

Attention, literature and education

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Abstract

The study draws on both educational philosophy and literary works in order to illuminate its central idea. This idea is that attention, a vital pedagogical achievement, possesses preeminent worth in education. Yet institutionally, the state schools of Aotearoa New Zealand, with their recent move toward so-called Modern Learning Environments, have retreated very far from maintaining or marshalling regard for this idea.

Drawing on the philosophical writings of two mid twentieth-century philosophers, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, this thesis argues that a person advances towards achieving attention by becoming better attuned to think well. A kind of conscientiousness in this endeavour is possible in every person, just as a potentiality to appreciate what is beautiful is seeded in us all. Attention improves persons not only in what they grasp and how they grasp things, but also thereby improves persons in the very quality of their being. The morally most choice-worthy way to be is on the one hand respectful of the experience and perspectives of others, while on the other hand it is also self-respecting, imaginative, judicious, curious, reflective, and alive.

Literary interpretation, according to both Weil and Murdoch, possesses a special pedagogical potency, and is the readiest and most easily encountered training ground for attention. To explore the worth of their conviction, the thesis considers four literary works and, with respect to each, examines the pedagogically significant accomplishments that attentive literary reading enables.

If one is to grow one's power of attention, then one's eyes must often fall on examples worthier than one's own to follow; mentors are needed. This thesis contends that revitalizing attention is the defining educational imperative of our age. It calls for re-empowerment of the teacher as mentor. The hope towards which this thesis builds is that opportunities for pedagogical attention may again be reclaimed, fostered, and celebrated.

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Introduction

The central idea of this thesis is that attention is fundamental to education. Against the tide of contemporary managerialism across all sectors of human endeavour including education, it mobilises grave disquiet about the loss of regard for attention in education at the present time. While the implications of current educational trends are far from clear-cut, the thesis challenges the dominant pedagogical themes of the twenty-first century, and argues for us to revisit, grasp once more, and begin again to champion, the place of attention in education.

The thesis seeks first to develop a philosophical understanding of the notion of attention in relation to education. It explores what pedagogical attention is, why it is important, how it might be inculcated, and what might foster (or impede) the development of an attentive bearing.

The notion of attention that is utilized has been extensively worked up and developed by two mid-twentieth century philosophers, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. Truly to educate individuals is, according to Weil and Murdoch, to draw those individuals out of themselves. Education is in this way spiritual. An educated person becomes deeply oriented to conditions of ideal agreement among people. And while an *ideal* for agreement among people concerns community, it concerns community quite in the abstract. For these two philosophers, the worth of education is not merely personal. The worth of education is not even chiefly to foster community. The worth of education concerns something larger not only than individuals but also larger than any particular community. Individuals who are truly educated are therefore brought to be very far outside of themselves.

Attention, far from being, in its concept, neutral, provides powerful direction for education practice. The philosophical case for upholding its imperatives is also powerful. The aim of the present thesis is to investigate the notion of attention, its metaphysical basis, and the implications for ethics, morality, and hence for education. Attention is presented as a moral concept, one that calls for a particular way of apprehending the world, one that involves intellectual focus, imaginative engagement, and so a deliberative as well as a particular kind of non-deliberative involvement. Attention is shown to be attainable by all, much as moral growth is attainable by all. The thesis argues that attention has an important, and indeed fundamental role in education.

The case has both a negative component and a positive component. On the negative side, the thesis argues that without attention, learning is impossible. This means moreover that to quell the possibility of attention, to impede attention's ever being possible, is to limit learning even to the point that learning cannot have occurred. The thesis examines some signs that institutions of formal education are being deflected precisely onto such a self-defeating, education-defeating, course. On the positive side, the thesis argues that to enable attention, and to foster its full development, is to lead toward learning that is meaningful. In support of this, certain modes of classroom engagement that foster this very best sort of learning are examined.

The thesis is motivated by a critique of contemporary trends in state-sector school education in Aotearoa New Zealand where comprehensive institutional reform currently unfolding in our formal education is arguably the reverse of sensibly-directed. The caution and warning that is offered is that these positive modes of learning are presently being worse than side-lined, since the very possibility of realizing the best modes of classroom engagement are being structured out of existence. The possibility of sustained, contemplative reading—for example, of fictional literature, to a pitch and intensity of absorption that is the antithesis of self-absorbed, and that is, on the contrary, outward, as in the grasping of beauty that the work possesses—is likewise being structured out of existence, not only in any classroom setting, but furthermore and beyond that, out of the lives of almost all the young people.

0.1. Attention-giving versus attention-seeking

The notion of muscular effort, rather than of attention, dominates contemporary educational thinking. Activities that call for in-depth attention run counter to contemporary educational requirements for progress, coverage, mastery. In the current environment, the very notion of giving full *attention* (from the Latin *attentio/attendere*—to apply the mind), with its attendant notions of contemplation and reflection, is compromised. As this research will explain and elaborate, this current educational emphasis on quantifiable goals deflects focus away from such aesthetic priorities as contemplation and immersivity. These latter pursuits are, within a parlance oriented to measurables, 'unproductive'—for just as they call for patience, commitment, and thinking over the long haul, they hold no guarantee of immediate 'results'.

In the wider neoliberal context within which education is currently situated, a culture prevails of the commodification of knowledge, and a consequent prevailing tendency to

overlook the value of the aesthetic experience.¹ Contemporary education operates within a culture of quantitative methodologies. Emphasis has got to be upon gathering, into a kind of palpable possession by an individual learner, an inventory of ticked boxes. Muller (2018) characterises this culture in terms of what he calls the “gospel of managerialism” (p. 25). The aim for ostensibly ‘evidenced’ educational success are that of a manager’s wish for a ticked box. As a consequence, there is today a tendency to overlook entirely the value of what we might call the ‘intangibles’ in education—considerations that include a sense of moral purpose, of selflessness, of community, of giving respect and time to aesthetic experience. The very epitome of the muscular disposition behind contemporary managerialist educational gospel is that considerations such as these are called ‘soft’ and on that basis altogether sidelined.

No longer does western education emphasize that students should be thinkers, that they should give their reflective attention to nuanced issues and complex issues and topics. Contemporary education quite fails to orchestrate consideration by students of what even requires to be deliberated about. When educational aims become muscular, there is too little opportunity for students to evaluate and discuss, to be drawn into intricate and complex issues. Curricular models that prioritise human intelligence and ways of thinking are today uncommon.

