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SCHOOLING AND THE SACREDNESS OF THE PLAYFUL

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He is concerned at what he sees as a "new wisdom" in many countries which seeks to improve education by downgrading teaching as an occupation. The following essay is an invitation to all who are interested in the quality of schooling in Ireland to recognise the cultural strengths which still distinguish that schooling, to acknowledge the real causes of the strains which yearly grow more serious for pupils, teachers and parents alike, to learn from the policy mistakes of our neighbours and to consider anew the deeper, or more enduring, sources of improvement in teaching quality.

1. The Playful in Education: a vexed question.

One of the most formidable critics of the controversial kind of education, which in our own century became associated with the label "progressivism", has been the American scholar Jacques Barzun. "Progressivism" itself has been persistently, and often quite unfairly, associated with the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Barzun's major critique, *The House of Intellect*, first appeared in 1959, the centenary of Dewey's birth and the same year when President Eisenhower warned teachers and parents in the United States to "abandon the educational path that, rather blindly, they have been following as a result of John Dewey's teaching".[1] Ironically, just twenty-one years previously Dewey himself had completed a reformulation of his thoughts on education in one of his final publications, *Experience and Education*. In this book he had concisely reviewed his educational arguments in the light of the experience of "progressive schools" and in the light of criticisms of some of his earlier formulations, and had cautioned

against the divisive consequences of thinking of education in terms of "isms", including, in a particular way, "progressivism".[2] In any case Sidney Hook responded to the presidential denunciation of his deceased colleague's efforts, insisting that Eisenhower, and the opponents of "progressivism" more generally, were mistaken in identifying Dewey's works as the source of the ills of American schooling. Hook pointed out that Eisenhower would have been nearer the mark had he said of teachers and parents: "the path they have been following as a result of their *misconceptions of* John Dewey's teaching".[3]

Barzun's criticisms, however, have an authority and an abiding relevance which numerous less circumspect attacks on "progressivism", like that of Eisenhower, have lacked. Apart from its own virtuosity of intellect, what distinguishes Barzuns' critique is its discerning attention to the actual practices of American schooling, its eschewal of the recurring public melee attending "progressivism", and not least, its recognition of the merits of those educational principles and "maxims" which, Barzun avers, "go back to Rabelais and Montaigne through the amplifications of Rousseau and John Dewey". It is worth quoting in some detail here the appropriate passage from *The House of Intellect*, not merely because it reveals Barzun's sober estimation of the tradition to which Dewey's educational writings belong, but also because it lists some of the shortcomings which Barzun himself regarded as the more widespread and the most serious in American schooling:

> *One notes, to begin with, that these philosophers and the lesser ones who promoted school reform throughout the nineteenth century were men of intellect. They intended that schools should impart knowledge more efficiently, with less of the unnecessary pain or pointless drudgery that alienates young minds. But one will not find in Dewey, or his predecessors, any repudiation of literacy and mental power in favour of gregariousness, conformity to group opinion, love of praise, and the nurturing of self-deception.*[4]

Barzun assembles many striking examples to illustrate his contention that a time-wasting concern with peripherals and agreeable banalities had displaced the disciplined cultivation of intellect even among the more highly regarded schools, both Elementary and High Schools, in the United States. How representative this selection of examples is it is difficult to tell, as *The House of Intellect* is a collection of essays rather than a systematic study. But Barzun insists that the blemishes he observed in American schooling were also prominent in other Western countries. Significantly, he was a contributor to the 1975 issue of the *Black Papers*,[5] the fourth in a series of pamphlets which subjected British schooling to a similar kind of critique to that which *The House of Intellect* had carried out in America. More recently, a succession of books and reports has produced a sizeable literature of discontent on the quality of American schooling. The alarmist

titles and polemical tone of many of these publications — *Why Johnny Can't Add*, 1973; *The Decline of American Education*, 1976; *Our Children's Crippled Future:— How American Education has Failed*, 1977; *A Nation at Risk*, 1983[6] — should give us some reason for pause before accepting their dismal contents as the full, or indeed the true, picture. The fact remains, however, that the major reforms in schooling in recent years, especially in the United States but also in Britain, have largely proceeded from a widespread acceptance by legislators of the charge so frankly levelled at the schools by Barzun in 1959, namely: "the persistent avoidance of work", leading to declining standards and a "nurtured incapacity" of intellect.[7]

