

## **For the Scavengers and the Gleaners: An Anti-Heroic Vision of Education**

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**Abstract** *What is the relationship between educational imaginaries and heroism? Much educational discourse mobilises a language of overcoming, of betterment, of success, of idealism, of resilience, and of perfectionism. Even if such aspirations are benevolent, the experience of education is, for many, one of failure. Not the ordinary failure of the human condition, but the kind of sadistic failure exemplified in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." It is impossible for all to attain external standards, embody the ideals evolved by others, or attain goals prescribed universally. Educational systems do not calculate the cost of the ethos of perfectionism, competition and comparison in the lives of others who fail to accede to such standards, or who were never going to be in a position to do so in the first place. Unlike the language of hopes, dreams, and potentials that populates talk about education, many human beings instead face more tempered lives, punctuated with disappointment, tragedy and loss. If fortunate, they enjoy some contentment, some kindness, and some companionship. What if we were to have more modest, anti-heroic images in and of education? This might prepare us better to face the human condition. This paper looks at the possibility of an anti-heroic, renunciative image of education and of curriculum, to understand nihilism in a different manner, refusing teleological language and developing our awareness of the finitude of not only human existence, but also of the cosmos.*

**Keywords** educational imaginaries, failure, ethos of perfectionism, anti-heroic images, nihilism, refusing teleological language, finitude

The mind's dignity is to acknowledge that it is limited and that reality is outside it. To acknowledge, with or without dismay, that nature's laws do not bend to our wishes, that the world exists independently of our will, that our own sadness proves nothing about the moral condition of the stars or even of the people who pass by our

windows—in this acknowledgement lies the mind's true purpose and the soul's rational dignity. (Pessoa, 2001b, p. 39)

We are born without knowing how to talk, and we die without having known how to express ourselves. Our life runs its course between the silence of the one who cannot speak and the silence of the one who wasn't understood. (Pessoa, 2001b, p. 39)

### **Education and Revolution**

The existence and persistence of efforts at educating the young might seem, at first glance, at odds with positions calling themselves “nihilist.” The images that education gives to itself tend to be overwhelmingly positive and optimistic, imbued with hope, potential, progress, idealism and futurity. Nihilism, understood as the consequence of confrontation with nothingness suggests there is no justification for, sense of, or meaning to, existence. One simply exists. One lives. However, there are other readings of nihilism that place education on a more awkward footing.

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Deleuze argues nihilism is misread if it is to mean the value of nothing. Rather nihilism is found where it seems least evident: in life denied and depreciated as life made subordinate to ideals and the supersensible which negate *this* world as it is. For Nietzsche, Deleuze writes, “it is higher values that are related to a will to deny, to annihilate life” (1983, p. 139). Higher values negate life. Nietzsche in turn, claims that, “[r]adical nihilism’ is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognises; plus the realisation that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be ‘divine’ or morality incarnate” (Nietzsche, 1968, §3, p. 9). The negation of *this* world in favour of values that are impossible to achieve is called passive nihilism.

Few spheres of life are as bathed in aspiration and “life as it ought to be” as education. Howard Caygill's observations in relation to the highest values thus arguably ought to equally apply to this domain:

Nietzsche regards the other-worldly character of Christianity as a prime example of a culture in which the “highest values” diminish life by establishing standards that are defined by the impossibility of their ever being realised. Every finite act in the light of these values must be a failure, so reducing to nothing any autonomous significance they may possess and judging them only with regard to those highest values that they can never achieve. (Caygill, 2000, p. 191)

He posits that when John Paul II sought to replace scientific and technological nihilism with its valorisation of pleasure and efficiency with a higher transcendent

set of values of the truth and the good, he failed to see that “[b]oth sets of value, however, are nihilistic in establishing transcendent ideas which can never be realised and so condemn humanity to failure and self-negation, so ensuring the survival of nihilism” (Caygill, 2000, p. 194).

The experience of education is, for many, one of failure. Not the ordinary failure of the human condition, but the kind of sadistic failure exemplified in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* (1994b). It is impossible for all to attain external standards, embody the ideals evolved by others, or attain goals prescribed universally. Educational systems do not calculate the cost of the ethos of perfectionism, competition and comparison in the lives of others who fail to accede to such standards, or who were never going to be in a position to do so in the first place, as Eva Feder Kittay (2005) details in the story of her daughter. Curricula such as the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, laudable as its aims may appear, outline an ambitious set of capacities that underpin the curriculum—successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors. It asks that children, no matter how shy, how existentially questioning, or how militant, conform to a quasi-corporate identity in the midst of the plurality of beings that inhabit the world.

Is there another way of understanding nihilism, in particular in relation to education? The death of God does not necessarily lead to a more joyful existence if the pessimism born of weakness unleashes life’s internal reactive forces of bad conscience, and of pity, rancour, reactivity, and *ressentiment*, that is, passive nihilism. If the task is to revalue values at their origin so that the power of affirmation allows for the creation of new values that are those of life and of becoming, as Deleuze suggests, this is not straightforward—as Caygill rightly recognises when describing the difficulties and ambivalences in Nietzsche’s efforts to overcome nihilism. Part of this essay will examine that re-figuring of nihilism in terms of the ideals of education but it is another sense of nihilism—the courageous persistence in existence without salvation, without ground, and without *telos*—that interests me more.

