences that take them as their objects] are directed, but that in which, in the fullness of its coming presence, [these sciences] can never encompass by means of their representing. This impotence of the sciences ... is grounded ... in the fact that in principle the objectness in which at any given time nature, man, history, language, exhibit themselves remains only one kind of presencing, in which indeed that which presences can appear, but never absolutely must appear. (*QCT*, 175)

As long as nature, man, history, language, and all of the aspects of Being that elicit inquiry into their truth are subject to an objectifying representation, those inquiries will be fundamentally limited by their inability to encompass that which is lost in that objectification. Along with all modes of exhibition comes a simultaneous withdrawal from appearance, and the demarcation of the object-sphere fundamentally occludes the possibility of that which does not appear — of the possibilities not instantiated at any given moment in time. This aspect of Being remains imperceptible precisely because it is characterized by withdrawal and nonappearance, and it can never be accounted for in man’s re-presentation precisely because it does not present itself to begin with.

In the mutually enforcing relation between subject and object, each locks the other securely into place, and the system they comprise functions as wholly self-contained. The comprehension of “what is as a whole” as the contents of the object-sphere — the domain of man’s intellectual reign — anchors man’s position as subject and obscures non-objectifiable aspects of being that lay outside that realm: as long as Socrates and Glaucon await their prey with their attention trained on that wood, they will be prevented from the apprehension of anything that’s taking place behind their backs. Thus, in order to apprehend the realm of Being outside the object-sphere as a possible locus of truth, the subject-object relation must be disrupted.

The force that keeps this structure in place — that keeps Socrates and Glaucon intent on that wood — is the will to understand, which propels the soul toward the realm of the forms on its quest for truth in the Socratic model. Thus, in order to effect the aforementioned disruption, this will must be stilled. Curiously, Heidegger identifies an experience of puzzlement, which invigorated the will in the Socratic model, as the potential means of its arrest. In other words, the *structural* role of puzzlement with regard to truth is the same for Heidegger as it is for Socrates: it is that which can catalyze some kind of turn. Its actual function, however, is altogether different. For Socrates, the soul’s orientation toward the real — or the realm of

the forms — is hindered by the draw of the perceptible realm, while for Heidegger the soul's orientation toward the real — or Being — is hindered by the will of the intellect. Thus, while for Socrates, puzzlement orients the soul away from the perceptible realm toward the realm of the forms, for Heidegger puzzlement can instead orient the soul away from the realm of the intellect toward the openness of Being. For both Socrates and Heidegger, the reaction to puzzlement results in a traversal of the limits of the perception-intellect circuit, but there is a profound difference in the direction of those motions.

In an attempt to begin to characterize this difference, I would like to offer another image to contrast with that of Socrates and Glaucon surrounding the wood, that of the interlocutors in Heidegger's imagined dialogue between a Scientist, a Scholar, and a Teacher on a country path. These figures are surrounded by openness, wandering aimlessly — the incarnation of Heidegger's description of the "essence of man in the great age of the Greeks" (*QCT*, 131). This essence is "to be beheld by what is, to be included and maintained within its openness and in that way to be borne along by it, to be driven about by its oppositions and marked by its discord" (*QCT*, 131). Man, in this scenario, is no longer the central subject of Being. Rather than beholding what is, he is beheld by it. He is not confining what is within his own sphere but is rather included and maintained within *its* openness. But most importantly, he does not impress his will upon it in an attempt to represent and classify. Instead, he is being subjected to its machinations — "driven about by its oppositions" — and changed, affected, "marked by its discord." "Therefore," Heidegger concludes, "in order to fulfill his essence, Greek man must gather (*legein*) and save (*soezein*), catch up and preserve, what opens itself in its openness, and he must remain exposed (*aletheiuein*) to all its sundering confusions" (*QCT*, 131).

Being is characterized here as full of opposition, discord, and confusion — that which cannot be reconciled via the function of reason. And the task here, in the face of the complexity of Being, is not to "relate it to oneself, to the one representing it, and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the normative realm" (*QCT*, 131). It is not to make some attempt to clarify the confusion, reconcile the opposition, or quell the discord. Instead, it is to hold these things — to preserve them through a simple, nonwilling apprehension of them — and be in relation to them as what they are rather than trying to reify them into comprehensible objects.

In the imagined conversation that takes place between the occupants of this image, Heidegger characterizes this stilling of the will to understand as a particular mode of waiting. The purpose of his text (as is, arguably, the case with the Socratic dialogues as well) is not necessarily to assert any kind of propositional knowledge, but rather to illustrate the kind of meandering thought that can lead to this state of waiting as one in which the thinker never truly becomes certain of any of the conclusions he draws, or, perhaps never truly draws any conclusions at all:

SCIENTIST: Again this restless to and fro between yes and no.

SCHOLAR: We are suspended as it were between the two.