It may seem strange to launch an exploration of what I want to call "the sacredness of the playful" in educational experience with such an apparently prejudicial introduction. What place can play have in education, it might be asked, *except* in connection with the avoidance of work? It is precisely because the international educational mood at the start of the 1990s is so promptly dismissive of the claims of play in education — though in certain limited respects Ireland is still something of a happy exception in this event — that attention to the educational significance of the playful is particularly appropriate at this time. Any of us who are teachers, or who have otherwise made a concern with education our life's occupation, stand to lose something vital if this point is not properly acknowledged. If, for want of disciplined effort of thought, we fail to understand and to appropriate the significance of the playful for the heart of our work; if, further, we fail to embrace and acclaim the proper event of the playful in our practice, we have then not merely lost a historic battle at the hands of an internationally ascendant force in the politics of education. In fact such a limited conclusion, notwithstanding its validity, can deflect our attention to partisan considerations, which are strictly not educational in character. More importantly then, *we have,* in the event of such a failure, *become accomplices by default* in the disfigurement of our own work.

The choice of the word *disfigurement* here is not a casual one. Familiarity with the history of education in the West informs us that a strategic interest in the control and conduct of schooling has frequently marked the activities of the protagonists in that history. Church and State have featured prominently as such protagonists. In this regard we are well aware that the educational enterprise has been continually vulnerable to being nudged or forced in this direction or that by the more powerfully established interests of the day. Such conflicts may well distort the conduct of education, and often have done so. Yet, the human to-and-fro of classroom life, particularly in the presence of an adroit teacher, frequently shows a remarkable resilience in the face of distortions caused and prohibitions imposed in this way. What the term *disfigurement* brings before us is at once something deeper and indeed more ominous. It signifies an eclipse, or an abiding absence, of something which is vital to educational experience itself. In particular, it draws our attention to a radical absence of the playful.

One might explore this point by way of an illustration: most readers will be acquainted with the opening pages of Dickens' *Hard Times*, where even the fearsome insistence of the intruding Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. M'Choakumchild fails to banish completely the spontaneous occurrence of the playful in the responses of the schoolchildren. Sissy Jupe quite naturally continues to "fancy" after being solemnly forbidden by Gradgrind to do anything of the sort.[8] In fact the very grotesqueness of the outlook of a Mr. Gradgrind or a Mr. M'Choakumchild invites the healthy scorn of pupils and teachers alike. In a peculiar way then it actually nourishes the spirit of the playful (though as an underground movement), which aptly discerns here the advent of the ridiculous. Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind, of course, is something of a caricature, and his foibles accordingly are easy to detect. It is quite otherwise, however, where the playful is not so much assailed by an obvious intruder, but its demise gradually occurs behind our backs as it were; where it has imperceptibly slipped away from the professional outlooks of many teachers themselves, and from the imaginative resources of some of the most industrious of students.

Many may deny that this demise has happened on any large scale in our schools in Ireland. Indeed, I am not anxious to press such a grim argument in any final way myself, but rather to call attention to some disquieting trends which are annually becoming more pronounced. Firstly then, any of our national newspapers would scarcely have conceived the idea, say a decade ago, of running a daily feature for almost two months on what is now called "the points race" to gain access to higher education. The fact, moreover, that ten thousand or so students, most of whom have already acquitted themselves well, wish to repeat the Leaving Certificate examination to achieve their goal in this competition, betrays something which should startle, rather than merely concern us.[9] Secondly, the issue of stress in teaching, and its recent rise to prominence on the agenda of annual conferences of each of the teachers' unions, signifies something more disturbing than an occurrent ebb of morale in the teaching professsion.[10] Thirdly, the growing disconcertion among primary teachers that the entry examinations run by many postprimary schools are now seriously hindering the purposes of the "new curriculum" in the senior classes of primary school, provides a sobering present-day commentary on the sanguine hopes which the then Minister for Education, expressed in his Foreword to that curriculum on the occasion of its launching in 1971.[11] Finally, the fears in the Irish National Teachers' Organisation that the current review body on the primary curriculum was considering the introduction of externally administered national testing in primary schools, are in large part fears that such tests would represent a return to some kind of "Primary Cert", a body blow to the advances in primary education which have been made since 1971, and the possible abandonment of the 1971 curriculum itself.[12]

Serious reflection on these happenings in Irish schooling, and on some similar but more drastic happenings in Britain and the United States, calls forth the suggestion that the eclipse of the playful in educational practice

may indeed be in our midst; though not yet perhaps in such a way that this eclipse has become in Ireland the dominant feature of the culture of the bulk of our school classrooms, staffrooms, and management board meetings. In view of the trends reported above, however, we can better appreciate how suggestively apt the term *eclipse* is to describe their cumulative effect. With this awareness, moreover, our enquiry into the nature and the scope of the playful in education takes on a more urgent and more practical character.