I follow Beckett, Coetzee, Varda and others by tempering the language of appreciation, affirmation, and joy whilst refusing those positions that depreciate life: in certain respects, I think Deleuze and Nietzsche may ask too much. Rather than either joyous affirmation of active nihilism or the passive nihilism found in the pessimism of weakness, a different messy, confused, but courageous variant of nihilism could acknowledge that there is nothing beyond this world, that the human species is bound for extinction, as indeed is the universe, and still manage to savour the moments of joy as and when they arise, treat others decently, try to alleviate suffering where one can, and live without the consolations of salvation, the quest for prestige, the idea of progress, without falling into despair or without resorting to indifference or neutrality.

Samuel Beckett's characters are generally scathing of those who claim moral superiority or who desire power, and, at best, gently tease those who wish to find a firmer ground beneath their existences, though there is some understanding of the need for a glimmer of hope. This position is neither cynical nor pessimistic but simply prefers to resist the instrumental reasoning that has inspired the more grandiose projects of social engineering and human improvement, partly because of the catastrophic suffering that has often followed in their wake. It focuses on a set of more civil virtues and sensibilities, like gentleness, kindness, and camaraderie, a keen sense of the contingency of existence, the possibility of a world without the species *homo sapiens*, alongside the enduring recognition of our interdependence.

What can such a renunciative, minimalist image offer to education? It does not trade in teleological images of growth, potential, expansion, fulfilment, or in notions of improvement. It does not share the utopic visions of revolutionary politics. Indeed, it resists the power of those images that excite educational imaginaries such as power, flourishing, ambition, competition, or progress. David Katz is sceptical of the riposte that

...anything that seems in appearance to be the most severe depreciation of life, transcendent values, existence, and meaning can always be recuperated as precisely the refusal of a particular set of conditions and ideology which is intolerable, and therefore the implicit affirmation of the possibility of something other and better than the degraded space of our lives. (Katz, 2000, p. 236)

Instead, we might begin with Nietzsche and the refusal of the notion that the “goal must be put up, given, demanded *from outside*” (1968, p. 16) (albeit accompanied by the sober thought that there is no higher value or purpose to suffering that might redeem it) and end with Beckett who refuses Nietzsche's superfluity, exuberance and expansionist tendencies. In an admittedly ambivalent manner, Beckett brings values, if that is what we can call them, “down to earth” by refusing images of health, flourishing, and mastery, instead dwelling on the moribund, the ageing, the crippled, the incontinent, the disabled, the infirm, the homeless, and so on.

Keeping such images in mind, what might curricula look like if oriented by that different set of images that did not view grand stories of heroism as exemplary of and for humanity, or seek competence and capabilities rather than acknowledging failure, tragedy, persistence and comedy in the (all too human) condition? Whatever consolations there may be can be found in this world, as when John Llewelyn writes of the natural religiosity of birth, death, and copulation. What if the images shaping education were the scavengers and gleaners of Agnes Varda's films, the denizens and anti-heroes of the novels of J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett, or even the impossible thought of the future, in the aftermath of solar catastrophe, when this

planet and this universe (Brassier, 2007; Lyotard, 1991; Land, 1992), will become void of sentience and sapience, all extinguished. How then to live? How to go on? How to educate, in light of this thought?

## **On Perfection**

The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of [...] One cannot speak anymore of being, one must only speak of the mess [...] I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess. (Beckett in conversation with Tom Driver, 1961, p. 22)

In his despairing and ugly book *Heroes* (2015), Franco “Bifo” Berardi writes of the “heroes” of mass shootings whose murders are carefully planned as spectacle. They present themselves as those who will be seen as the “strong” where once they were weak, invoking, and oddly enough, given their prior experiences of isolation and marginalisation, they draw upon the neo-Darwinian language of “natural selection.” Pekka-Erik Auvinen, one of those mass murderers, simply states that “Humanity is overrated.” There is something deeply corrosive about this kind of cynicism and nihilism, which even as it destroys, wishes to preserve its own immortality through the staging of the spectacle. Even as we reflect upon extinction, catastrophe and devastation, this is not to say all is without hope (even if it is in the long run).

These imminent futures without futurity can help to show the precariousness and vulnerability of the human species and without the consolation of metaphysical truths to explain and justify existence. It is at and from this point that we begin again. Such sentiments and sensibilities run counter to the contemporary strain of nihilism of financial capitalism, argues Bifo. He thinks that the new form of nihilism is “annihilating nihilism” that seeks not to *begin* with nothing but to actively produce “*nihil* as its effect” (Berardi, 2015, p. 88) in an era of “capitalism absolutism.”

Despite the rhetoric of acceptance and inclusion in education, and perhaps because of the impossible rhetoric of flourishing, the dogmas of perfection, prestige, production and progress continue to haunt the educational imaginary. Spinoza offers a different understanding of the relationship between ontology, anthropology, ethics and politics. Transcendence is eliminated in his account of God, that is, Nature, and there is no sense of purpose or *telos* to Nature. He re-frames the idea of perfection and dismisses abstract ideals and teleological accounts of causality. In

the Appendix to *Ethics* Part I and the preface to *Ethics* Part V, Spinoza disparages the idea of a comparative idea of perfection premised upon a model human or a standard with which we might compare ourselves or be compared; we are as perfect as we can be given the ways in which we have been determined to exist. This does not mean we do not change, however, we are not self-making creatures. We are, to use his language, a “part of nature,” finite modes conditioned by forces beyond our control.