The emphasis in contemporary western education is increasingly on ostensible ‘hard evidence’. I term the ‘hard evidence’ that gets considered *ostensible* since actual evidence in support of any judgment will inevitably be nuanced and demanding. Facts do not fall out as knowable except through acts of attention, and do not ever truly ‘speak for themselves.’ Any evidence that is properly so-called is impossible without attention. Purportedly ‘soft’ matters, such as a shared aesthetic, or the cultivation of discursive capabilities for impersonal evaluation of matters they are mutually attending to, already pre-figure the possibility of evidence, properly so-called, ever being grasped as such. Often the ticked boxes that the gospel of managerialism lauds and enumerates are not truly worthy evidence for anything, at

¹ The neoliberal context is here understood in terms of economic and political arrangements that prioritize market forces ahead of social or moral considerations, and where individual competition, rather than state oversight or social co-operation, is viewed as the basis for society. (For discussions on the impact of Neoliberalism on education see for example, Giroux (2013), and Wilson (2018).)

least not for anything of value, and the bending of policy into pursuit of ticked boxes is deleterious to true educational functioning.

The once regarded as worthy ideal for education (see Whitehead, 1962), has dropped away—along with aspirations that students should learn to love the giving freely of their attention to matters much bigger than the self, so that their fair mindedness, their capability to give due consideration, their faculty for rationally deliberating, their capacity to withdraw and humbly reconsider a point of view previously expressed—all ideally should grow through the process of their education.² That large former ideal has dropped away since, among other reasons, qualities of selflessness are today systematically overlooked, and the forms of development that are now most prized are steadfastly individualistic.

The lexicon of the 21st-century educationist reduces attention quite away from contemplation (let alone mutual contemplation) altogether. So individualistic are the understood aims of contemporary education, that the word ‘attention’ becomes differently appropriated, and falls out in a perfectly individualistic and partly negative light. To be *attention-seeking* is almost the only mode of individual attention that the lexicon accentuates, and then there is an almost schizophrenic attitude towards this. On the one hand, pride in a performance that both rises above that of others and is seen to do so elicits, within the current educational ideology, actual commendation. On the other hand, show-offs may be distracting themselves from what it takes to tick attainment boxes and this heads them towards being losers, which within current educational ideology is the epitome of the bad. Worse, just as contemporary education tends to pick as winners those who are most fit to say “look at my muscles,” it tends to consider as losers those who might actually seek out nuance rather than to shy away from it, or those who are inclined to be thoughtful in their approach. The rhetoric is misguided and incorrect to a degree that would be difficult to exaggerate.

Today in education the purposeful and self-conscious pursuit of self-development is lauded. To this end, priorities are to set individual goals, to self-evaluate, to work within teams (preferably in a leaderly fashion), to think critically (insofar as this elucidates a justifiable answer), to network successfully in pursuit of one’s own ends, and to collaborate to the full extent (but only to the extent) that that promotes one’s own success. The measure of each of these priorities (goal setting, self-evaluation, teamwork, critical thinking, networking and collaborating) no longer comes to something of intellectual rigour, but reduces to forms

² Such aspirations are described by A. N. Whitehead in *The Aims of Education and other Essays* (1962).

of performance, prowess, or strategy. What is lost in this approach is a consideration of more complex responses—commitment to challenge, a specific grasp of the context or the constraints of a given situation or attention to the human story. Also the point of view misses completely the importance of mutual attainment for understanding, a word with two related senses: explanatory insight, and more fundamentally, mutually reasoned agreement among people.

0.2. *On contemporary education rhetoric: a turning of the tables*

Contemporary educational language is dominated by muscular metaphors of measurement, advancement and mastery.³ In the identification of educational priorities, sporting or business-world metaphors loom large: to set learning goals, to lift student achievement, to raise national standards, to meet national benchmarks, or to maintain international standing. All of these priorities involve attending to metrics that are quantitative (however unnatural and limiting of meaning may be the quantification) and pertain to individuals as individuals. These priorities place, at the level of compulsory schooling, the quantity of each single learner's ostensible individual growth and progress as central. At the tertiary level, emphasis is also placed on considerations of national economic advancement, as though quantitative parameters could reflect growth and progress meaningfully, rather than at the centre of the enterprise something inherently qualitative and shared, namely, a cohort's exercise together of attention.

Such exercise together of attention is towards mutual grasp of some new learning that is not personal but impersonal—that is, by all, an accomplishment, not inwardly but outwardly focussed, of developing *understanding*. That something is to be grasped, whatever that something might be, may have had to be negotiated by discussion, and it may come into view only after alternative ways to think of that something have been trialled and rejected. The agencies of those who are slow to judge and of those who are quick to judge may intermingle usefully in a mutual movement forward towards that shared understanding. Some who are quick to judge may humbly rescind and correct an earlier judgment, but they will have added to the mutual act of judging by firming up the reasons for a point of view adopted ultimately. Some who were slow to judge may be vindicated for having been slow,

³ The term 'muscular' is here used in the sense of 'performance-driven behaviour'. By contrast, Simone Weil's use of the term 'muscular' (See Chapter 1, Section 1.3), although not unrelated, connotes a distinction between physical effort and intellectual ease.

and they are also helped towards ultimate clarity by way of thoughtful interactions with their fellows. Such mutuality of understanding is beautiful in that it involves participants in a kind of willing “unselfing”⁴ that awakens in them what it is to be perceptually attentive.

Today, rather than the teacher seeking to foster educational *attention* and thereby helping a class to achieve together what is worthy for all, the emphasis has shifted to supposed growth of some kind that fulfils a checklist, by individuals who are assumed to be competitive with their fellows. In its individualism this characterises students’ agency as essentially aimed towards being a winner not a loser. The extent to which mutuality can be genuine is rendered almost or actually nil.

While the contemporary educational rhetoric steers well clear of idealistically-oriented words like “virtue”, “good”, or “public good”, it very much emphasises its own quite different, professed educational goals. Today, business-oriented words like “accountability”, “learning purpose”, and “evidence-based practice” are invoked to characterise worthy goals for education. High “quality” education is made out as being “accountable” and “evidence-based”. This rhetoric aligns with contemporary priorities for health services or other public service agencies, where the quantification of outputs is used as the sole measure for determining merit and effectiveness. Contemporary education rhetoric, with its corporate-sounding, business-oriented vocabulary, carries the overtones of education as a formal transaction, with the implication that there will be tangible benefits to the so-called “customer”—the student, from their involvement in the so-called interaction.