2. Uncovering the Presence of the Playful.

In the aftermath of the reaction in many countries against "progressive" excesses, and of the recent reforms in educational policy in the United States and Britain, any attempt to argue a case for play in education is burdened from the start with unenviable difficulties. Perhaps such a case may hope to win the hearts of the more adventurous among teachers, but it is likely to be cooly regarded in quarters where official control of schooling is ultimately vested. Ireland may again be something of an exception here, and for reasons that are generally overlooked by the relentless logic of political economy; reasons which come properly to light only when due note is taken of the more distinguishing cultural qualities of a people. In any event this essay is not concerned with making a defensive case in the court of political economy. It is not an *apologia* seeking a toleration of the playful in education. Rather our argument has a quite different origin and also a bolder starting point. Hans-Georg Gadamer, amongst the most perceptively subtle of this century's great philosophers, voices this starting point as follows in one of his most recent writings:

> *The first thing we must make clear to ourselves is that play is so elementary a function of human life that culture is quite inconceivable without this element.*[13]

Gadamer had laid the ground earlier for this argument by devoting an important section of his *magnum opus, Truth and Method,* to the overlooked primacy of the playful in human life and culture. An argument along quite similar lines has been advanced by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens.*[14] The striking import of this kind of argument arises from its premise that it is a major mistake to regard play as an adornment to human culture; rather the argument puts it to us that *it is the presence of the playful itself that makes anything like human culture possible in the first place, and,* that in the absence of this presence what we have are privative, or impoverished, forms of culture.

It may be asked immediately, however, if this starting premise can be sustained. In the first place, does it not reduce the achievements of human culture to the level of the frivolous or the trivial? Secondly, can whole

inheritances of language, literature, religion, art, music, scientific achievement, as well as the customs and traditions which attend daily life in any society, be seriously described as the fruits of human play? In venturing a negative answer to the former of these two questions, the answer to the second question has to be largely, however surprisingly, *Yes*. But we can see this only if we overcome the crass, yet commonplace, prejudice of modernity that play is necessarily the opposite of anything serious or earnest. A few classical examples may serve us well in illustrating this point. The works of that most serious of classical thinkers, Plato, contain nothing which is even remotely trivial, yet the primacy of the playful in human life is everywhere acknowledged by him, albeit in a way that its cultural possibilities are severely censored. This is most obviously true perhaps of his *Republic*, where the unconstrained imaginative playfulness of Homer and Hesiod is at once so admired and its influence so feared.[15] But more aptly for the present argument, in what scholars acknowledge as the most "austere" of Plato's works, his *Laws*, playfulness in thought and in deed, and in a special way "the plays of childhood," again feature as the most crucial of cultural foundations.[16] It is precisely because play, song, dance, indeed *any activities in which the Muses took a hand*, were so central in his conception of society that Plato accorded them a ritual sacredness and was so thorough in legislating for them.

Aristotle, in Book VIII of his *Politics*, initially seems to take a contrary standpoint. He insists that "while children are learning they are not playing" and urges that "we are not to educate the young with a view to their amusement".[17] His text makes clear, however, that in this connection Aristotle is thinking of play and amusement in much the same way as we think of diversions, or harmless ways of passing the time. The object of play in this sense is *rest*, as Aristotle himself directly points out. The object of education, he claims, is exclusively cultural: that of enabling our own nature "to be at leisure in the right way", or "of using leisure aright".[18] That play of a more intensely engaging kind is central to Aristotle's cultural aim we see a little later in Book VIII, where he refers in a preliminary way to the cathartic benefits of the study of music.[19] In these few pages Aristotle provides — albeit in a skeletal, implicit way — some of Western history's most seminal ideas on the distinctive merits of the playful in education. These ideas spring in the main from the notion of *Katharsis*.

Regrettably, the full details of Aristotle's theory of *Katharsis*, which he indicated he would provide in his *Poetics*, have not survived. His brief reference to *Katharsis* in the extant *Poetics*[20] is in connection with the beneficial effects of tragic drama, but the context of the reference in his *Politics* is more inclusive. Specifically here Aristotle was considering music rather than drama; but the Greek *mousike*, as used by Plato and Aristotle, refers generically to any engagement presided over by the Muses, or, more simply, what we now call the Arts. Viewed in this broader context *Katharsis* is of major importance to education. As teachers, it enables us to understand in the most suggestive way what is properly involved in the

creation and the experience of works of art, particularly those which feature prominently in school curricula: the dramatic, the poetic, the literary, the musical and the visual. When viewed as an educational, as distinct from an aesthetic experience *Katharsis* is what occurs when a work of art becomes present to us in such a way that our sensibilities are thoroughly engaged and our minds and hearts take wing to a different neighbourhood. Dwelling thus awhile within the presence of the work that has addressed us, we become, perhaps disarmingly, or adventurously, or poignantly, or delightfully, or fearfully, or wistfully, or otherwise engrossed; occasionally even enraptured. The earnest playfulness of this event has little to do with personal aesthetic surrender, or with the confident connoisseurship of the critic, or with the emotional escapes supplied by the entertainment industries. As distinct from any experience of a primarily self-indulgent kind, Aristotle emphasized the restorative nature of *Katharsis*. In short, its effects are enabling rather than disabling; they represent an invitation and a summoning of energies rather than a diversion or a dissipation, where each person's participation in culture is concerned.