TEACHER: Yet our stand in this betweenness is waiting.⁴

Here, the interlocutors remark on an apparent circularity that seems to be emerging from their conversation: they cannot seem to settle on a conclusive answer in the face of their inquiry. The teacher points out, however, that the suspension between yes and no — between the thing and its opposite, in a state of puzzlement — is, quite simply, what waiting, as the stilling of the will, is. In its submission to inconclusiveness, waiting “lets re-presentation entirely alone. It really has no object” (*DT*, 68).

This objectless state allows the relation between *energeia*, insofar as it is apprehended by man, and the primordial essence of Being to circumvent *idea*, which puts man in a similarly unmediated relation to that essence. In that relation,

the nature of man is released to that-which-regions and used by it accordingly, for this reason alone — that man of himself has no power over truth and it remains independent of him. Truth’s nature can come forth independently of man only because the nature of man (as releasement to that which regions) is used by that-which-regions in regioning both with respect to man and to sustain determining. Evidently truth’s independence *from* man is a relation *to* human nature, a relation which rests on the regioning of human nature into that-which regions. (*DT*, 84)

When he relinquishes the will to represent and explain, man allows himself to be released to “that-which-regions,” which may be described as something like the openness, or the expanse, in which both the unconcealed, to which man has perceptual access, and the concealed, to which he does not, abide. Thus, man is put in relation not only to that which he can perceive, but also that which withdraws from him, and in the establishment of this relation man inhabits his nature as “releasement to that-which-regions.” And while truth itself “remains independent” of man, his nature does play a role in the emergence of the nature of truth. But rather than fabricating or even eliciting truth, man’s nature is “used” by the openness of being, perhaps as something like a point of orientation, toward which truth can come forth and to which that which is unconcealed can show itself. Thus, the locus of the guarantee of truth, in the Heideggerian model, is in the relation between the nature of man and the nature of truth.

Thought is a key component in the establishment of this relation, as “Openness itself,” which is that-which-regions, “would be that for which we could do nothing but wait” and “into which we are released by way of waiting, when we think” (*DT*, 68). Through thought man releases himself into openness and thereby orients truth in the relation between himself and that openness. This thinking, however, is of a particular character, and is markedly different from representational thinking, which is the primary mode of what Heidegger characterizes as calculative thinking. In calculative thinking, “we always reckon with conditions that are given. We take them into account with the calculated intention of their serving specific purposes” (*DT*, 46). The given conditions, in this case, might be characterized as the known — or the contents of our intellectual infrastructure — that, in the process of explanation, serves to situate the unknown. And the intentionality of this kind of thought resonates with the resolution-driven approach to puzzlement that emerges out of the model of truth-as-certainty. Calculative thinking, in other words, seeks to explain. It “never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is” (*DT*, 46). Meditative thinking is the kind of thought that occurs in the “betweenness” of

puzzlement. It “demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all” (*DT*, 53). When we pursue a path of meditative thought, we “engage” with opposition and discord, rather than trying to will them into reconciliation. Thus, it would seem that the practice of meditative thought, characterized by the nullification of the will to understand through the engagement with puzzlement as such, is a practice that would induce a state of waiting and thereby put man in relation to the openness of being in such a way that he would fulfill his nature and the truth that exists independent of him would be guaranteed in that relation.

Because the model of truth-as-certainty, as it has emerged out of the Socratic model of truth, provides the foundation for pedagogy in the modern age, the apprehension of truth does not appear to be distinct from the production of knowledge; and with knowledge-production as its sole purview, the *modus operandi* of educational practice is calculative thought. But even the establishment of a distinction between the production of knowledge and the apprehension of truth doesn’t guarantee that inquiry into truth belongs within the sphere of educational practice. It might be argued that this kind of meditative thought either need not or cannot be taught. On the first score, Heidegger might respond that “meditative thinking does not just happen by itself any more than does calculative thinking. At times it requires a greater effort. It demands more practice. It is in need of even more delicate care than any other genuine craft” (*DT*, 47). Thus, it seems only fitting that both modes of thought should be cultivated through education. Certainly the goal is not to put a halt to calculative thinking altogether, for each mode of thought is “justified and needed in its own way” (*DT*, 46) but rather to recognize that the calculative is only one mode of thought and to put into practice its counterpart so that our inquiries can be directed not only toward knowledge but toward truth as well.

The question, then, becomes, can meditative thinking be integrated into educational practice? And, if so, what might this pedagogy of perplexity look like? How might we curate an educational space in which the goal of inquiry is not resolution but rather the ability to stay with the question itself? Now I finally beckon the poetic onto the scene. In an encounter with the poetic, we experience a kind of puzzlement that can exert the powerful resistance to the will to understand that this pedagogy may call for. It should be noted that what I mean by “an encounter with the poetic” is something quite other than the interpretive or even evaluative work done in the field of aesthetics. According to Heidegger, “[one] essential phenomenon of the modern period lies in the event of art’s moving into the purview of aesthetics,” a phenomenon that has both resulted from and, in turn, deepened the entrenchment in the structure of truth-as-certainty (*QCT*, 116), for “the way in which aesthetics views the art work from the outset is dominated by the traditional interpretation of all beings”⁵ — the interpretation of beings as *idea-energeia*. In order to study art in a way that does not lock us immediately back into the subject-object relation, we must resist the inclination to objectify the work itself and remove our inquiry into the work from the purview of aesthetics.