Yet we are potentially deceived by the contemporary rhetoric to the extent that we fail to observe that the old meanings (of what amounts to quality, excellence, rigour, achievement) have been seriously diminished or reduced. Muller (2018, p. 19), argues that “the calculative is the enemy of the imaginative”. In other words, the emphasis on qualifiable outputs as determinants of quality comes at a cost: a cost to creativity and to imagination—a “feel for the whole and a sense for the unique are precisely what numerical metrics cannot supply” (p. 62).

Since the start of the twenty-first century, New Zealand schools have increasingly taken up a managerial approach to the delivery of education. Ravitch (2010) argues why a business-oriented approach is unsuitable as a means to achieve school improvement. She

⁴ Murdoch’s term ‘unselfing’ is explained in detail in Chapter 2.

describes the impact of the emphasis on accountability in education, which started in the U.S. in the 1990s, and the way that this orientation paved the way for “a new era of testing and accountability” (p. 150), the effects of which have seriously undermined the quality of government-funded or state-funded education in that country.

Kohn (1993) gives a number of reasons why schools are not appropriately viewed as, and ought never be viewed as, businesses. He reminds us that to consider schools in this way is to seriously undermine the enterprise of education. The reduction to dollars motivations, even in the circumstance that dollars may be won or lost dependently on the attainment or otherwise of certain other measurables, is grossly shallowing of the values that befit education that is worthy of the name. Kohn reminds us that when education has measurement as its sole criterion for quality, then aspirations are hollowed out at best to concern the individual students’ measured growth and progress (summed over the individuals involved). Lost to possible consideration are the nature and quality of students’ collective and in many ways mutual educational experiences (p. 62).

One quality of mutuality is its tendency to make value in attainment multiplicative not additive, so the summing over individual achievements misses for deep reasons the actual value of mutuality and of mutually won understanding. While there are undoubtedly situations where metrical and checklist-type information can be of use in education (such as for tracking student attendance), it is surely wrongheaded to assume that metrics are, or ever could be, the sole touchstone for evaluation of educative worth. Concerns about the risks to education within a prevailing culture of quantification, where so-called “metric fixation” (Muller, 2018, p. 18) largely eclipses all else, provide part of the contextual background for this thesis.

Perhaps it is precisely because linear measures for one’s capacity for attention are impossible that one’s capacity for attention does not receive any emphasis in education today. Perhaps also we have lost from view that one’s capacity for attention is affected very much by whether others who are in one’s company possess and exercise such a capacity. To capture by some quantity an individual student’s growth in attention would be difficult if not downright impossible to achieve. The quality of a cohort that concerns its capability for attention is still further distant from capture by a quantity, and certainly would be no mere sum over individual capability levels. However, to argue that because attention is deeply non-linear and quite clearly unmeasurable, it is therefore something that does not “count” in education, is, as this thesis will argue, patently faulty thinking.

Perhaps, attention is de-emphasised in today's education environment precisely because it involves the individual thinker seeking to think independently of any mere orthodoxy. The quest to judge some matter impersonally allows as its touchstone for success no orthodoxy, any more than it allows as its touchstone for success merely personal whim. Here, the quest is to discover the best or most beautiful way to think in relation to some question, where the standard for this is not only bigger than any individual, but is also in a sense bigger than all individuals combined.

While attention involves mutuality and helps to create and augment mutuality, it strives beyond something that is strictly collectivist in its character. Attention strives towards the ideal, and so it is not the collective that determines the standard. Progress of this kind towards the ideal for collective agreement sets every thinker the task of putting their mind to work in a way that is independent of the collective. It is the task of every thinker to work out independently, the best or ideal way to think about the question at hand.

At first glance, the notion that attention is fundamental to education may appear odd or even slightly antiquated. Attention involves taking care of, respecting or nurturing, someone or something other than oneself, or viewing someone or something else as intrinsically interesting or important. An interest in attention may appear to run counter to the current tide of educational thought. This present tide floats the attitude that attention may be naught but a loser's priority. According to such an attitude, attention cannot be fundamental to education, since attention takes time, and since its outcomes are neither visible, tangible, nor readily measurable. Attention cannot be easily called up, and its benefits cannot immediately be discerned. An individual's progress in attention cannot be readily documented or tracked over time. To give attention generally calls for dedicated space and for quiet, if not silence. As Caranfa (2016) observes, "the state of *attentive silence*, of *looking*, or of *seeing*" (p. 1) calls for patience, receptivity and openness, and a certain kind of intellectual humility that comes with curiosity and the desire know more.

0.3. Twenty-first century educational priorities

Contemporary education practices and environments appear increasingly to delimit opportunities for sustained cognitive attention. The teacher is no longer the focal point of instruction, and possibly not even a joint participant in a shared experience or idea. Contemporary education priorities encourage individual enquiry and self-directed classroom activities. While there is undoubtedly a place for such independent activities, it remains the

case that in today's schools, students are less often joint attenders in a classroom activity, but are more frequently encouraged to pursue their own individual lines of enquiry. The current government mandated emphasis on the study of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (the so-called STEM subjects) represents a determined move to emphasize those more rule-governed, compliance-based programmes of learning, ahead of arts subjects that are more open-ended in the form of their dependence upon imaginative involvement.

Emphasis on the so-called twenty-first century priorities of collaboration and cooperation has increased at an accelerated pace in Aotearoa New Zealand in the past decade. This emphasis has been exacerbated to some extent by the rapid uptake of digital devices into school classroom programmes. Radical changes are also being made to the mode of classroom design and so of the dynamic for grouped education delivery in schools across the country. In particular, we are seeing a shift from classrooms that are teacher-led, to those that involve the integration of information technology, with the teacher playing a much less central role than previously.

We are also witnessing radical changes to the physical design and layout of schools themselves, although, astonishingly, the pedagogical merits of these changes are yet to be ascertained. Indeed, it could appear that many New Zealand schools are intent on taking up the latest technological or pedagogical innovations well ahead of reference to any research base that would endorse the educational merit of those innovations.⁵ (So much the worse for the nevertheless insistent claims that contemporary education methodology is evidence-based.) It is within this context of rapid educational change that the current study urges a reconsideration of the place and value of pedagogical attention.

