

## That “not yet” of the present

### *Educating to meaning*

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The rhetoric of an education that has lost its way and is confined to the margins of epistemology now faces the need to move away from (solely) inquiring into the forms and specificities of its own questions. The dimension of the unexpected, the necessary revisiting of our representation of the future, and scenarios that appear to have no future prospects, have brought questions of meaning urgently back to the fore. To seek purely theoretical answers or shut down questions is to risk missing out on the bright light of inquiry, as well as on the poetic significance of an event that “signals and awaits us” (Deleuze, 1973, p. 134).

The figure of exile, which distances us from the known and the obvious and allows us to rename, to act, to endow shape and direction, may offer, together with the act of poetry, a way to access meaning (Nancy, 2017). Which, if it is to be forward-looking, requires an education that is nourished by a sensitive logos, an education that is not detached from the world. And hope.

A philosophy of education that is attentive to aesthetic experience – viewed as a “breach of insignificance” (Bertin, 1974, p. 217) drawing us into a language with the power to “retell and re-found the world” (Cambi, 2010, p. 137) – concerns itself with situations underpinned by anxieties surrounding prophecies and the paralysis of history and narrative, and seeks to generate experiences that enable poetic space to become poetic through the speaking of words that are “laden with intent” (Zambrano, 2004, p. 29).

*Keywords*: exile, poetic, hope, dis-birth, meaning.

*Quel "non ancora" del presente. Educare alla significanza*

Le retoriche di un'educazione dispersa e confinata ai margini dell'epistemologia sono poste ora di fronte alla necessità di allontanarsi dall'interrogare (solo) le forme e le specificità delle proprie domande. La dimensione dell'imprevisto, il necessario ripensamento della rappresentazione del futuro e gli scenari che paiono privi di orizzonti hanno riportato le questioni di senso a farsi urgenti. Il rischio di rispondere per vie esclusivamente teoriche o di chiudere le domande è di perdere quel carattere di bagliore del ricercare, nonché la significatività poetica di un evento che "ci fa segno e ci attende" (Deleuze, 1973, p. 134).

La figura dell'esilio, che ci allontana dal noto e dall'ovvio e ci permette di rinominare, di agire, di dar forma e direzione può essere, insieme al gesto poetico, una via di accesso al senso (Nancy, 2017) che, per divenire progetto, ha necessità di un'educazione che sia nutrita da un logos sensibile, da un'educazione che non sia priva di mondo. E di speranza.

Una filosofia dell'educazione attenta all'esperienza estetica, considerata come "rottura dell'insignificanza" (Bertin, 1974, p. 217) e come vissuto che ci lega ad un linguaggio capace di "ridire e rifondare il mondo" (Cambi, 2010, p. 137), è portata a confrontarsi con situazioni che rivelano ansie di profezie, paralisi della storia e della narrazione e a costruire esperienze che consentano allo spazio poetico di divenire poetico, parlando parole "cariche di intenzione" (Zambrano, 2004, p. 29).

*Parole-chiave:* esilio, poetico, speranza, dis-nascere, senso.

*If all time is eternally present  
all time is unredeemable.*

T. S. Eliot

We shall start from an image, a painting by Paul Klee that Walter Benjamin wished to keep by his side and with which he was somewhat obsessed. It is the image of an angel, the *Angelus Novus*, painted in 1920: a stylized, almost childish, figure of angel whose arms/wings are held upwards, almost as though to surrender to something unexpected, frightening, or at any rate surprising. Benjamin purchased the oil and watercolour piece in 1921. Except for a short period when he left it at the home of a friend, the painting was to remain with him to the end of his life.

The philosopher himself described it as follows:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1969, p. 249).

Benjamin's remarks offer us a sort of misunderstanding of time, a view of it that inverts its flow. The angel removes his gaze from the future. If there is to be a solution, some prospect of salvation, it seems that his attention must be directed towards the past. There, the cause of the storm may be glimpsed; it may be sensed. Benjamin evokes a form of redemption: the past (be it remote or recent) draws attention to our perception of time, inviting us to redeem ourselves by moving towards the future.