It must also be pointed out, however, that *Katharsis* in education is not the preserve of the arts, although in saying this we make a sharp departure from Aristotle.[21] *Katharsis* of the most noteworthy kind can also occur in the teaching and learning of mathematics and science; but again, this happens only when such teaching and learning become a genuine venture, if even the most simple, into the ever surprising, newly intriguing, often perplexing worlds of science and mathematics. It occurs when the burden of learning is relieved by a pedagogy rich in perceptiveness and imagination; where the consciousness of the pupil is taken up, or absorbed, by the disclosures and possibilities of the experiment being carried out or the problem being explored. The pupils are carried along, as it were, by the anticipatory atmosphere which comes into play, or in Gadamer's works, by "the primacy of play over the consciousness of the players".[22] It must be stressed that this kind of experience, which most teachers will still recognise, is of a quite different kind, is even the qualitative antithesis of the mere mastery of formulae for delivery in examinations. It is not that formulae and theories need not be committed to memory. Indeed they must, but as active vocabularies and ideas rather than as dismembered or residual fragments of the now forgotten play of mathematical or scientific imagination. In fact, it is from the very to-and-fro of this play that mathematical formulae and scientific theories receive their existence and significance in the first place. This may seem a curious point at first, yet to fail to grasp it is to miss a vital part of what it means to be a teacher.

Let us take these two points concerning the arts and science together then, and review the significance and direction of the impulse provided by Aristotle. When viewed in an educational light the notion of *Katharsis* greatly enables us to uncover our cultural resources and to enrich our cultural understanding and outlooks. It does so most significantly by bringing within our stay the most thought-worthy or challenging perspectives

on life, on living, on the secrets of nature, and on the scope and limitations of human possibility; perspectives which are not normally, or not immediately available from within the routines, or the tumble and flux of everyday living itself. In other words *Katharsis*, in this other-than-aesthetic sense, gradually *teaches* us to know ourselves and our world anew. In so doing, moreover, it defines the playful in its most distinctive educational form. Finally, it calls our attention to the point that education, as a major cultural enterprise, is properly concerned not with mere transmission, but rather with an elusive, unforced enablement which is singular to each and the entitlement of all.

From these observations it will be evident that the playful in education has little to do with mere amusement, but is concerned rather with learning of the most significant kind. Clearly there is no suggestion here that the school is an arena for impulsive romps or avoidance of work. Equally, however, we become aware that the proper occasion of the playful in education is placed in peril by any priesthood of scholarly *gravitas*; just as in sport, to draw an analogy, the flow and buoyancy of an absorbing field game are frustrated by an officious referee. What these points bring to light is that the proper occasion of the playful in education is governed by requirements of a strict kind, but not by requirements which are alien to or which distort the educational forms of the playful itself. In this connection it is worth noting that the study of works of poetry, music, drama and literature, of science and mathematics, particularly in our postprimary schools, all too rarely uncovers the presence of the playful; all too rarely does it achieve the kind of *Katharsis* described in outline above. By contrast, *Katharsis* of a simple yet remarkable kind is a more frequent occurrence in the better organised and more favourably circumstanced of our primary schools, most often perhaps in the junior or infant classes.

The main factors which hinder the emergence of the playful in schools need to be identified. They include: the inappropriateness of much of prescribed material to the sensibilities and abilities of many pupils; overcrowded conditions in very many classrooms; excessive amounts of material to be covered, to the neglect of genuinely (i.e., play-fully) engaging with it; an often parsimonious teaching shaped by publishers' "notes" and by the drill of examination technique; and not least, a pervasive, scholastic anxiety, aggravated by the competition for grades and places, which grows ever more like an incubus. The rules which apply in a milieu where influences such as these listed are prominent are of course mainly unwritten rules, and their decisive force derives largely from the fact that their presence *and their consequences* are only partially acknowledged. Were such an acknowledgement to become explicit on any wide scale however, it would also become evident to what extent the riches of the playful have been lost.