Today's model of what amounts to educational "good practice" takes as its starting point that the school classroom must be predominantly social and interactive. Nothing is said about the role of education in developing students' capacity for individual attention. This thesis argues that we should be deeply concerned that schools, as places of education, appear (at least implicitly) to have embraced a culture of *inattention*. Certainly contemporary schools, as sites of ostensible education, are effectively losing sight of the 'norm' of attention. Given the

⁵ A specific example of this phenomenon, which will be discussed in Chapter 7, is the current uptake of so-called "Modern Learning Environments" or "Innovative Learning Environments" (open-plan classrooms) for school design.

various forces that are impacting on contemporary education (and contemporary society), this vanishing regard for attention is, or ought to be, a matter of deep concern.

We appear, both in our schools and in society more broadly, to have reached a point where slow, attentive, focussed reflection has been superseded by priorities of output, performance, mastery and attainment against measurable outputs. The relentless adoption and uptake of increasingly powerful digital technology contributes in no small way to this current situation. The very notion of taking the long view—say through taking time for a concentrated study of the erudition of previous centuries, or through a detailed and applied study of primary rather than secondary texts, or through patient critical reading of a range of long-form literary fiction, are now relatively unfavoured approaches in curriculum design in our schools. On some contemporary views, to read long-form literary fiction is of limited appeal, in part because the benefits to the reader are likely to be minimal when weighed against the significant investment of time required. Yet the more that readers' exposure to material is limited to shorter or abbreviated texts, the greater the likelihood that they will never want to venture into extended literary reading experiences.

Today the very notion of school teachers and their students taking time to give detailed attention to primary texts, or to analyse the themes in lengthy works of literature, is viewed dubiously, and is considered an approach unlikely to hold much relevance, as though students of today have lost their powers of concentration on any but the briefest of texts. In his 2013 collection of essays on the state of liberal arts teaching in North America, Edmundson argues that his university-level students no longer have the ability to connect with classic literary texts because they have lost the ability to read extended and demanding literary works. He argues that as a consequence of this, not only are his students missing out on engaging with layers of literary complexity and artistic and imaginative challenge, but also, in his view, their capacity to interpret complex thought and argument is itself diminishing. Such concerns as these are echoed in recent New Zealand research into reading at both secondary and primary school.

In May 2018, The New Zealand Education Review Office published a national report entitled *Keeping Children Engaged and Achieving in Reading: Teaching Strategies that Work* (Education Review Office, 2018a). In its summary, this report provides a dismal account of reading achievement and suggests that many New Zealand primary schools are falling short of providing their students with an adequate reading programme. The report acknowledges the declining rates of reading achievement in our schools over the past decade. We appear to be

raising an entire cohort of students who have been denied the opportunity to develop a love of reading.⁶

Resistance to both the cognitive demands and the demands of time that lengthy literary works require are likely to be exacerbated when these demands are considered against the ease of accessing information by electronic means. This is particularly the case when factors of speed and immediacy are valued ahead of the contrasting qualities of pursuits that call for patience, reflection, and open-endedness. While this thesis does not argue against the use of digital tools *per se* (and indeed, much use of has been made of digital information seeking in undertaking the research), nevertheless the thesis does seek to question what may be seriously at risk given the current exodus away from ‘analogue’ reading experiences and away from activities that call for sustained and undivided attention.⁷

0.4. A deficit view of attention

Whereas contemporary education has much to say about developing the skills to get access to information, it has much less to say about cultivating attention, or about the role of the development of the imagination through attention. Neither the cultivation of attention, nor the development of the imagination are acknowledged priorities in contemporary education manifestoes. The only mention of the word ‘attention’ in education is made in relation to its absence. In today’s lexicon, educators are likely to work largely from a “deficit” or pathological model concerning attention, rather than working to champion attention’s potential and promise for students.

A number of the digital communications tools of contemporary society area are now also an everyday part of the school environment. As many teachers are aware, these tools can be as much sources of inattention as of attention, yet as educators we have yet to determine what these impacts might mean for education, and what our levels of approbation ought to be. As recently as three years ago, the Board Chair of the country’s senior secondary examining body, The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was defending the notion of delivering online examinations via cell-phone. Perhaps, as Eppert (2004) argues,

⁶ The most recent survey of reading in New Zealand (run by the Book Council 2018) repeats and further underlines trends of previous years, indicating that adult readership of fiction in this country is becoming a lost priority for all but a small, largely female, group of readers. The loss of enthusiasm for reading is becoming evident in our schools as well. We are at risk of raising a generation of students who are effectively “ill-equipped” for literary reading.

⁷ The thesis is limited to a discussion of paper-based reading, and does not discuss narrative using digital media.

rather than those in education demonstrating greater and greater tolerance for communication devices which are themselves sources of distraction and inattention, educators ought to be seizing the opportunity to work with students to help them inculcate their own individual capacity for attention:

The problem of the pervasiveness of habitual inattention needs to be addressed, not through the band-aid measures of increasing pressures on children or placing greater emphasis on exams, but rather through a revitalization of our understanding of attention itself. (Eppert, 2004, p. 44)

As Ergas (2016) notes, we fail to see the formative role of attention for teaching and education, and “tend to conceive of attention as a means, and not as an end in itself” (p. 67).

0.5. *A brief genealogy of attention*

At first glance it might be assumed that attention is a simple and straightforward notion, one whose nature is easy to describe, but on closer inspection, questions begin to emerge about what just attention is, and what it makes even possible. While it may be unproblematic to suggest that attention is involved in aspects of perception, thought, and behaviour, it is evident, through the work of Campbell (2002), Dickie, (2015), Eilan, Hoerl, McCormack and Roessler (2005), that attention has implications for a broad range of topics across consciousness, cognition and language. Allport (2011, p. 25) proposes that “*attention* (better still, *attending*) refers to a state or relationship of the *whole organism* or person”. Mole (2017, Section 1) proposes that attention is “involved in the selective directedness of our lives”. He notes that just how this selectivity works is “one of the principal points of disagreement between extant theories of attention.”