If transformation occurs, it stems in part from developing a deeper understanding of the nature of things. The human is de-centred, both ontologically and existentially, as we come to understand our place in *Deus sive Natura*, our relative powerlessness, and our propensity to imagine and fantasise and hence react, rather than understand. In short, there is a perspectival shift that comes from no longer beginning with the human but instead with an ontological account that situates us, as finite modes, in relation to *Natura Naturans*, naturing nature, or the immanent cause of all that exists. Some forms of power and domination seem to preclude even the most minimal opportunities for experimentation in the composition of new relations, but understanding how we are determined is still the first step towards liberation. Whatever happens in the mind is registered in the body in Spinoza’s monistic philosophy: the relations of bodies are as important as relations of ideas, and transformation is not simply about changing one’s attitude.

The idea of displacing the centrality of the human in order to begin with the cosmos, the “whole,” or “all that is,” and to see ourselves as part of nature, runs counter to the more familiar images that inform educational imaginaries, in particular those that rely, implicitly or explicitly, on a variety of appeals to transcendent ideals or causes, including the idea of “fulfilling your potential.” Such images continue to be oriented by philosophical imaginaries that value non-interdependent existences, perfectionist understandings of autonomy, individualistic conceptions of agency, notions of creativity *ex nihilo* inherited from the God of Genesis, and a greater sense of purpose.

Such imaginaries also envision lives oriented towards flourishing, expansion, success, and endless growth. This is not to suggest that, for instance, the Christian imaginary does not include images of humility, but rather that in the field of education other images tend to be foregrounded. Nonetheless, error is likely when perfection is abstracted from the particular:

it came about that everyone called “perfect” what he saw agreed with his universal idea of this kind of thing, and called “imperfect” what he saw agreed less with the model in his mind, even when its maker thought he had entirely finished it. (*Ethics*, IV, Preface, 1996, p. 114)

What would happen were we to refuse the imaginary subject of the Enlightenment and welcome a far less ambitious figure into educational discourse, a Beckettian tramp or Coetzee's Michael K as our anti-hero or alternatively one of the anonymous figures from Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*? Beginning with the *nihil* allows one to see "how it is"—a mess, for Beckett—and thus to act from that point; comparing "how it is" with an impossible or utopic ideal makes cynicism and despair more likely. (That said, there are, of course, those whose lives under the increasingly precarious, intensified and fragile conditions of today's capitalism facing "how it is" can feel at times that there is little to face but endless despair and exploitation, objectively speaking.)

What if the language of capabilities and ideals were replaced with persistence, courage, interdependence, and kindness? Should we begin to educate children differently in light of our finitude, the precious brevity of even a long life, and the inevitable future of solar death when the species will no longer exist? Such an education would be an uncomfortable one, though perhaps children have more facility in this respect than adults: as my four year old nephew said to my three year old niece "I was born when you were still dead." So, how much should change in our philosophy of education if we acknowledge that the solar system has a death sentence? What would it mean to inject a modicum of humility into our image of education? Might it be possible to even come to look at our world in a different light, a world that never seems to move beyond violence as a tool to resolve difference, and see how we are unbound and dispossessed by one another, and then try to find another way of relating to the other?

### **When You Were Still Dead**

In 4.5 billion years there will arrive the demise of your phenomenology and your utopian politics, and there'll be no one there to toll the death knell or hear it (Lyotard, 1991, p. 9).

I was taken by the ease of explanatory power mobilised by my nephew mentioned above in recalling the time of non-existence of the other for that short period of time between his own birth and that of his sister as the "time when you were dead." It made me think of Hannah Arendt and Christine Battersby's writings on natality, of birth. It is with relative ease that we think of a universe before even the most primitive organism, but it is often with huge difficulty that we think of a future universe without us, or any other form of sapient or sentient existence, even if and when we know we will be dead. Why is this? So much has been written to justify and tell the story of *why* we are here, from mythological storytelling, to the world's religions, including those that do not involve a transcendent God, that to suggest that perhaps there was no deeper rationale or purpose or meaning can be

disquieting, let alone the idea that there might be no future, at least not for us. This was not something with which the Moderns had to occupy themselves, at least not in the same way. In his move toward a more “geo-centred” conception of the subject and, indeed, subjectivity, Spinoza writes in a way that sits uncomfortably with the reputation for quiet tranquillity and stoicism for which he is often lauded. He describes his motivation for his intellectual journey that will culminate in the *Ethics* in the first poignant lines of the *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*:

After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realised that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity (Spinoza, *Ethics* IV, 1996, p. 205).

Spinoza's comfort, and indeed beatitude, eventually came from understanding the nature of our dependence on, and participation in, God, that is, Nature. This de-personalisation and de-subjectification of the human allows for a different perspective on one's place in the world, one's relation to others, as well as reconciliation to one's finitude, vulnerability and fragility. Were adults to have a more attenuated understanding of these dimensions of human existence, perhaps they/we might be less keen to push children toward external and artificial standards and towards the kind of perfectionism implicit in discourses of flourishing. But those imaginaries consistently circumvent the opportunities for circumspection and the care that could be offered to children. Demanding the impossible, systemically or within the pedagogical encounter, involves the kind of nihilism of which Deleuze and Spinoza write; it denies life and “how it is,” by constantly looking beyond what is, and devaluing lived experience as not enough. When Beckett rather ambiguously writes “Enough,” it is perhaps both to say “that is enough!” and to suggest that we only need enough, and not more than “enough”; the resistance to the intolerable and the refusal of the desire for more can sit alongside one another.