Any convergence of influences such as these just described has a compounding effect, and this brings to the fore again the issue of disfigurement, mentioned in the first section of the essay. To the extent that

the factors which hinder or obscure educational *Katharsis* intermingle and thus predominate; to the extent that the venturesome play of intellect and imagination has thus by conspiring means been curtailed; then to that extent the disfigurement of educational experience becomes inescapable. Notwithstanding the impressive annual output of examination scores by the more scholastically advantaged in our postprimary, and now indeed our primary, schools, the emergent event of disfigurement on an ever increasing scale in these schools signifies a jeopardising, even incremental, corruption of the purposes of schooling itself. Insofar as schools and colleges are to remain the major arena (contra Illich) where the purposes proper to education are to be pursued, we must therefore look very seriously again at how these purposes are to be conceived and carried into practice; but in this examination, our sights *will now be guided* by the acknowledged *presence* of the playful.

3. Towards a New Tradition of Argument.

In allowing any argument on education to be guided by the presence of the playful, we may of course be inviting a serious objection, so perhaps the objection should be made explicit at the outset in order that we might take proper account of it. To give the objection its full voice then it might be stated in words such as the following: "Whereas one can see some merit in the points about *Katharsis* and how the spirit of the playful in education can bring about learning of an interesting kind, you have said very little so far about reason, or about its disciplined cultivation. You seem to have overlooked the primacy of the fact that man is essentially a *rational* animal, and that the first and most defensible concern of education is not the free play of imagination but the development of reason." Variants of this objection, of course, are commonplace for quite some time in educational discourse. It is noteworthy, moreover, that objections of this kind characteristically serve to relegate the place of the arts in schools and colleges.

The objection stresses the primacy of the "rational" in human experience but it blithely presumes that this element should enjoy an unquestioned priority in the attentions of teachers. (Notice the implicit, yet decisive, attribution of opposites betrayed by the phrase "*not* the free play of imagination *but* the development of reason"). Now unless characterizations which stress the primacy of the "rational" also do equal justice to the irrational — e.g., the resentful, the prejudicial — and to the myriad of other attributes which collectively constitute the distinctively human, such characterizations become, in effect, stereotypes. As such they overlook those features which manifest themselves occurrently; which, as the poet aptly said, "come and go with endless play" in all human experience.[23] Consequently such plausibly "rational" characterisations give rise to a one-sided, but a popularly attractive simplism in the conduct of human affairs.

It is in this sense that the above objection, despite its apparent reasonableness, is akin to the kind of outlook which views education firstly, or simply, as a vehicle for serving extrinsic, or functional ends; ends which enjoy a current enthronement as it were, to the neglect of other ends which are often cast thereby in an incompatible light. Put more plainly, schooling is seen here firstly as a "rational" device for advancing the influence of those interests which embrace a particular political, or economic, or religious, or cultural rationality. In practice, as the history of Western education — especially since the French Revolution — shows, these are generally the more securely established, or the more politically prominent interests in a particular society. The kind of objection we have been considering thus belongs to a widespread, but impercipient, tradition of rationalism in public discourse; a tradition which, as Michael Oakeshott has pointed out, is often shared by the most diverse of interest groups in their battles for advantage.[24] It is a tradition which for the most part has *already* relegated the arts in education to the status of a non-rational adornment, which views educational priorities themselves in an instrumental light and in oppositional (either/or) terms, and which is inherently suspicious of any advent of playfulness in schooling.

Yet in considering this objection it is necessary to acknowledge the classical dignity of the argument that rationality is a unique characteristic of mankind. We do Aristotle no justice, however, if we enthrone rationality, or one version of rationality, to the neglect of other characteristics. Aristotle himself speaks not only of the "rational part" but also of the "irrational part" of the soul, and he is clearly aware that the latter frequently gains the upper hand in the conduct of human affairs.[25] But even if we broaden the description of mankind to include the irrational, it still remains too narrow in scope. It fell to later philosophers to place the emphasis elsewhere in supplying their own descriptions of the distinctively human; for instance: *animal laborans, homo faber, homo economicus*, "a rational soul using a mortal and earthly body", a "will to power", a yearning for the divine, a "useless passion", a being whose essence lies in the manner of its existence, and many more, including, significantly, *homo ludens*.[26] We have here, moreover, only a small sample of the philosophical characterizations of the distinctively human which have been, or could be advanced.

Now rather than allow the objection we have been considering to mislead us into endless attempts to adjudicate "rationally" between competing characterizations of humankind, and thus to lose sight of the educational import of any of them, a much more promising prospect arises here from our awareness of the "rational" bias of the objection itself. If we attend to the emergent and often adventitious nature of life in classrooms, to the occurrent ebb and flow of moods, to the uncertain play of human dispositions, sensibilities, aspirations and so on, it dawns on us that perhaps many, or even all, of the above characterizations have their own moment, or longer, as experience unfolds; and unfolds not just in a class of pupils as a whole, but within each individual, including the teacher. If we

attend closely to our *own* experience the force of this point may strike us as something of a revelation.