Benjamin argues, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, that there is a secret understanding between past generations and the present one: "Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that precedes us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power to which the past has a claim" (Benjamin, 1940, p. 74). However, it is not our object here to address the theological connotations of redemption, but rather to point up the value of the gifts and legacies consigned to us by the past, demanding a form of recovery for those who have not succeeded in living their own histories to the full.

Let us take this notion and relate it to a vision that we might surmise to have had some influence on the thinking of Benjamin, whose past heritage included Jewish mysticism: in this domain of thought, angels are believed to never praise a second time and are "new" precisely because they are reborn in order to praise and while praising. What must give us pause, in this regard, is the *upset* appearance of the angel figure. This unexpected aspect, in conjunction with the ephemeral character of angelic beings, yields a sort of questioning surprise. From an angel representing history, we might expect to discern a lasting message. Yet, here we glimpse, via the images evoked by Benjamin's words, the wholly fragmented nature of rupture and of interruption.

The redemption referred to by the philosopher is not to be understood solely in the Messianic sense, but also in the operative sense. Indeed, the term appears to be bound up with recovery; that is to say, a way of attributing meaning, of realizing acts of memory that witness to the senseless and the thought-provoking, via the shattering of the golden image of a mythical time that is implicit in official history. An image that only considers “hard facts”, thereby excluding the possibilities that the mere facts left no room for. Benjamin inverts such a perspective on time: the present bears witness to and redeems the past. The gaze with which the Angelus invites us to contemplate time is thus an ethical gaze, a gaze that attends to the seemingly unimportant, to the fragments. Thus does Benjamin attempt to counteract the mindless consumption of the modern world: by reminding us that we have lost our ancestral capacity to contemplate, to retain a state of *upset*.

According to Bauman, the angel turned and history changed direction even more radically. While Benjamin sees the past as a source of admonishment, Bauman theorizes that we are frightened of the future. The sociologist of liquidity even coined the term *retrotopia*, to describe backward-looking perspectives: in this scenario, the angel looks towards the future with fear, while a lack of confidence in progress makes it look to the past with nostalgia. The future is no longer seen to be situated in the domain of happiness, but rather reveals itself to be a source of fear, terror, uncertainty, and the inability to make plans (Bauman, 2017).

Our own vision of the future has been evolving at an uneven pace, especially since the public health emergency due to COVID-19/Sars-CoV-2 induced us all (under a regime of *panpatia*<sup>1</sup>) to cling to the present and cast uncertain glances towards the future. The disruption caused by a sudden period of unforeseen and crushing life experience has upset the continuity of time; the ongoing state of tension and the failure to solve the public health issue continue to fuel a sense of misfortune: on moving everyday practices away from the places where they previously played out, the unexpected causes differences to fluctuate, subjecting them continuously to a threshold regime, under which we find ourselves constantly before, and in contemplation of, the dual dimensions of before and now, inside and outside, progression and interruption. Both time and space find occasion for reflection in the narrative that is produced.

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Mancino (2020), p. 35.

Some have theorized (even before the advent of Covid-19) that, while the past is a phantom that lends itself to representation, the figure of the future remains elusive. A sociologist of the everyday, Paolo Jedlowski, even suggests that it is possible to have a memory of the future, a memory of how we imagined the future (Jedlowski, 2017). Increasingly, especially for young people, with their fears, and widespread tendency to suffer isolation, mortification, and even depression and suicide, the future that is remembered is a future that once seemed rich with possibilities, an open space. The image of the future is increasingly marked by despair. Such desperation is heightened by its incapacity to narrate itself. To the extent that it cannot be narrated at all.

Byung-Chul Han suggests that the name of the contemporary crisis is not *acceleration*, but rather a *temporal dispersion* (Han, 2017). This is caused, amongst other factors, by a sort of absolutization of *active life* that is sustained by imperatives connected with work, productivity, and neoliberalism. In light of this, Benjamin's notion of recovery takes on, in the pedagogical reading proposed here, the meaning of an urgent need to revitalize the contemplative life, to reaffirm the ethical and aesthetic need that characterizes formative processes in education.