“It is due to art’s poetic nature,” Heidegger writes, “that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual”

(*PLT*, 70). The defamiliarizing power of art, which results from its poetic nature, is a crucial aspect of its power to catalyze meditative thinking, and draw man into his nature and its relation to the nature of truth. In order to remain in a state of perplexity, we must first encounter that state, which is much less likely when we make our way through a field of perceptual experience that is always already interpreted: “Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds” (*PLT*, 25). When we listen to *something*, we have already identified that thing as object; when we listen for *something*, we await its sound rather than simply open ourselves to perceptual experience: “In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ears from them, i.e., listen abstractly” (*PLT*, 25–26). This does not mean that we must somehow muffle or interfere with our ability to perceive sound, but rather listen to sound *as* sound, rather than as the effect of an already identified object-cause. Thus, to enter into a state of perplexity as a result of perceptual experience, we must listen, look, perceive away from things. We must put ourselves in an oblique relation to beings such that we come into perceptual contact with them as *energeia* before that contact is mediated by *idea*. In other words, we must apprehend thatness prior to, and apart from, whatness.

This, however, is no simple task when we remain within an object-sphere filled with beings that do not strike us as unusual, and thus do not strike us at all: “In general, of everything present to us, we can note that it *is*; but this also, if it is noted at all, is noted only soon to fall into oblivion, as is the wont of everything commonplace” (*PLT*, 63). When we encounter an eminently categorizable being, such as a piece of equipment, its thatness is quickly and automatically mediated by its whatness: the pure fact that it is “disappears in its usefulness” (*PLT*, 63). To hearken back to Socrates’s example, when we encounter the commonplace, we encounter that which is “adequately seen itself by itself” (*Republic*, 524d) and will not elicit a state of puzzlement.

The work of art, on the other hand, is anything but commonplace. In the work, “the simple ‘factum est’ is to be held out into the Open” (*PLT*, 63). The createdness of the work of art manifests itself as createdness, unlike that of the piece of equipment, which is instead concealed by its utility. This has to do, in part, with the uniqueness of the individual work. In the work, what shows forth is the fact “that unconcealedness of what is has happened here, and that as this happening it happens for the first time; or, that such a work is at all rather than is not” (*PLT*, 63). The work of art, in other words, is a kind of happening — an event — and as such it resists ossification. Thus, one aspect of the nature of the work of art is that its thatness comes into view without the mediation of an assignation of whatness: the “uniqueness of the fact that it is rather than is not” becomes “luminous” (*PLT*, 63). The luminosity of this fact beckons our attention toward the work of art as what it is, thereby luring us out of the subject-object relation. This, however, is only the first step on the path of meditative thinking: in order for us to stay on that path, there must be something about the work that can hold us in this relation to it and still us in the absence of interpretation.

The stilling power of the work is derived from its essence as the instantiation of stasis, a state of equilibrium caused by opposing, equal forces: “Where rest includes motion, there can exist a repose which is an inner concentration of motion, hence a highest state of agitation, assuming that mode of motion requires such a rest. Now the repose of the work that rests in itself is of this sort” (*PLT*, 47). The role of the work of art is to house a conflict the motion of which cannot be sustained without such a locus for its repose. This conflict is the mutual opposition between world and earth, which is an “essential striving” in which “the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures” and in which “each opponent carries the other beyond itself” (*PLT*, 47–48). It is out of the relation of mutual opposition between earth and world that the openness of being emerges, and the work of art is the essential locus of both the instigation and the maintenance of this struggle: “In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this striving. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife” (*PLT*, 48). Just as the maintenance of perplexity is a necessary aspect of meditative thinking, the maintenance of the primal strife that can instigate that perplexity in the apprehension thereof is a necessary function of the work of art.

The work of art is thus simultaneously an analogue, a catalyst, and a guarantor of our ability to still the will to represent, reconcile, and understand. It wrests us from our complacency in the subject-object relation, displaces us from the object-sphere, and orients us toward the essence of the work of art as a happening of stasis. In an encounter with the poetic, we are held in its thrall, our awaiting turns to simple waiting, and we can tread — perhaps not forever, but at least for a time — along the path of meditative thought.

1. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 508d–e. This work will be cited as *Republic* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

3. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 131. This work will be cited as *QCT* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), 75. This work will be cited as *DT* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 38. This work will be cited as *PLT* in the text for all subsequent references.