Perhaps no single catchall account could possibly collect together all aspects of what attention is, since discussions on attention are complex and varied and have been carried out over centuries and across Eastern and Western cultures. As Mole (2017) points out, until well into the twentieth century, attention was considered more a philosophical than a psychological matter. Then, in the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, scientific and experimental investigations into attention began to flourish. Mole’s research demonstrates that even within the confines of philosophy, discussions of attention have unveiled unexpected richness both about what it is and about how it expresses itself in our existence. This unveiling has been part and parcel the gleaning of unexpected richness in experience as such, as well as the discovery—albeit one that is philosophically

disputed—that in important if unexpected ways, experience of the beautiful is itself antecedent to experience of material matters of fact or existence in the world.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the work of the early modern empiricists (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) started this journey, commencing from a place where experience was as yet scarcely connected in philosophers' minds with aesthetic appreciation or moral rumination. That there was something deficient in the point of view of the early modern empiricists has been identified in part through later philosophy, although credit may equally be given to psychological, neurological and educational findings, including many of recent times or of the present day. One outcome from more recent work in neurological studies has been to understand that attention and responsible action are richly interconnected.

A key reference for philosophical discussions on attention and its connections to education is William James's 1890 *Principles of Psychology*.⁸ James notes that attention shapes experience as much as is it shaped by it: "*My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos*" (James, 1981, p. 380–381). James describes attention as "the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible trains of thought" (p. 381). He recognises that many more things are encountered by the senses than are ever admitted to the mind as meaningful experience, and that a person's attention reflects their interest: "The only general pedagogic maxim bearing on attention is that the more interest the child has in advance in the subject, the better he will attend" (p. 401). James considers that attention can assist us in a range of ways, including with perception, understanding, recognition, comparison, memory, and our capacity to respond. His subsequent comments imply that attention inevitably possesses the ethical significance of concern with choice of ideals by which to live:

The practical and theoretical life of whole species, as well as of individual beings, results from the selection which the habitual direction of their attention involves...each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit. (p. 401)

Thus, James identifies that attention has implications that relate to our ability to think, to choose, to be consistent, to regulate our behaviour, and it also has implications for moral

⁸ In Volume 1, Chapter XI of this work, James discusses the topic of attention in detail.

choice, our ability to remember, to generalise, to use language, and to make associations across ideas. Attention clearly has implications for education:

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is *compos sui* if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*. (p. 401)

We might go further than this and conclude that any attempt to disconnect attention from education would seem to be entirely unhinged.

The etymology of the word ‘attention’ (from the Latin *tenere*—to lean towards, to incline or to stretch) derives from the Latin past participle stem *attendere* meaning “to give heed to”, or “to stretch toward”. In our daily lives, ‘attention’ is typically understood to relate to aspects of our subjective experience: we talk of focussed attention, undivided attention, and also of fractured or split attention. While truly focussed attention requires effort and practice, in daily life we frequently manage to divide our attention (a practice that is colloquially known as ‘multi-tasking’)—such as when we listen to the radio while cooking, or converse while driving. If, however, we find that our situation demands greater intellectual focus, our instinct is to lessen the competing demands on our attention, say by turning the radio either up or off, or pausing the conversation in order to focus more intently on the driving conditions.

It is evident that some tasks of attention make more demands on us than others, and that to achieve cognitively demanding activities for sustained periods would be impossible without attention. In their 2003 study of the effects of cell phone use on driving performance, Scholl, Noles, Pasheva & Sussman identified profoundly impaired visual attention (so-called “sustained inattention blindness”) among their control group when compared to the performance of those drivers whose attention was not split.

Educationist John Holt makes some useful observations of a group of inattentive students:

Watching older kids study, or try to study, I saw after a while that they were not sufficiently self-aware to know when their minds had wandered off the subject. When, by speaking his name, I called a day dreamer back to earth, he was always startled, not because he thought I wouldn’t notice that he had stopped studying, but because *he* hadn’t noticed....Most of us have very imperfect control over our

attention. Our minds slip away from duty before we realize that they are gone. (Holt, 1964, pp. 22–23, cited in Ergas, 2016, p. 69–70).

Given that our human capacity for concentration is not unlimited, attentional focus is the means by which we are able to filter out some things in order to concentrate more effectively on others. Campbell (2002) uses the term “experiential highlighting” to describe this achievement. Wu (2011, p. 97) argues that such “selectivity” has a purpose at a personal level: “It helps us to get things done—to serve action, both bodily and mental behaviours (i.e. thinking, reasoning, imagining, etc.)”. This view resonates with the earlier view of James, that “volition is nothing but attention” (1981, p. 424). All these researchers present attention as involving some kind of ‘selectivity’ in order to navigate through multiple possible courses of action.

There is nothing specifically Western about the topic of attention. To view attention as a discipline in its own right is significantly strong in Eastern philosophy. Eastern philosophical traditions regard attention as a key to settling the mind. Buddhists, for example, value the way that attention attunes the individual to the ‘here and now’. In Buddhist philosophy, the act of bestowing attention raises one’s awareness of the present. In the Buddhist tradition, attention is associated with openness and with withholding judgments or holding back rather than jumping to possibly reactive assumptions. Eppert (2004, p. 63) notes that the Buddhist notion of ‘mindfulness’ also celebrates attention, yet attention is better appreciated in terms of Buddhism’s doctrine of ‘no-self’. While there may be some overlap between the contemporary practice of mindfulness—of being aware of the present moment, the notion of pedagogical attention as championed by Murdoch and Weil has a far richer metaphysical, ethical, and moral quality.⁹

Attention in the Buddhist tradition involves initiating a connection with something other than the self. It also involves the recognition that the object of one’s attention is something to be respected, and therefore that the act of bestowing attention is already something worthy:

To be attentive is not to be captivated by an intention or a project or a vision or perspective or imagination (which always give us an object and catch the present

⁹ For example Germer (2004) uses the term ‘attention’ in a way that suggests mindfulness rather than attention in the sense understood by Weil and Murdoch. His definition of mindfulness is “(1) awareness, (2) of present experience, (3) with acceptance” (p. 26).

in a re-presentation). Attention does not offer me a vision or perspective, it makes an opening for what presents itself as evidence. Attention is lack of intention. Attention entails the suspension of judgment and implies a kind of waiting in the sense that Foucault wrote of critique as the art of waiting (in French too the idea of attention relates to the verb *attendre*, to wait). (Masschelein, 2010, p. 48)

Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch each engage appreciatively with Eastern and Buddhist views within their own philosophical writings on attention. (An especially beautiful insight concerning attention that Weil and Murdoch lay hold of, is that a person is most nearly realized as such who accomplishes genuine selflessness through attention. Self-absorption in the guise of narcissism or selfishness is a kind of *inattentiveness* or a failure to be mindful—so much so that we could consider that a person who suffers from this condition in fact barely exists as a person at all.)