Writing in an earlier period, Bertin situated the tension inherent in education – given the complexity and crises inherent in the historical present – within a framework that we might define as wisdom. In *Educare alla ragione* and *L'inattuale* (1977, 1995), his proposal to educate reason, in the midst of social conflict (in the late 1960s) and class struggles, remains a powerful idea in the face of the collapse of ideologies, of the so-called great narratives, and the shift to “weak thought”. The contemplative life – insofar as it is dedicated to beauty, slowness, thoughtful reflexivity, critical attention and problematizing thinking, capable of asking questions, of challenging conformism, of questioning complacent or automatic, performative and obedient responses to the calls of a neoliberal culture that permeates not only pedagogical action, but even pedagogical thought – has and can retain the power, at this historical juncture, to stimulate an alternative perspective on pedagogy's homage to an efficient productive system that is imposed by asking subjects to adapt to “their times”; a homage that overlooks the risk of capitulating to a “technicalism that is directed by others and is far removed from what might be considered its own purpose, that is to say, to form human beings to truly fulfil their human nature” (Tramma, 2015, p. 25).

In the face of a disruption of our sense of time, of a crisis that alternates between forms of *heterochronia* and forms of *uchronia*, Bertin invites us to reconsider the pedagogical as a space of *utopia*: a call, that is to say, to critical, reflective, and above all self-reflective rigour, which reminds us that crises are not ontological, but depend on human circumstances and interactions and that therefore pedagogy must *ontologically become a pedagogy of crisis*, in terms of generating spaces where problematic situations may be contemplated with perplexity, ambivalence, doubts, and uncertainty. And in terms of guiding this process in the direction of reason.

For pedagogical thinking is necessarily utopian thinking, but in the terms proposed by Salvatore Veca, of a reasonable utopia, one that remains faithful to the exploration of the possible (Veca, 2002). It is from the category of the possible that Bertin's thinking (Bertin, 1977, 1995; Contini, 2005; Contini, Fabbri, 2014) points to the perspective of existential planning. Such an approach, while taking contingent factors into account, is not confounded by or caught up in the meshes of the present, and is able to move toward a future that is certainly characterized by risk, but above all by our commitment to and engagement with it.

Benjamin's gaze from the perspective of the Angelus Novus risks the paradox and immobility of a movement that comes to a halt if one thinks about history or thinks about the future, a sort of dialectic "at a standstill". And so the gaze of pedagogical commitment is called to restore to this dialectic its restlessness, a restlessness that encompasses subjectivity and circumstances, together with contexts, the world (disquiet) that frightens and worries us, knowledge, and restless knowledge, as also observed by Elena Madrussan (2017).

The restlessness that permeates present time and the thinking and practices involved in educating and transforming (if we believe, following Massa, that the fulfilment of educational action is an introspective process that acts on openings, hurts, transformations, and risk, in that the value and the meaning undergirding educational experience is the possibility to revisit, analyse, explore, and interpret experience in an intentional way – Massa, 1991; 1975; Bertin, Contini, 2004) is not just an interpretative category, but rather becomes a form of intervention: a *manoeuvre*, as Madrussan defines it, from the French word *manoeuvre*, which comprehends both the gesture itself and its substantial meaning of an action performed with one's hands. (Madrussan, 2017) And this intervention, in a suggestive manner, effects a rotation, an inversion of one's movement and one's gaze.

Intervening with one's own work, displacing, implies operative, material engagement. The inversion becomes a new posture of gaze (Mancino, 2014), a dwelling on the gaze itself (Mancino, 2020b). The displacement produces a true change of locus, generating a dynamic that is simultaneously one of decentring, disorientation (with respect to place, given forms, roles), and centring, of concentration towards an inner space that seems to have freed itself from both the cult of action centred on output and the cult of action that celebrates the subject.