None of this is to suggest that we are necessarily "at the mercy of our moods", as the popular phrase puts it. Rather it is to claim that philosophical descriptions of the distinctively human, which place an exclusive emphasis on one or other attribute, prevent us from seeing something crucial: namely, that we ourselves are an unfolding inter-play of suggestive self-characterizations which come and go, which often do battle within us, which frequently intermingle in differing combinations, but which invariably pre-dispose us in one way or another. Of course, if we do not possess some critical awareness that we are such an interplay, if our consciousness has already been possessed by a particular characterization, if our predispositions have thus become unyieldingly fixed, we may indeed be at the mercy of much more than we would wittingly like ourselves to be. This is all too often true of our more decided standpoints in educational discourse, particularly if these standpoints belong to variants of the rationalist tradition of argument mentioned above.

Now if the education we experience in school is such that it goes beyond a so-called "transmission of culture"; if it achieves the form of a buoyant inter-play between our mingling sensibilities and abilities on the one hand, and the coherent voice of the subject which wishes to address us on the other, then such an event has the distinct advantage of corresponding to, rather than straining against, the natural way that our experience already unfolds in our everyday lives. In short, it does justice to what we already are, as distinct from what we "rationally" or "seriously" mistake ourselves to be. Insofar as this inter-play is marked by the teacher's judicious foresight, it has the additional advantage of giving discipline and direction to that more haphazard everyday unfolding without in any sense colonizing or proselytising it. The discipline here is essentially a self-critical one, and the direction in question, though it may be distinct or pronounced, is on the alert for any kind of divisiveness, or unyielding vehemence. It is worth recalling here that *Katharsis* in education is concerned with a discipline of enablement, and not in any power-seeking sense.

The importance of these points for how the purposes of teaching and learning are to be understood must be emphasised. Only the most discerning and the most imaginatively subtle of practical arts can succeed, for example, in bringing into fruitful relation the demanding vitality of mathematics, or the authentic colourfulness of the Irish language, or the earnest voice of religious tradition on the one hand, and on the other, those sensibilities which are pre-disposed towards these subjects in an indifferent or hostile way. If the teacher's own relation to the subject being taught lacks fluency or the ever resourceful presence of the playful, then that relation is already an impoverished one and it is difficult to see how, in a pedagogical sense, anything really fruitful will follow.

Reference here to the ever resourceful presence of the playful calls our attention to a crucial point, one which highlights the artistic quality of the

playful in education. Where any disciplined inter-play with a field of study gets under way in a regular or enduring manner, proficiency and fluency are not the only benefits which accrue to the participants. Rather, resourcefulness itself emerges here, most palpably in the critical (some might say awkward) nature of questions flowing from the pupils, but also in the teacher's fresh encounters with a field of study in the light of such questions. Earnest questions of this kind reveal how fluent, or how proficient, the questioners have become, and how intelligent or searching their own relation to the subject has become. They also disclose new challenges, frustrations and possibilities for the teacher; these challenges may well prove defeating unless the teacher, in common with the artist, can experience such challenges and frustrations in such a way that they disclose unforeseen possibilities.

These are possibilities — however unwelcome at first sight — which now summon forth the playful to come into its own and define afresh the nature of the teacher's work. This remains the case whether the subject in question is science, or music, or a language, or mathematics, or history, or religion. It also remains the case whether the pupils are an infant class or students in a university seminar, whether they are among the intellectually weakest or the strongest. In other words, where educational experience is infused by the playful in the sense described in this essay, not only does it bring to presence in the most apt and engaging ways the various traditions of human belief, expression and accomplishment; it also seeks, at the judiciously attainable level, to nurture a fluency of response on the pupil's part which is both generous and critical. In doing so moreover it respects the critical demands of reason more conscientiously than does any "rational" pedagogy which has dutifully or respectably distanced itself from anything playful.

Perhaps the most important thing to point out by way of conclusion to this section is that all of the arguments made above underline anew something which should properly be recognised from the start in all earnest educational discourse and action. In this sense, therefore, they represent a new tradition of argument; a tradition whose own particular interest lies in seeking to understand, to make widely available, and to promote a critical fluency in traditions of diverse kinds. In pursuing this interest however, the new tradition views the educational enterprise as something essentially other than a cultural apparatus for the compliant "transmission" of such "values" as those which currently enjoy some institutionalized privilege. From these remarks it will be clear that this "new tradition" of educational argument is in important respects not new, but quite ancient. Insofar as its generous efforts to bring to presence the more enduring voices of a cultural heritage are also marked by the implicit or overt questioning of established verities, this new tradition has its ancestry in the daily example of two major educational figures in the history of Western civilization, namely Socrates of Athens[27] and Jesus Christ of Galilee[28]. Whereas the presence of the playful can be discerned, with careful scrutiny, in its full ingenuity in the

actual dialogues of Socrates and in the documented parables of Jesus, it now becomes explicitly acknowledged as a defining characteristic of education itself. In other words it calls attention in an initial way to what is new in the tradition of educational argument being recommended here.

