

Rediscovering the Poetic in Education

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“A Pedagogy of Perplexity: Reimagining the Role of the Poetic in Education” presents the case that it is time to retrieve a kind of thinking that has been lost since Socrates. The author suggests that students and teachers are using only *calculative* thinking and that it is necessary “to expand the purview of education such that it encompasses not only the practice of calculative thinking, but the practice of meditative thinking as well.” To get into the mood required to think meditatively, one must abandon willing and instead adopt the virtues of waiting and openness. The first step down the path, the author suggests, is the encounter with the poetic, which enables one to abandon the search for clear knowledge, stay puzzled, and thereby find Truth. Although I think the author makes a strong case for the importance of meditative thinking, I disagree with the premise that meditative thinking is missing from the school. In what follows, I will suggest that meditative thinking is being taught in the school and that instead of reintroducing it, we should nurture what is already there. Before doing so, I will offer my interpretation of the main points of the author’s essay.

According to the author, truth-as-certainty (that against which Martin Heidegger positions meditative thinking) has its origin with Socrates: “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.” The Socratic model of truth must overcome puzzlement to build a system of clear and distinct knowledge. For Socrates, puzzlement (*aporia*) is a stimulus to seek out knowledge — a deficiency to be remedied. But the author, invoking Heidegger, suggests that puzzlement is not a deficiency; it is an opening to a kind of thinking that can uncover truth. This is meditative thinking, “the kind of thought that occurs in the “betweenness” of puzzlement.” The author uses *A Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking* to give an example of meditative thinking. In this dialogue, Heidegger gives an account of three thinkers on a path (*Feldweg*) that are trying to clarify what thinking is. This discussion between friends contains a repetitive back and forth, with each of the friends expanding and questioning the insights of the others. In other words, the dialogue *is itself* meditative thinking. The words they are discussing return like a mantra, each time becoming clarified and yet retreating, moving just out of reach.

Additionally, the significance of the path as a force in the dialogue cannot be overlooked. When one walks a path “deep into the night,”¹ one only sees the next few steps; the path-walker finds the path becoming visible and yet retreating. Also, the path presents itself as a task that requires a commitment but accomplishes nothing because (I assume) the path starts and ends in the same place (the edge of town, for example). The path suspends teleology because it goes nowhere, returning to its origins, yet the walkers commit time to walking it, that is, they commit time to

going nowhere. Meditative thinking from this perspective can now be described as a journey that requires a commitment of time, reveals itself by being followed, and continuously retreats from view.

The version of this dialogue published during Heidegger's lifetime (cited by the author)² includes a teacher (*Lehrer*), but the version published in Heidegger's collected works³ changes teacher to guide or sage (*Weiser*).⁴ A discussion of how this might affect the interpretation of the dialogue would require too much space, but I would like to point out that a guide on a path presents a clear image: one who directs and yet walks *with*.

Now we have a path to walk, but how does one approach thinking in this way? This, the author suggests, requires an encounter with the poetic. The author writes, citing Heidegger, that an artwork is an "instantiation of stasis." In the encounter with artworks, they show themselves as a clarity that retreats, revealing and concealing all at once. Like walking a path, the truth opened up by artworks is constantly retreating from view, in this case because it is the result of the "strife" between the revealing and concealing powers of world and earth. The poetic nature of art allows us to start thinking meditatively and to stay puzzled, to avoid a resolution of our puzzlement (*aporia*). Art, unlike most things that we encounter is unique, has no utility, and stills the will to seek concrete knowledge. To get to know a painting I must stay with it and puzzle over it. We might recall the example of Cézanne continuously copying masterworks in the Louvre. He consulted them as one might consult a master teacher, meditating with them to play with ideas and get on track, as a sort of rehearsal. Later in life, he would contemplate his favorites, still discovering bits of insight from his memories, which by then were retreating in his old age.⁵

In order to meditate as the walkers on the path or Cézanne do, we can encounter the poetic in an artwork. The author writes, "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," and, later, "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." We are, however, left without specific suggestions for placing meditative thinking in the school. I would thus like to offer here an image of an educator who practices with and through the poetic.