0.6. *Thesis overview*

The overarching purpose of this thesis is to interpret Weil and Murdoch's philosophical interpretations of the notion of attention, and to explore the ways that their insights establish strong educative connections between attention-giving and moral and intellectual growth.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis provide the philosophical base for the thesis as a whole. They draw on the philosophical concept of attention as developed by Simone Weil (Chapter 1), and subsequently adapted by Iris Murdoch (Chapter 2). The aim of these two chapters is to critique these two philosophers' respective notions of attention, to outline the metaphysical and epistemological bases of their accounts, and to consider the implication of these ideas for ethics, morality, literature, and hence for education. Across these two chapters, the argument is advanced that pedagogical attention (alongside its attendant attributes, respect and humility) has both epistemological and moral dimensions, and that the concept has the potential to clarify fundamentally, what it means to be educated, and possibly even what it means to be human. Selected Platonic themes regarding education are considered (and critically appraised) as they provide significant backdrop to the thinking of both Weil and Murdoch.¹⁰

¹⁰ Throughout their philosophical writing, both Weil and Murdoch use the male personal pronoun as generic. I have opted to avoid this in instances that do not involve direct quotes.

Chapter 1 provides a discussion of aspects of Simone Weil’s philosophy that relate both to her to her pedagogical writing and her indebtedness to Plato. It considers aspects of Weil’s life and times, and the particular character of Weil’s adherence to principles of consistency in relation to the pursuit of that which is of greatest worth. Important considerations in this chapter include Weil’s understanding that attention is an ethical training, and that the practice of attention enables one to access ideals of virtue and perfection as timeless.

Chapter 2 discusses Iris Murdoch’s philosophical writing on attention, particularly as discussed in *The Sovereignty of Good*, but also through various other of her philosophical works. This chapter considers how, and why, Murdoch adopts and develops Weil’s concept of attention. It discusses Murdoch’s neo-Platonic sympathies, her use of Plato’s myths, and her idea of the Good as even more perfect and timeless than the Forms, so that the Good represents an unachievable but nevertheless meaningful condition upon reality as such. Murdoch describes attention as “not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamed of virtue” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 99). While the particular reading of attention that I pursue leans more towards Murdoch’s largely (but not entirely) secular interpretation than to Weil’s more spiritually-oriented approach, both philosophers show that the notion of attention has a noetic quality, and both see its application in diverse areas of a person’s moral growth and education, even across a lifetime.

In Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, I apply Weil’s and Murdoch’s concepts of attention to four separate literary works, in order to examine the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of attention. Across these four chapters I offer reflection about, and a detailed response to, the concept of attention in relation to fictional texts that concern teachers, teaching, or education more broadly. I examine some of the ways in which Weil’s and Murdoch’s philosophical ideas (as outlined in chapters 1 and 2) provide a coherent structure within which to undertake literary readings. The interpretative approach, which is distinct from the scholarly domain of literary theory, rather follows an established approach in the philosophy of education, whereby literary texts are explored to reflect upon and develop philosophical concepts.¹¹

¹¹ Such an approach is exemplified in the work of Greene (1973), Nussbaum (1990, 1992), Palmer (1998), Parker (1994), Roberts and Freeman-Moir (2013), and Roberts and Saeverot (2017).

The four selected texts are Muriel Spark's 1961 novella *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette*, Herman Hesse's 1943 work *The Glass Bead Game*, and Henry James's 1898 novel *The Turn of the Screw*. These four texts have been selected both because they concern aspects of 'schooling' and also because they are texts of sufficient complexity that they support detailed literary reading. Each of these novels serves as a case study to exemplify aspects of Weil's and Murdoch's thought. They each connect to a discussion of the place of literature in the educative process, as well as to identify the place of attention as a tool of thought, the two main themes of the study. Across these four chapters, various philosophical concepts and interpretations are further developed through discussions of secondary literature.

Two female and two male literary authors are represented in the sample of novels discussed. The publication dates of these works span a period of two centuries, so offer a broad spread of historical perspectives. The sequencing of these four chapters follows the order in which the chapters were written rather than any historical or ordering, since the themes that are discussed, while interrelated and various, are discrete, rather than cumulative. This means that these chapters are self-contained and may be read in any order. Nor does the literature selection champion works of a particular length to develop the argument in favour of attentive reading. Two of the four novels discussed (*Villette* and *The Glass Bead Game*) are over 400 pages long, while the other two works (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Turn of the Screw*), could be more accurately described as novellas, each running to a little more than 100 pages.

None of these four novels is offered as being superior or more compelling than any of the others. For instance, Hesse's Nobel prize for life work that includes *The Glass Bead Game* does not elevate that work above the others, and neither does James' complex rendering of language mark him out as the greater literary artist, nor Brontë's attention to her educationally impoverished nineteenth century heroine necessarily exemplify the best or most beautiful way to portray a literary character's growth in pedagogical attention. The four literary artists whose work is considered do mutually exemplify the theme of difference. As James acknowledges in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, the house of fiction has "not one window, but a million"—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned...but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist" (James, 1962, p. 46).

Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Chapter 3) is a work that tolerates irony and ambiguity. This is a work that self-consciously explores its own 'modality'. It deliberately draws attention to its own literary devices and features, its own *aporia*. Yet although the novel is in some ways obviously contrived, in other ways it well represents how we experience life, with some life experiences staying with us forever. Ultimately the novel is inconclusive about the kind of teacher that Jean Brodie is, yet we know for sure that she has had a lasting impact upon her students.

By contrast, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (Chapter 4) is something of a *Bildungsroman*, a sprawling nineteenth century narrative based on memory, a retrospective view of a woman's slow growth to maturity as she learns to forego fantasies about her own prospects. Whereas Spark's novel is self-consciously plotted, the strength of Brontë's novel comes from the progressive development of the central character, Lucy Snowe, including her growth into humility. Brontë's novel presents the tension between the narrative that Lucy wants to believe, and tells herself, about her possible future, and the more difficult narrative of her life as it unfolds.

Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* (Chapter 5) is a metaphorical work that combines a range of literary forms. This work functions as a fable or a myth ahead of a narrative, or rather, it epitomizes the narrative power of myth. It explores educative themes through dislocations of time and identity. The novel is made up of a series of stories and formative events that survey times past, present, and future. This serves to draw attention to the growth and maturation (*Bildung*) of Joseph Knecht, who, in part through the guidance of lifetime mentors, enacts a kind of non-attachment to his own self that culminates in his death and 'rebirth'.