4. Three Practical Necessities.

Among the priorities which this new tradition of argument would regard as practical necessities, the following three, which are closely related, feature most prominently. Firstly, there is the *educational* necessity to ensure that wherever teachers embark on their work they are themselves willing, and encouraged, to cultivate their own cultural fluency and pedagogic originality; to exercise these with the professional discretion which educational experience itself, as an artistic inter-play, requires; and to include parents ever more trustingly as partners in this enterprise. Something along these lines was present in embryonic, but implicit, form in the primary curriculum *Handbooks* published in 1971. Much the same can be said of the various curriculum development projects, which, over the best part of two decades now, have enjoyed mixed fortunes at the margins of Irish postprimary education. The recently introduced courses for the Junior Certificate once again contain in embryonic, but implicit, form a conception of educational experience which is ultimately premised on the centrality of the playful. The many misgivings voiced by teachers about the introduction of these new courses — especially the absence of regular workshops which would provide the proper opportunity to come to grips with the different rationale underlying them — betoken anxieties of a quite understandable kind, anxieties which in more than a few instances may unfortunately have become ingrained in a way of life. In this respect they call for new insights and sustained efforts of professional renewal if they are to be really tackled.

Secondly, arising from this educational necessity, there is the *managerial* necessity to ensure that the many obstacles to the kind of inter-play described above are systematically addressed and, as far as possible, overcome. This calls for a degree of co-operation between school managements which might sometimes occasion a serious questioning of some of their own traditions and practices. In this connection it is important first to recognise the abundance of voluntary effort which has been associated historically with the involvement of religious bodies in Irish schooling. Similarly the distinctive traditions of V.E.C. schools, particularly in the field of adult education and in providing for the needs of less favourably circumstanced pupils, merit the ungrudging regard of anyone who would wish to understand well the provision of schooling in Ireland. What calls for critical questioning rather is the regrettable tendency (with notable exceptions) of the main managerial traditions to view their own work as being somehow exclusive, or as being somehow jeopardised by sharing their educational concerns and responsibilities with each other.

The competitive excess which is now so evident both within schools and in relations between schools aggravates this tendency. It promotes, moreover, a factious mentality, even a debilitating lack of trust, in the discourse of educational management and, as previously described, obscures the pregnant possibilities of the playful.

Finally, there is the *political* necessity to see to it that what is embryonic and promising in genuine educational discourse and action does not suffer still-birth, or struggle into a disfigured existence, but is nurtured with solicitude to health and vitality. This political necessity, as a practical imperative of a new tradition of educational argument, is anything but partisan in character. As something which takes its inspiration from the primacy of the playful in education, it is of course as vulnerable to the spoiling effects of foul play as is the trusting spirit of the playful itself. This is all the more so where the foul play is plausibly mistaken as the public interest, or where a tradition of sectoral discourse in education is no longer able to distinguish properly between the two. Accordingly, an analogy may illustrate more clearly the third necessity being described here. We are all aware of how the habit of fouling on the sportsfield, and in a particular way "professional" fouls, can thoroughly banish the presence of the playful and put in its place a relentless, unscrupulous jockeying for advantage. Here sport itself becomes exclusively about winning and losing, and teaches by the most public example that all other considerations are secondary. Bearing this in mind the significance of our title can thus be captured in the conclusion to the essay: If the *sacredness of the playful* is not respected *in practical ways* by educational discourse and action in the political arena, it becomes doubly daunting to safeguard it elsewhere.

NOTES

1. President Dwight Eisenhower in a letter to *Life* magazine 15th March 1959; quoted by R. Rusk & J. Scotland in their *Doctrines of the Great Educators,* p.231. (London: Macmillan, fifth edition 1979).

2. See Dewey's Preface to his *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier-Macmillan 1971. Originally published in 1938). For my own part I have, in an earlier issue of this journal, attempted to highlight the enduring promise of some of Dewey's educational insights, and to distinguish these clearly from "progressivism" (*Oideas 29,* Fomhar, 1986).