Given the dominance of calculative thinking in schools, an educator interested in meditative thinking is faced with a problem: he or she can no longer outright teach in the conventional way. Helping students acquire knowledge has become counterproductive. Rather, what is required is that the teacher is puzzled; that he or she is uncertain.

An encounter with an artwork in a classroom can call to mind a class looking at an artwork with a teacher prodding students: What do you see here? Notice the use of light and dark, chiaroscuro; and so on. This approach is what the author has argued against in light of Heidegger's aesthetics. Instead, I would like to offer as an example the music conductor, who does not present knowledge. The conductor teaches musicianship, which is getting into the mood of music. The conductor is the paradigmatic example of the kind of teacher that the author has in mind. Conductors

teach music (an artwork), through rehearsal (meditation), by conducting. In order to arrive at a clearer picture of the conductor I will describe each of these elements: the piece, rehearsal, and conducting itself, in turn.

THE PIECE. The lesson plan of the conductor is the piece. While another teacher might say, “I’m going to teach you this today,” the conductor says, “We are going to play this today.” The conductor comes to class with music to share and a mood instead of a list of student learning outcomes.

REHEARSAL. Rehearsal is the method of educating in a conducted music class. The path suspends teleology because it goes nowhere, returning to its origins, yet the walkers commit time to walking it, that is, they commit time to going nowhere. Like the thinkers on the path in Heidegger, the music group will play a few measures, attempt to put it in context, and try it again. One might falsely interpret the word as “re-hear,” suggesting students producing sounds so that the conductor can listen and evaluate, but rehearsal means to tell a story or recite a poem. The image of a rehearsal should be the players and conductor poetizing together. This is how students learn to get into the music, to dwell in its stasis.

The word rehearsal is also used to refer to the music class session (for example, “orchestra rehearsal”). Just as the thinkers are in a discussion (a sort of path) while on a physical path, the group rehearses at the rehearsal. This time is not about finishing the piece; it is about meditation within a musical fractal, with meaning given and retreating in each moment. Indeed, walking the path of rehearsal always starts and ends with silence — nothing is accomplished. The great conductor Carlos Kleiber’s rehearsals were described as “always moving toward an infinite point of truth just over there, just past the visible horizon.”⁶ The truth of music and the music itself can never be grasped; Heidegger’s *Weiser* is “one who points”; the conductor points “just over there,”⁷ in between silence.

CONDUCTING. Conducting is done in the musical moment. When teaching students how to get into the music (to “turn their soul”), the conductor works within the stasis of music, the moment of clarity that immediately retreats. Conducting is an encounter not only with music; it is a musical encounter, a dwelling in poetic thinking and being-with. The conductor points down the path, towards the truth just past the horizon, and guides by travelling with the students. As to what is being taught though, the most that one can say is that the student and teacher have meditated together.

In conclusion, I fully support what the author has argued: that it is time to open a space for meditative thinking in schools. But where we must look to begin is not only in theory; we must look to the modern practitioners of *mousikē technē* in the school, the teachers of music.⁸ I now realize, however, that by attempting to describe what can be learned from the conductor, I have lost what I seek. What I would like to suggest, then, is that educators join in making music, for one cannot capture what the conductor teaches.

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1. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 89.
 2. Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, 3d ed (Tübingen: Verlag Günther Neske Pfullingen, 1959), 28.
 3. Martin Heidegger, *Feldweg-Gespräche (1944/45)*, vol. 77, Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 1.
 4. The text, *Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking* (Harper and Row, 1966) was translated from *Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit – Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken in Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen Neske, 1959). The German text was updated, however, with the publication of *Feldweg-Gespräche (1944/45)* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), and *Lehrer* was changed to *Weiser*.
 5. Nancy Locke, “Paul Cézanne Revered the Old Masters, Yet Influenced Waves of Modernists as They Broke with the Past,” *Humanities*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/januaryfebruary/feature/the-museumgoer>, accessed March 3, 2015.
 6. Charles Barber, *Corresponding with Carlos: A Biography of Carlos Kleiber* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). 285.
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Babette Babich, “Mousikē Technē: The Philosophical Practice of Music in Plato, Nietzsche, and Heidegger,” *Articles and Chapters in Academic Book Collections*, 2005, Paper 23, http://fordham.bepress.com/phil_babich/23.