The position that I am outlining here is not one of indifferent quietism, resigned fatalism, or passive nihilism. It invites a gentle camaraderie that understands that much of the time the best we can manage is to tolerate others, even those closest to us. We may even accept the necessity for mutual aid and co-existence, without thinking that one must have sympathy or empathy or projective understanding in order to be able to be decent or kind. Such things are not necessary



to allow one to acknowledge that the other also has the right to exist. It does not mean that one stand by and do nothing whilst others are subjected to suffering that one might be in a position to alleviate. Yet it involves avoiding power, *grand projets*, and the seductions of idealism and emancipatory revolution; it has perhaps been the case that the logics of violence that have claimed to serve benevolent and liberatory ideals have done more damage to human lives than those more situated approaches to refusal and resistance that maintain a more attenuated sense of facticity and the singular lives of others and that have adopted experimental logics that are more sensitive to the specificity of situations.

States' actions have, of course, been particularly egregious in this regard. The messianic image of eventual salvation, worldly or transcendent, remains a powerful one in terms of the call to provide reasons for decency and kindness to others; the response, without much logic, that one acknowledges one's interdependence and responds to the other is not so compelling or seductive as the "great ideas." Yet, great ideas can slide into death-denying cultures that deny any reality to our finitude and the inevitable and imminent annihilation that we face. It can be then all too easy to slip into a life-denying existence by positing an external end or *telos* to existence that justifies and/or judges life.

There is something difficult in all this, in particular in relation to education. It is probably because we can feel ill at ease in addressing such issues as death, finitude, pain, catastrophe, meaningless, and suffering directly with young people and children, when, as we know, life always brings in its wake suffering and tragedy. We may feel that these are experiences of which they need not be made prematurely aware if they have been fortunate enough to have led lives that have remained protected hitherto. Life also brings the small and temporary joys, laughter, pleasure, and epiphanies of mortal bodied existence, the logic goes, so why expose them needlessly? I am not suggesting that educators ought directly address and teach either the kinds of philosophical vision that Spinoza discusses or the question of more or less imminent extinction discussed by Claire Colebrook, Jean-François Lyotard, and Ray Brassier. It might however be possible to think of creating educational atmospheres that invite minor insights, little moments of happiness, the joys of persisting with something, some sense of achievement and progression, however small, that stems from engaging in doing something, no matter how undervalued others might find it.

This is different from approaches that evaluate the success of the educational endeavour by whether prescribed goals have been achieved or that justify curricula and methodologies through their instrumental value to extrinsic objectives. My rather anti-heroic and modest vision of education might better prepare children for disappointment and a sense of the "mess." It does not demand too much in terms of an idealised development of them as perfected and perfectible humans and citizens who will *finally* make the world a better place, an indecent request given the litany

of failures of humanity hitherto. An anti-heroic pedagogy could support the development of a politics and ethics of decency, camaraderie, and an ontological vision that begins with dependence, interdependence, dispossession, and vulnerability.

If, as I suggest, curricula and the vision for education remain beset by the heroic imaginaries of romanticism and the Enlightenment, this may be a more helpful approach, and I will map some ideas in respect of this shortly. Cruelty comes easily to human beings (including children), capitalism's ideology of growth and mastery demands wilful oblivion to the destruction of the earth, and many of the heroes that populate curricula are described in terms of exceptional, albeit one-dimensional, virtues, whilst ordinary lives of persistence, endurance and refusal remain invisible. In this respect, even small cracks in the image education presents to itself can offer some scope for some improvement.

Despite our awareness of educational delusions, we continue to lie to children and young people about what they can expect from life. Let's reflect a little further on lying and heroism because lies and omissions in education and curricula can foment distress in younger and older lives. Arguably, benevolent as the intentions for such lying may be, they create the conditions for *ressentiment* through valorising competition, and they privilege ideals, such as standards, above existing human beings. Some might say that these delusions are not only functional but existentially necessary. They serve to "re-territorialise" a little, to use the language of Deleuze and Guattari, creating a sense of safety and order, or they provide what Nietzsche called an "*antidote* against practical and theoretical nihilism" (1968, p.4). Yet, still I wonder about the relationship between the idealism and hope that we continuously witness in educational discourses that has resonance with the Platonic lie. Such "aspirations" and ambitions certainly fulfil a function in constituting particular kinds of subjectivities that appear unable to acknowledge "how it is."

### **Solar Death and the Great Lie**

The striking thing about this metaphysics of development is that it needs no finality. Development is not attached to an Idea, like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms. It is produced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone. It assimilates risks, memorizes their informational value and uses this as a new mediation necessary to its functioning. It has no necessity itself other than cosmological chance.

It thus has no end, but it does have a limit, the expectation of the life of the sun. The anticipated explosion of this star is the only challenge objectively posed to development (Lyotard, 1991, p.7).

The question of the purpose of education is systematically addressed in Plato's *Republic*, a text which underscores the importance of lying to children and to adults. This serves a dual function: to protect children from the exposure to those images and ideas that might breed vicious habits, and to cultivate the conditions for socialisation within a State structured on the basis of a clear division of roles. Falsehood is a kind of medicine for the populace. Talk of suffering or tragedy would undermine this project. The image of the hero is required in order to offer solace and resolve to the warrior, hence Homer and Hesiod should be rejected: the requirements of justice trump the need for truth: "It will be for the rulers of our city then to deceive citizen or enemy for the good of the State" (Plato, 2007, p. 114).