Indeed, Bertin had long since spoken of Utopia as a necessary and fertile thoughtfulness that is required to think alternatively, to move. And he identified this situating wisdom as the existential task of the educator: a figure who is able to find the wisdom to inhabit time and situations and contexts, but with an attitude of hope.

Let us therefore make our own of this dual dimension of inhabiting time and manoeuvring our own ethical position as an aesthetic movement of our gaze, which turns its attention to *a recovery* that is freed from the bonds of instant production and roams the space of the *aesthetics of the mind* (as defined by Bachelard, 1972), thereby restoring wonder at the ordinary, renewing our capacity to look with astonishment and admiration, and allowing ourselves to break free from a priori meanings.

This act of torsion, which has us learn from our own gaze, moves us towards epiphanies of meaning, responds to our leanings towards utopia and our pedagogical commitment to prefiguring new models of humanity, calling subjects back to a configuration of the future as the construction of their existence in the world, tending in the opposite direction to conformism.

Let us consider that such a dynamic – which responds to the loss of time and meaning with an “otherwise” of significance, with meanings that can barely be discerned, but which do not fall to the level of nonsense – speaks to the need and necessity to work in a kind of border territory, where educational tension is composed of images, words, and poetic universes with the power to both guard and reveal that which is already there. But which needs to be expected.

Educating also implies meeting the other in an unexpected region: it means finding oneself responding to an aesthetic call that powerfully challenges and leads into spaces of experience composed of traces, vestiges, and quests for futures that are not ‘progress’, but rather generative space.

A fertile concept for experiencing this path is offered to us by the notion of *dis-birth*, linked to the experience/category of *exile*, both of which terms from the thinking of Maria Zambrano.

The twisting manoeuvre, the turning towards the gesture of redemption, of taking back, of feeling again, is a first step: that of detaching or separating oneself. In this sense, the gesture of redemption moves in the direction of helping us to grasp that which eludes us, that which eludes the logic of measurement and performance, and the logic of educating oneself or others while keeping at bay that which is difficult to perceive, because it is subtle, sensitive, delicate, and apparently lacking in current relevance.

Hence the need to recover questions. Hence the invitation to engage in a difficult behaviour, expressed by a little used and, indeed, often devalued verb: *linger*. To *linger* is not just to hesitate or to have doubts. It is not just the gesture of those who do not know how to act. *Lingering* is a wise verb, the verb of those who know how to take the appropriate amount of time so as to act more thoroughly, to allow more room for thought, even for doubt. In Latin, *indutiae* means *truce*. The time of *truce* is the time required to lead one's thoughts and resources to safety.

The first phase of exile as disorientation, as loss of meaning, becomes for Maria Zambrano a figure of thought and feeling. This philosopher was herself forced to undergo the condition of uprootedness. She initially suffered, but then she voluntarily took this uprooting upon herself, indeed she claimed it as her own, almost blessing it and attributing it with an ontological quality. The unknown homeland and the non-place, which from suffering is transformed into a vital condition, become – in the words of Maria Zambrano – auroral nudity, a denuded humanity.

The loss of meaning, as well as the loss of direction of time, re-voke and call on the dimension of exile as expropriation, as a condition whereby that which is our own, our familiar surroundings and interior is denied or obfuscated.

Zambrano's experience of *destierro*, of exile entails the possibility to be uprooted and undone, followed by the act of *being dis-born* and *being re-born*. The origins towards which to return to become a source of questioning; to go into exile is to be born of oneself, to project oneself further afield, into the possibilities of the "not yet". Once the impossible homeland has been lost, all possible homelands remain open to us.

For Maria Zambrano, this is the golden place of philosophy and, thus, the gold place of poetry, for poetry means to hear things in their nascent state.



This pathos of incompleteness, this intercepting of what Jankélévitch defined as ‘almost nothing’ (2011), a sort of particle of a nascent, primitive nature, draws our attention – our quest for what appears to be in hiding, denying itself, and remaining ineffable – to an active circling of reason and the logos of the senses, to an elusive something that is almost not there, which indeed does not exist “but is at work” (Jankélévitch, 2019, p. 346)

Exile reconfigures *being* as essence, drawing it far away from *being* as remaining in a static position, and situating it as a poetic subject that is capable of new beginnings, new dawns, and new sunrises.