3. Hook's observation is also quoted on p.231 of *Doctrines of the Great Educators.*

4. Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect,* p. 100. (New York: Harper, 1959; London: Mercury Books, 1962).

5. *The Black Papers: The Fight for Education.* edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson. (London: Critical Quarterly Society, 1969-70). The fourth Black Paper, in which Barzun's contribution appears, was edited by C. B. Cox and Rhodes Boyson as Black Paper 1975, (London: J. M. Dent).

6. The bibliographical details for this list are as follows: M. Kline, *Why Johnny Can't Add,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); J. McCurdy, *The Decline of American Education,*

(Los Angeles: 1976); F. Armbruster, *Our Children's Crippled Future — How American Education has Failed*, (The New York Times Book Company, 1977); The Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk*; The Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, (Washington D.C. 1983).

7. *The House of Intellect*, pp. 107 and 114.

8. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, Chapters 1 and 2; i.e. the first seven pages of the text. (Penguin edition 1982).

9. In 1989, "The Points Race" feature in *The Irish Times*, ran from 16th August until 7th October. The text for Saturday 2nd September included the following: "Estimates indicate that up to 10,000 students will seek to repeat the Leaving Cert, this coming year. This represents 17% or one in every six who sat the exam ... Roughly 5,000, or 20% of those who applied for CAO places this year had repeated the Leaving."

10. At the ASTI convention in 1988 for instance, it was reported to the delegates that the ASTI, the INTO and the TUI were jointly to commission a major research study on stress in teaching in Ireland.

11. The Minister in question was Mr. Pádraig Faulkner. See the Réamhfhocal to the *Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook, Part 1*. The growing disconcertion among teachers about this issue can be traced by consulting the following sources: (a) Kieran Griffin, "Primary Curriculum Survey" (1986), in *Primary Curriculum and Related Matters: Report of a Conference*, p.36. (Dublin, INTO, 1988); (b) "Entrance Exams to Post Primary Schools", in the May 1989 issue of the INTO newsletter *Tuarascáil*; (c) John Carr, "Assessment and Evaluation", in the June 1989 issue of *Tuarascáil*; (d) Joe Carroll, "Assessment in The Primary School" in the October 1989 issue of *Tuarascáil*.

12. See the newspaper reports entitled "Tests in primary schools planned", *Irish Independent* 9th August 1989; and "Teachers set against any primary cert 'stigma' test", *Irish Independent* 18th August 1989.

13. Hans-Georg Gadamer. "The Relevance of the Beautiful", in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, p.23 (Cambridge University Press, 1986; first published in German, 1977). Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.91-119 (London: Sheed & Ward 1975; first published in German 1960).

14. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*; particularly chapter 1 (London: Temple Smith, 1970; first published in Dutch, 1938).

15. Plato, *Republic*, 377c-398b.

16. Plato, *Laws*, 643, 764-766, 797, 803.

17. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VIII, ch.v, 1339a26.

18. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VIII, ch.iii, 1337b32.

19. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VIII, ch.vii, 1341b37.

20. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch.vi.

21. The point to be noted here is that Aristotle's observations on *Katharsis*, though indeed seminal, are fragmentary. If he formulated a theory of *Katharsis* in education, which is unlikely, that theory remains unknown. It is even more unlikely that he would have included science in such a theory. One could of course proceed here to formulate a

theory of *Katharsis* in education without any reference to Aristotle, and thus sidestep the inconclusive debate this concept continues to occasion among classical scholars. In addition to ignoring a genuine debt, however, this move might easily restrict *Katharsis* to being a psychological concept. In the above essay *Katharsis* is no mere concept. More significantly, it is an educational *event* of decisive import.

22. *Truth and Method,* p.94.

23. The quotation is from Wordsworth's poem "Louisa".

24. Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics", in his *Rationalism in Politics and other essays.* (London: Methuen, 1962, reprinted 1981). See also his essay "Education: the engagement and its frustration" in *Education and the Development of Reason*, edited by R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

25. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Bk. I, ch.xiii.

26. In this list we have a selection of Marxist, Economic-Capitalist, Augustinian, Nietzschean, mystic, existentialist and Heideggerian conceptions of mankind, in addition to the philosophical conception of man as playful: *Home Ludens.*

27. The reference here is to the actual person Socrates, as distinct from the "Socrates" who increasingly becomes a literary device for Plato's views in the latter's later writings. Although Socrates left no written works of his own, we can still learn much about his work and about himself in the earlier, but not the later *Dialogues* of Plato.

28. Neither do we have any writings attributable to Jesus, but a careful study of the wide variety of teaching episodes in the four Gospels of the New Testament reveals dramatic differences in how He approached different kinds of groups; for instance, "disciples", "multitudes", "scribes and pharisees".