The education of the young is targeted because "[t]his is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark" (Plato, 2007, p. 114). We censor in order to protect and to promote civic virtue since "opinions formed at that age is difficult to eradicate" (p. 116). In respect of curriculum, "it seems that our first business is to supervise the production of stories, and choose only those which we think suitable and reject the rest" (p. 116). Plato promotes an ethos of endurance, heroism and self-overcoming so that all citizens might come to prefer death to slavery.

Some contemporary resonances of Plato's *Republic* are to be found in the demand for heroism that persists in different forms today. One image of the hero might be located in the contemporary psychological parlance of "resilience." This also suggests, implicitly, that one is to blame for failing to overcome the odds stacked against one when others have managed to pull through, and it also suggests that we can "proof" people against being undone by tragedy or social misfortune.

Other heroic motifs might be found in the efforts to refuse to acknowledge the tragedy of the human condition, the lack of discussion of death, contemporary conflict, violence, ageing, illness or dying in most curricula. When the virtues and values of competition and achievement are lauded over camaraderie, thriftiness, or care, this might constitute another heroic motif, despite the reality that lived lives face debt and precarious labour. Discourses about education perpetuate ideals that refuse to fully acknowledge the fact that we experience failure, weakness, vulnerability, aging, sickness, and dependence. When Fernando Pessoa wrote, "I began to understand how the continuous struggle for an unattainable perfection finally tires us out, and I understood the great mystics and great ascetics, who recognize life's futility in the soul" (2001a, p. 290). Such "tiring out" due to being consistently subjected to impossible ideals constitutes a form of nihilism that would be avoidable were there other images to orient education. There are ways of thinking and doing that can make life less painful, such as not persisting in the fiction that all problems can be solved, and that a human life is possible without encountering tragedy. There are ways of reflecting upon ethics that encourage sensitive responses to the student who says in class "what has some orphan in some

country far away got to do with me,” exploring how the ways in which each of our lives can affect the lives of others who are strangers, not through a “butterfly effect” but through unfair trade arrangements or the consumption of goods produced in exploitative conditions. We could do well to remind our students that those who are more affluent are inevitably complicit in creating and perpetuating suffering. Ethical imagination that projects itself into the life of the suffering other is not required; all that is required is a cursory analysis of political economy.

Much of what has been discussed so far may seem to invite a kind of hopelessness; without transcendent ideals or a sense of purpose in education, what is the point? Rather like Spinoza’s response to Blyenbergh’s letters when he says that he does not engage in wrongdoing because it is against his particular nature rather than because he is afraid of being punished for wrongdoing, this anti-heroic pedagogy suggests that we simply respond to the singular beings who exist despite, and perhaps because of, our knowledge that all that is currently familiar, including the earth, sun, moon and stars, will not last. Notwithstanding this, we can provide one another with a modicum of care and comforts, alleviate suffering where we witness it, and try to learn something about this world and one another. If “man’s inhumanity to man” pained and upset Beckett greatly, so too should it pain us simply because it *exists*.

The prospect of solar death and the degradation of the planet provide a greater sense of context temporally and materially, and might spark instead of despair greater care for the things and beings of the world, existents that are already finite, fragile, and vulnerable, instead of imagining eternal release, salvation or happiness. Beginning with “how it is” is not a cause for disenchantment or disappointment but can even invite minor and unexpected enchantments, as Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010) describes: we can experiment with our material sensibilities and we can take up in new ways our capacity for thought. It is not that the world will no longer be a mess or no longer confusing, or that we will finally understand ourselves. Rather, a non-dogmatic, more reticent, more humorous, and minor “politics” might help us see the futility and destructiveness of expansive ambition uncoupled from material constraint and the suffering of sentient beings. It might thus allow us to gain a modicum of perspective. The danger of this would be the romanticisation of lives of those who are the denizens of the past and who live lives that can seem futile, in poverty, exile and without relief. This is not what I wish to convey. However, I suggest that the appropriate ethical response to such lives, and indeed it is a possibility for each of us, is not pity. There might be less self-satisfied ways of responding to need and despair both in the realm of action and the imagination.

That said, educators who adopt anti-heroic curricula and pedagogies could be charged with abnegating their duties to make the world a better place, just as writer and activist Nadine Gordimer once charged J. M. Coetzee with creating heroes who

ignore history, rather than making it. Admittedly, the approach that I am suggesting is not a prescriptive one which aims to enlighten and tell the truth to those who don't understand: it is always a temptation for educators to translate scraps of knowledge into moralising tracts and political edicts. My approach even shies from the language of wakefulness, conversion and waking up that is Plato's legacy from the Stoics to Maxine Greene. Rather it is a rather bumbling and modest pedagogy, stumbling, provisional, committed, honest, messy and full of dilemmas. It steers clear of the immodesty of trying to enlighten others, and tells stories that have their own truths, without imposing a greater truth or framework.

It is true, as Gordimer said, that Coetzee's characters, such as Michael K (2004) do not try to change things on a grand scale. In that respect they might be seen to lack courage or betray their fellow human beings. They avoid the revolution, allowing others to die in their stead, preferring to plant pumpkin seeds and find hedonic pleasures where they arise. What happens is a white noise around them that makes no sense and which they try to avoid. However, perhaps this tells a more accurate story of conflict than the grand narratives of war or the liberatory tales of revolution. So often, rightly or wrongly, many who would have been happy to continue as they were, who didn't harbour political ideas or ideals other than at the most local level, simply get caught up and swept along by historical current.