Poetry knows how to go about not shutting down questions and conserves, always and afresh, its own inaugural nature, its own possibility of saying once again, of rekindling the bright glow of inquiry, as well as the poetic significance of an event that “signals and awaits us” (Deleuze, 1973). Through exile, which is also the exile of meaning, grows an irresistible attachment to the perceptible poetics of things, to their being – for Maria Zambrano – details of fullness, parts that explode the senses towards the most ordinary, inadvertent, dusty phenomena of existence, the most everyday of everyday life, together with a sort of rejection of the ambition to know their whole, finite meaning.

Through this gaze, the act – dear to the Spanish philosopher – of redemption takes place. This is the ransom of an intimacy that is already, as Levinas would have it, intimacy with someone, or intimate attention (Levinas, 2016, p. 158). Intimate attention and recovery meet in the welcoming, taking care of, and first and foremost the making authentic of one’s way of being in the world, of thinking, of feeling, of laying claiming to one’s own poetics, and one’s own words: “thinking has an internal dynamic that takes place, so to speak, within the subject itself. If thinking does not sweep the house clean from the inside, it is not thinking, it will simply be a logical clarification which repeats that which what has already been thought on the outside” (Zambrano, 1990, p.73).

To attend to our inner selves, in contact with the things that speak of us, to recover them and ourselves, is to dialogue with the invisible and give it voice. Hence, recovery features taking (*captare*), turning back (*re*) and drawing out of (*ex*): It is a going back to take; it stands for a retrospective gesture that realizes an expression, an escape. It is about freeing what has been left behind or hidden. It can also be a time left behind or an unspoken time. Recovery corresponds to an act of memory, of recollection. But also of planning for the future.

Intimate interiority, gathering the things of time and self, clothes, words, images is an autobiographical gesture (Mancino, 2020) of memory, of recovery, and of active, forward-looking poetry. It is, in fact, “a search for something lost and indispensable, something that needs to be looked at again” (Zambrano, 1997, p. 71).

The gaze that is renewed in *recovery* is not mere commemoration, but relies on a more perceptible quality of thought, which endows the restless look toward the Angelus Novus, with an unprecedented quality, a new possibility: “life and life experience are not dealt with by thinking about them (...) but by suffering them”, Maria Zambrano (2008, p. 97) tells us.

“If we can understand, if in some way we have access to a threshold of meaning, this happens poetically” says Nancy (2017); when every stable foundation of sense, of time gives way, the future loses its known structure.

The everyday, now proven – by the sudden disruption of our perceptions by a worldwide phenomenon – to be necessary, also reveals how much we need stability and continuity, how functional this need actually is.

We find it useful to rely on patterns, prophecies, anticipations of homogeneous worlds and scenarios. But we can learn to revitalize this same sense of time, this same feeling, via moments, gestures, actions, words, misunderstandings, and glimpses that belong less to the space of time understood as *kronos* and more to the space of *kairos*, which allows for epiphanies of meaning.

The fleeting, nascent moment – a moment that is produced via a kind of consensus or sharing that nonetheless grants freedom to the sensibility of the other, thereby establishing a distance and the possibility for the agreement to be betrayed – generates a moment that is not only poetic, but pedagogical, fostering a going beyond, in the direction of reasonable utopias.

Now, poetry opposes our prosaic tendencies as readers, and “leads inner experience toward a “place” where all reality (and we in it) is reaffirmed *ab imis*, in primitive form, is fused with a language that re-tells and re-founds the world” (Cambi, 2010, p. 137). Re-telling and re-founding, when revisited from a poetic perspective, not only trace the flow of time, but actually cut across it, opening up an escape route, a fissure, a new space in time. Roland Barthes, in commenting on writing, drew on a powerfully intense word that is extremely physical, tactile, and gestural. As a “work” that is inscribed in doing, in the *poiein*, the (poetic) word is a *fissuring*: it divides, cleaves, interrupts. And it does not only do this with a material (such as the flat or

concrete matter of a sheet, clay, a wall, leather...). It does so by swinging between that which is compact and that which requires air, between that which is welded and that which is broken (Barthes, 1973, p. 37).