The power of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (Chapter 6) lies in the beauty and artistry of the work's construction. James's attention to detail in the ways he exploits themes of haunting and mystery, and his exploitation of his reader's apprehension are a tantalizing challenge to attention. This chapter argues that James presents a collision between what we think we are reading about and what James invites us to see for ourselves. This story, which suggests the moral consequences of pursuing fairy-tale readings, teases out some complex ideas about literature and moral education.

Each of these four novels has its own distinct form and character, and as a group perhaps their chief defining feature is their sheer difference from one another. Whereas

James's story is an elegantly structured work of impeccable artistic design, and Hesse's novel epitomises the narrative power of myth, the works of Spark and Brontë are more obviously open to the chaotic and untidy realities of life as we experience it. All four works show characters whose experience involves the vexations of doubt and uncertainty, and all four exemplify the important role of attention to memory and recollection in experience. Each of these four texts also captures the vitality (as well as the potential perils), of the educative experience—not just the opportunities but also the challenges, uncertainties, and potential missteps.

Across these four chapters, the case is argued that through encounters with literature, readers may gain further insights about the notion of attention. This section of the thesis seeks to demonstrate the ways in which reading connects to our inner sense of self—something that is both singular and also quite mysterious, and that is itself quite difficult fully to comprehend or explain. It is argued that through reading, we may effectively “re-cognise” (i.e. make understood), imaginative experiences that are no less potent, though obviously not equivalent to, actual lived experiences. This section draws on Murdoch's claim that attention to literature can charge our imaginative and moral sensibilities in ways that are morally significant. This is to argue, with other theorists including Bruns (2002), Nussbaum (1990), Diamond (1998) and Roberts and Saeverot (2018), that to read imaginative fiction is far more than a suitable recreational hobby, but an undertaking and a commitment that has the potential to awaken realizations that are intellectually and aesthetically creative, potentially eye-opening and formative, possibly even life-changing. As Murdoch argues, “the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 33).

Chapter 7 continues the moral and psychological explorations of attention but in an entirely different context. It returns to the 21st century and priorities for contemporary education. This chapter critiques the implementation of open classroom design into our state schools and education spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand. It queries the origins of this directive, and argues that opportunities for attentive engagement within the remodelled 21st century New Zealand school are virtually nil. The chapter critiques the kinds of managerial teacherly oversight that open classrooms demand, and argues that such configurations eclipse altogether opportunities for pedagogical attention of the character described by Weil and Murdoch. This chapter seeks to reinforce, based on ideas developed in earlier chapters, what is potentially at risk for education if the value of attention is entirely overlooked. It seeks to

show why the current emphasis within education upon workplace-readiness and upon social skills of self-advancement is at the very least egregiously uninspired, and that the pursuit of collaborative and interactive classroom activities in an open environment, to the exclusion of more contemplative and thoughtful approaches, not only undermines, but potentially even snuffs out, vital aspects of a teacher's individual agency. This chapter emphasizes that ultimately the most important considerations in education are moral and aesthetic rather than economic or ideological, and that good classroom teaching is that which is built around appropriately attentive relationships. The chapter closes with recommendations for further research and investigation. A brief conclusion which revisits the overarching themes of the thesis brings the work to a close.

Overall, the thesis seeks to explore what we might call the importance of the “glorious immeasurability” of the benefits of reading literature (Roberts, 2016, personal communication), at a time when so much educational emphasis is being placed on measurable and quantifiable data. The thesis defends the view that literary reading opens the door to finding wider meaning, and that this touches on wider or more fundamental truths about our subjective existence. Literary reading is important because, through attention, it connects us to our inner sense of self—a sense of self that is unique, mysterious, that possibly defies clear understanding, to which humility is essential, and that originally and ineluctably connects us with our fellows.

Chapter 1: Simone Weil

1.0. Introduction

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was a French philosopher, teacher, and political activist. Weil is today is recognised as a singular person of great intellection.¹² Although few of her writings were published in her lifetime, these have subsequently been translated and published into many languages. During her short life, Weil wrote on a wide range of themes including those of a political, spiritual and educational nature. Weil’s philosophical ideas draw on Plato as well as on Eastern sources, and she considered spirituality to be fundamentally part of both political and educational arenas. As a Neoplatonist, Weil believed in the existence of transcendent moral laws. She considered that these moral laws require of all of us, obligations and responsibilities to others. Weil had a powerful social conscience, and she argued tirelessly against what she saw as the dehumanising forces of capitalism and industrialisation. Today, more than a hundred years after her birth, the legacy of Weil’s work continues to yield profound meaning, not least in relation to the study of the philosophy of education.

At the centre of Weil’s philosophy is a belief in the Platonic ideal—that the object of philosophy is the pursuit of goodness. As a consequence, Weil’s philosophy is fundamentally centred on matters of morality. Her philosophical stance is that the human mind can never fully reconcile the ultimate mystery or “unknowability” of the world. Weil’s philosophy does not entail a systemic search for truth or knowledge, but is rather oriented towards the quality of reflection in the face of that mystery or contradiction. Weil’s central philosophical concept is that of ‘attention’. In her view, to give attention to that which is beyond the self is not only morally improving, but is also an act of creativity.

In many respects, Weil’s overall philosophy is impossible fully to characterize. She is not formally connected with academic or scholarly circles in France and is, in this sense, something of a philosophical “outsider”. With few exceptions (for example Winch, 1989), Weil has received scant attention from Western philosophy—perhaps because she defends the Platonic view that there is a unity to different branches of knowledge, at a time when analytic

¹² In his introduction to *The Need for Roots*, T.S. Eliot describes Weil as a “great soul and a brilliant mind” (Weil, 2002, p. xiii).

male philosophy was in its heyday. Sontag (1966, p. 1) respects Weil's "scathing originality" and her "manifest willingness to sacrifice" herself for her truths. Steiner (1996, p. 178) recommends that we distinguish between "the singularity of the person" and "the autonomous weight" of Weil's work. He identifies in Weil's writing glimpses of what he terms "supreme moral intelligence" (p. 179).