It is also true that Michael K. is not a character who knows himself (and in this respect perhaps he is closer to most of us than we would care to admit). He does not have a clear sense of purpose, although he remains committed in his journeys and he tries to avoid being trapped and confined, finding ways of escaping the confinements that others try to impose upon him, keeping going. Critics have written of the ecological romanticism of this story as the protagonist tries to live outside war, civilisation and arbitrary arrest. Yet the text might be simply read as it is: a story tracking the life and times of a fictional character, rather than an allegory that advocates an anti-political strategy of return to the earth and the local. As Coetzee said of South Africa, "there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (Coetzee & Atwell, 1992, p. 99).

There are moments when life becomes intolerable. Keeping going then becomes the task, and art and education will offer neither consolation or release from the violence of the present. Even if art and education offer stories and images that can remind others of their existence, in particular at those moments when forces conspire to annihilate some from memory and from earth, to make them mute or unbelievable. Telling those stories is the job of the writer, says Gordimer. For Coetzee, writing is a more ambiguous affair as the writer does not know where she is going as she begins to write, and she cannot control (nor does she wish to) how she will be taken up by her readers. To do so would make literature an instrument of

politics, and a tool for enlightenment or indoctrination. So the story of Michael K. is what it is, I suggest; simply, a story rather than a clear message.

### **Anti-Heroes and Camaraderie**

However, the situation would seem to be precisely the opposite: the world is overfull with meaning and we suffocate under the combined weight of the various narratives of redemption—whether they are religious, socio-economic, political, aesthetic or philosophical. What passes for the ordinary is cluttered with illusory narratives of redemption that conceal the very extraordinariness of the ordinary and the nature of its decay under conditions of nihilism. What Beckett's work offers us, then, is a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives, a paring down or stripping away of the resorts of fable, the determinate negation of social meaning through the elevation of form, a syntax of weakness, an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption, an acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human condition (Critchley, 1997, p. 179).

Critchley's long investigation of Beckett and others in his 1997 book *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* ... opens up a different line of inquiry as it nears the point of its completion. Living without narratives of redemption and acknowledging the "finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human condition" offers that *nihil* from which we can begin. What would education look like if the salvific narratives were pared away? Does education have to have a point or higher purpose? The limited approach I take to thinking about this question involves the effort to locate a non-prescriptive way of understanding pedagogy. It is an oxymoron, I admit, to aim to find a less heroic and ambitious way of telling the story of humanity, and perhaps it is contrary to imagine a world in which the figure orienting curricula was the denizen rather than the citizen.

George Bataille writes of Molloy:

If I were indifferent to cold, hunger, and the myriad difficulties that overwhelm a man when he abandons himself to nature, rain, and the earth, to the immense quick-sand of the world and of things, I myself would be the character Molloy. I can say something more about him, and that is that both you and I have met him: seized by a terrified longing, we have encountered him on street corners, an anonymous figure composed of the inevitable beauty of rags, a vacant and indifferent expression, and an ancient accumulation of filth; he was

*being, defenseless* at last, an enterprise, as we all are, that had ended in shipwreck.

There is in this reality, the essence or residue of being, something so *universal*, these complete *vagabonds* we occasionally encounter but immediately *lose* have something so essentially indistinct about them, that we cannot imagine anything more anonymous' (Bataille, 1979, pp. 60-61)

Bataille's image, taken up in different form by Deleuze in his last short piece *Immanence: A Life...* (2001) retains a sense of the purified singularity of the other, distilling him or her into universal qualities—defenceless, anonymity, indifference, abandonment—rather than obdurate, rude, unfriendly, or smelly. It is not that there is no generic sense of the human condition in Beckett's characters, but there is a good deal more to them than that. Such acts of purification annihilate the particularity of material, bodied existence of characters like Didi and Gogo or Molloy that enjoy dwelling in their full corporeal faculties.

Similarly, speaking of her film *Vagabond* (1985), Varda eschews psychological explanations of the main character, and does not see Mona as a victim but rather "as someone who says no to everything so totally as to look like independence itself" adding,

[t]he way the story is told is not to be pitiful, not for understanding, that is not what it's about. It's about what it is to be so much in the 'no' situation—she says no all the time—and I don't know why she ended up on the road and saying no" (Varda & Quart, 1986-7, p. 5).

She says,

I've always been interested in people who have nothing because whatever you do they'll take it—this I found out very easily. You give them money, they'll take it, you give them food, they'll take it, you give them board, they'll take it. They don't ask you, they don't speak to you, they don't want you, they don't like you—they just need (p. 8),

saying "we don't know what to do when people don't want to be helped" (p. 9). She concludes, "So the film is really about tolerance also. How with tolerance you can accept other ways of existing which are so difficult to tolerate, difficult for me, difficult for everybody" (p. 10). Despite what I have written elsewhere, I think there is something compelling about this way of thinking about tolerance, primarily because it does not seek to understand the other who may not wish to be

understood, who doesn't desire pity, and probably, like all of us, does not really understand him or herself.

What I mean by this is the refusal of the gesture of the sympathetic (or ethical or narrative) imagination that tries to project into the lived existence of the other, a gesture seen as an essential prerequisite to living with the other, as found in the philosophies of education of thinkers such as Maxine Greene or Martin Buber. Favoured instead are delicate modes of conviviality, being-together, sticking together, interdependence, and humility (rare in academic and educational circles perhaps). In short, these are ways of being together that acknowledge our ignorance of one another, what Sam Durrant calls "unwilled ignorance," and which do not see mutual understanding as a necessity for living together.