And it is in this fissure that we glimpse not answers, not solutions, but *mystery*; it is into this fissure that we lean to carry out our work of *recovery*. This must be our starting point, following Simone Weil, who wrote of the need for “inevitable humility when one is not sure of oneself for the future”, arguing that in this situation “two things are irreducible to rationalism: time and beauty. It is from here that that we must begin” (Weil, 1993, p. 65)

Recovery then is a work that speaks of loyalty, that resonates with return. It is the encounter with the other because it is a practice of attention, contemplation, and listening. For, as Simone Weil teaches us, it is the contemplative who recovers the other.

Recovery, which leans forward to listen to the voice of things, acquires the semblance of the redemption of our gaze, as suggested by Rilke. For the great poet, contemplating things does not rescue the subject from transience, but rather within transience. It is by means of such a dynamic, both within and against temporal dispersion, through the search for meaning alluded to by Bertin, that a hermeneutics of desire can become possible. Mystery looks out at us from the fissure in things and invites us to “do something” with what we see.

Returning now to the angel, this figure has been the object of questions and questionings (from Bodei to Cacciari), apparently bearing witness to mystery insofar as itself mysterious, while expressing, in its own way, the invisible, being itself invisible. His turned position allows us to educate ourselves in that secret con-sent [feeling with] to the imperceptible that reveals the possible, including and above all where there is detachment, rupture, or a departure from the gaze that we would expect to have (be it turned towards the past or the future).

The *angelus*, for our purposes here, is the bearer of a pedagogical attitude that we might define as hermeneutical. Almost as though it is mimicking a sort of hermeneutics of unexpected movement and, as Cacciari might put it, of contrary movement: the very movement that guides and leads us out of the literal interpretation, not from the idea to the thing or from the sign to what it represents, but rather from the thing to the invisible (Cacciari, 1922).

And to come back to Maria Zambrano, as mentioned above, “life and the lived experience of time are not dealt with by thinking (...) but by suffering”

(Zambrano, 2008, p. 97). Thus, *pathos* is directed at a memory that is neither distorted by the past nor reliant on the future, but rather strikes a dynamic balance between staying in place and remaining living, vital. This allows us to hold on to our own lives, especially our past lives, together with the past lives of others, via elements with the power to reawaken native feeling, that intimate and dark depth of intimate attention, of closeness, of feeling alive together with the things that bring us to life.

And, by means of the aesthetic universe, with its perceptible images, and poetry in particular – as a suspended word that questions, a tension directed toward otherness, a tension that points up alternative, unexpected paths towards the unsayable and invisible – education can become an angelic instrument, that is to say, an instrument with the power to announce and initiate the difficult task of reassigning meaning, of transcending the expected or pre-given reading, measurable performance, and our usual gaze (Mancino, 2014, 2020b). Indeed, education may be phenomenologically conceptualized (Bertolini, 1988) as our lived experience of ourselves and of the world, which is not intended to be understood but above all to be acted upon, transformed, narrated, and shown.

Hope is rekindled in the fragment, in the announcement that shifts our gaze from the metaphysics of universal being to historical, concrete, material, and poetic ontologies of being. In the “not yet” of the present – which is the entire space of education, the entire space of poetic becoming where it is possible to speak words that do not seek the certain boundaries of a given meaning, but are “laden with intent” (Zambrano, 2004, p. 29) – it may be possible to perceive even more strongly the material consistence of doing, the craftsmanship of a pedagogical operativity (namely, *recovery* as the act of bringing home that which is authentic and our own) that lends substance to a philosophy of education as a life practice that is both thought and perceived.

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