Given the recent historical record of endeavours inspired by images of mastery, autonomy and enlightenment that have left in their wake a history of colonialism, genocide, slavery, fundamentalism and ignorance, it might be rather more wise to encourage a little more humility and self-doubt and get rid of the idea that any of us can wake up and see clearly. Both Spinoza and Plato have a more attenuated sense of the limits of human wisdom; perhaps the best we can hope for is coming to realize that we are confused and that we depend on others.

Mona, in *Vagabond* (1985), and the people in Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) do not fit the romantic ideal of the impoverished outsider. Just like Beckett's couples, often in states of physical decay, crippled, hobbling and crawling when they can't walk, and who tend to fail to meet one another's needs but stay together nonetheless, human life might be better imagined as one of persistent misunderstanding. Perhaps there is occasional tenderness, bouts of physical violence, and the unwillingness to abandon one another for no other reason than that to be human means being bound, in some way, to the other. Mona does not seem to feel this way. She dies frozen and alone in the ditch, and yet it is difficult to pity her for the life she led. Sam Durrant writes, "Coetzee's figures of otherness—the barbarian girl, K, Friday—doggedly resist the attentions of their sympathisers" (2006, p. 120). They refuse the ready-made frames that might domesticate them, and thus allow familiar relations of power, authority and knowledge to be entrenched once more, whether willfully or not on the part of the protagonists of power.

Now, I think that there is a pedagogical lesson in this idea of the limits of the sympathetic imagination. This is not because one cannot project oneself empathically into the life of another, but because the other refuses to permit this, remaining inscrutable to the gaze of the one who wishes to understand and thus, in some sense, master or own them. However, this is not a Levinasian story—the other does not accuse, take hostage, persecute, and so forth—but rather simply resists without accusation, like a stone. This might constitute a fruitful starting point for researchers today: acknowledge the incapacity to describe the lives of others and



start with something other, like companionship or camaraderie or facing extinction together.

### **Somehow On**

Object object ages each heroic seen from the next when will the last come when was my golden every rat has its heyday I say it as I hear it (Beckett, 1964, p. 10).

Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Meremost minimum.

No choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Somehow stand. That or groan. The groan so long on its way. No. No groan. Simply pain. Simply up. A time when try how. Try see. Try say. How first it lay. Then somehow knelt. Bit by bit. Then on from there. Bit by bit. Till up at last. Not now. Fail better worse now (Beckett, 2009, p. 81).

In light of the kinds of issues addressed throughout this essay, ranging from extinction to idealism, there is a certain absurdity in continuing to persist with the relentless ambition and perfectionism that drive many of the discourses in education and of educators. I think there are more compelling and useful examples that understand a possible ethic for “humanity” in terms of “decency,” “sticking together,” or “interdependence” and even “kindness” in situations that are both difficult and ethically fraught, rather than trying to didactically instill morals or shape character directly. Even small children see through such moralising in such matters. In conversation with one class in a Gaelscoil (an Irish-immersion school) they evinced a visceral desire to not only burn all existing copies of *Bun go Barr* (an Irish text book), but indeed to place said copies in a black hole and eliminate them from the universe. In discussion with these seven and eight year olds they explained that “Real children don’t go to the shops and ask for broccoli and cabbage. They want sweets!” They resented the surreptitious efforts at moralising by the textbook writers.

On another note, though one related to the moralising tendencies of curricula, acknowledgement of ambivalence, cruelty, as well as persistence and camaraderie might allow for a more deflationary, comical, absurd and even tender account of the human. For example, when wandering along Liffey Street in Dublin one day, I saw two men bundled in multiple coats and sleeping bags, walking down the street at noon, arms wrapped around one another as they supported each other on their path—a gesture of mutual necessity. That kind of ambiguous interrelation of humans can be found in the couples that populate Beckett’s texts, the mixture of

need and interdependence, with no necessity that one like the other, or care for him or her in ways that might seem familiar when we speak of such matters.

There is no romance or romanticisation in such forms of camaraderie, and there is often betrayal and brutality. I remember another day speaking with a young heroin addict, new to the street, who was upset because he was with his friends when one of them overdosed: they called the emergency services, of course, and then the other one robbed the wallet from their friend lying unconscious, as some do when such opportunities arise on the street—everyone's ethical limits differ, and can differ further in difficult situations. A performance of *Act without Words II* (1994a) down an alley way in a derelict site out the back of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, conveyed something of the poignancy of such couplings, in particular in the gentleness with which each moved the other, whilst each remained unconscious as the other dressed and undressed again. There was no abandonment, just persistence.

In an interview about Beckett, Jack MacGowran describes what Beckett said to him about Didi and Gogo's relationship in *Waiting for Godot*:

“Treat it as a movable force meeting an immovable object.” But, he said, “They are interdependent; one needs the other. Estragon has so many nightmares, he must have someone to talk to. And Vladimir could not bear to be alone, because he cannot find any answers to the questions he is seeking. He hopes Estragon will provide the answers. Also, part of Vladimir is very much concerned about the plight of mankind.” (MacGowran, 2012, p. 159).

There is no resting in despair. There is courage without idealism, and with only the slimmest of hope without reason. *Endgame* (1994a) lacks the comedy and camaraderie of *Godot*. Again MacGowran says that he feels as though Clov needs to feel needed, he is still dependent on Hamm, responding that Beckett's interpretation of the play was “Interdependency—that man must depend on his fellowman in some way, no matter how awful; a love-hate relationship between Hamm and Clov that exists throughout the play” (MacGowran, 2012, p. 161). These two are perhaps some of Beckett's most damaged characters, they can't live without each other, they face the aftermath of extinction together, but they hurt each other.

Still, these are not unfamiliar exercises in living together without mutual understanding, without even love or care, that acknowledge human dependency, interdependence, frailty and fallibility in a universe that offers no solace, consolation, or real hope of salvation. Do we need reasons or explanations to offer kindness, support or care for one another? Must we ground such acts in stories about human nature, God or evolution? Some would say that the argument must be made given the propensity for cruelty and violence in the world, but it seems

unlikely that those set on such courses will be dissuaded by rigorous argumentation or citizenship education. At least, it has not worked very well so far.

As Agnès Varda notes in her film, few of us will forget those scenes in *The Gleaners and I* (2000) of François munching parsley from cardboard boxes in the remains of the market, describing his Masters degree, selling his magazines outside the train station, and offering French classes to his fellow co-habitants in the sheltered accommodation in which he lives. Nor will we forget Varda's more militant interviewee traipsing in his wellingtons explaining the reasoning for his ethical position to eat 100% rubbish because of the wastage and over-consumption of contemporary society. For him, "salvaging is a matter of ethics" and the energy of his strides about town is followed by a cut into a series of images of a controlled, sanitised workshop on recycling for children that needs little commentary, and which studiously avoids the politics of poverty.

People who glean and salvage out of necessity or principle seem admirable to me because of their commitment and persistence, and their uniqueness and moments of generosity, and not because their lives are wholly admirable. In her film, Varda follows the poetic logic of a journey seeking out gleaners, interspersing interview scenes with archival footage, stills, commentary, observation, conversation, vignettes, humour, and her own reflections. These undo the authoritative, distanced, invisible voice and eye of the director. This other vision of humanity, described by Varda, Beckett and others is more anti-heroic and, in many ways, courageous. It shows human beings who lack self-pity and refuse pity. For me, these would seem a better fit for school curricula and educational principles and visions than the sanitised language, technocratic appropriations, images of control, and impossible ideals that seem to think that education can produce an ideal humanity and an ideal citizenry through sufficient manipulation and moulding, perhaps even through exhausting our abilities to resist.

### **The Other in Education**

Coming back to the relation to the other in education, and the pressures of heroism both in terms of cultures of success and achievement and in terms of the stories we tell children and young people through the curricula, the telling of different kinds of stories and showing of different kinds of images might be both more truthful and more helpful. If, as I suggest, education needs to be excised of its salvific narratives, this does not mean it does not need images and exemplars to help orient its practice, but I would prefer more modest gestures. I think of the community in Ballyhea in County Cork, Ireland, who stage their weekly protest against the bailout of the bondholders after Mass each Sunday, a bailout that will affect at least the next two generations of citizens.

To those who dismiss such protests as a futile gesture, the protestors might not disagree, although organiser Diarmuid O'Flynn describes it as a tiny pebble in the

shoe of Europe. I think of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement who took the Contraceptive Train to Belfast in 1971 when the Catholic Church ruled women's bodies and family life with an iron fist. These small and local examples show more direction and purpose than the characters we have been exploring, but what they share in common is their relative invisibility, their lack of desire for power or prestige (usually) and their steadfastness in refusal of pity and of convention, and their camaraderie.

In *The Ethical Gesture Towards the Other* (2011), Luce Irigaray tries to respond to both nihilism and the idea of waiting in the writings of Coetzee and Beckett. I am not entirely sure she grasps that sometimes the other does not want to be talked to or helped. She thinks that "as soon as we are able to accept that the other exists, war becomes useless" (Irigaray, 2011, p. 2). Irigaray believes that meeting with the other is not the same as sharing the same world, or hospitality or welcome as such spaces are indifferent or neutral to the other. In order to meet the other, one must wonder about and question oneself such that the positive fulfilment of nihilism is in the creation of the "nothing" that "will permit the articulation between two worlds. This nothing implies both a 'no longer anything of one's own' and a 'nothing yet in common'" (Irigaray, 2011, p. 6).

Whilst I sympathise with this re-staging of the *nihil* as the negation of the desire to appropriate the other, I am not convinced by her when she says,

Beckett or Coetzee are waiting for something or someone who could arrive in their world in order to accomplish or to destroy it. They wait for an outside, a beyond, as for a something or a someone who could bring that which they are unable to realize by themselves: the salvation or the damnation and destruction of their own world, of themselves. This waiting in fact corresponds to the underside of the integration of the other in our country, our home. It still amounts to remaining within the same horizon: the other is not yet welcome as different. It still amounts to a part of us that we cannot or will not recognize and reach (Irigaray, 2011, p. 6).

My disagreement lies in my sense that both Coetzee and Beckett are more attuned to the conflict, tragedy and ambivalence that beset the human condition than Irigaray. Their writings intimate both apocalyptic landscapes and the need to go on, nonetheless. Irigaray, on the other hand, believes in the possibility of welcoming the other as other. It is not that either is wrong, but that perhaps we need both: the cultivation of the relationship with the other, and the ability to persist, in companionship, in camaraderie, without great expectations, and in needy interdependence. Perhaps the lesson is simply in how to persist, and to find joy and care in a world that offers no final purpose or meaning. Somehow on.

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