The purpose of this chapter is to appraise the pedagogical richness of Weil's philosophical insights, particularly in relation to her philosophy of education. The discussion pursues a secular reading of Weil and involves an interpretation of Weil's attention in light of her allegiance to Platonic thought. It considers Weil's interpretation of attention, and considers the ways in which her understanding of intellection, ethical awareness and moral and spiritual growth might challenge or inform contemporary educational approaches and priorities. The chapter, which builds on previous Weil scholarship is written in four sections. It opens with an examination of Weil's context and her notion of attention. Next, it discusses her considerable debt to Plato. The third section considers Weil's view of education, and the chapter closes with a discussion of Weil's conception of reading and its relation to her overall pedagogy of attention.

1.1. Weil's life and times

Weil lived during a time of great political instability in Europe. War was very much part of her lived experience—she was only five years old when World War 1 broke out, and she died, aged 34, four years into World War 2. Weil's writing reflects her lifelong commitment to social justice, as well as her assiduous efforts to maintain consistency between her ideals and the way she lived her life. Despite her background in a well-to-do French Jewish family, she chose to spend some months working in Parisian factories, including a car assembly plant, in order to experience first-hand the realities of blue-collar factory work. Through this experience, Weil discovered for herself the dehumanizing effects of repetitive menial work that lacked any sense of value. She later claimed that this factory experience left her feeling humiliated, as if she had been somehow branded by this experience, since to be compelled to concentrate endlessly on mindless things denied her the opportunity even to be able to think. This for Weil, represented the ultimate form of subjugation.

Weil's interest in education is evident across her writing. As a high school and university teacher, she repeatedly challenged teaching approaches that were, in her view, uninspired and solely examination-oriented. Her own teaching career (which spanned 1931

to 1938) was sporadic not only because of her commitments to various social and political causes, but also because her radical views sometimes put her off-side with the education institutions where she was employed.

Weil's writing repeatedly shows her deep commitment to social justice. Her biography reflects her thoroughgoing efforts to maintain consistency between her moral convictions and the way she lived her life. A recurrent theme in Weil's social commentary is her critique of societal and educational systems that essentially undermine the integrity of the individual, and that ultimately disrupt, rather than nurture, what she sees as the rightful sense of dignity due to each and every person. Weil repeatedly expresses her disdain for what we today call "marketplace" thinking, a way of thinking that infiltrates all aspects of our lives. In particular, she despises what she calls "our false conceptions of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice; our idolization of money; and our lack of religious inspiration" (Weil, 2002, p. 216).

The pitch of Weil's writing is remarkable for the rare depth of compassion she holds towards others. She has the exceptional ability to see all other people as equally deserving. In one of her essays she writes that "those whom we call criminals are only tiles blown off a roof by the wind and falling at random. Their only fault is the initial choice by which they became such tiles" (Weil, 2009, p. 75). Weil's pedagogical philosophy calls for clear thinking, generosity to others, and a capacity to see the limits of one's own relative importance.

Weil's philosophy of attention has been interpreted and discussed by a number of philosophers of education.¹³ Her interpretation of attention, influenced by Plato, points to the existence of transcendent moral laws that involve obligations and responsibilities towards others. It is to the pedagogical, moral, and aesthetic implications of Weil's notion of attention that this chapter now turns.

1.2. *Weil's ethics of attention*

Weil's concept of attention mobilises several other key concepts—chiefly, detachment, humility, and respect. Although these concepts may seem anachronistic and old-fashioned to the contemporary reader, removed as they are from current educational priorities of progress, motivation and self-improvement, they are the foundation of Weil's pedagogical theory, and

¹³ Cameron (2003), Eppert (2004); Roberts (2011, 2016); Rozelle-Stone (2009, 2010, 2017); and von der Ruhr (2006).

they form the basis for her insights into how we think and how we grow in understanding. Weil regards that attention is integral not only to the educative process, but also to how we flourish as thinking beings in the world.¹⁴ What exactly does Weil mean by the term ‘attention’ and why does she consider it so pivotal?

In order to be a properly reflective creative and attentive thinker, one must, according to Weil, enter a mentally detached state wherein all mental activity is literally suspended. The state of attention contains an intriguing paradox: in order to activate attentive thinking, one must enter a detached and contemplative state:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of...Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil, 2009, p. 62)

The mind, when in the attentive mode, is thereby oriented towards something that is beyond itself. It is directed towards something perhaps more abstract and impersonal—a sense of relationships perhaps, or an intersection of ideas. Weil holds that the attentive person thereby stands not without the diverse knowledge that they have previously acquired, but rather ready to do with that knowledge something creative, rather than something dull. In this state of suspended cognition, the mind is free to discern necessary relations and meanings (truths), and to make intuitive connections that are neither willed nor imagined, but are simply ‘accessed’.¹⁵

The student who starts off in a state of ‘unknowingness’ may, through attention, enter a state that is outwardly-focussed and beyond selfish distractions. In this detached and immersive state, the attentive one may achieve the capacity to see things in a new, altered way. Thus, Weil argues, what leads to truth in understanding is not necessarily related to incredible philosophical insight or intellectual brilliance (endowments that Weil herself possessed in spades), but more simply, to a right amount of attention. The ideal state for us to make progress intellectually or morally, is to attend to the reality that is outside us, such that

¹⁴ Weil (2002, p. 260) describes attention as “immobile expectancy.”

¹⁵ Weil notes that “this kind of passive activity, the highest of all, is perfectly described in the Bhagavad-Gita and in Lao-Tse” (Weil, 2009, p. 126).

we are no longer aware of ourselves, but feel ourselves to be part of something else, something larger and much more interesting. Weil's attention is a state of preparedness or readiness, a state that calls for both selflessness and mental concentration, a state that is neither willed into being, nor entirely acquiescent.

To arrive at Weil's state of attention involves a kind of conscious mental detachment, a "de-cluttering" in order to empty the mind of unfocussed or self-preoccupied thoughts. This involves letting go of the "I" and turning the mind outwards, beyond the self. Weil argues that if we can succeed in this to the extent that we can suspend all self-oriented thoughts and attend impartially, we may truly be able to open our minds to that which is true. As examples of inspirational truth, Weil cites examples such as the complex thought systems of the Latin language, or the rules of geometry, or the beauty of particular works of literary genius: "For this inspiration, if we know how to receive it, tends—as Plato said—to make us grow wings to overcome gravity" (Weil, 1968, p. 165). Weil's attention involves a purposeful commitment to turn away from that which is fleeting and ephemeral, and to strive towards that which is real—that which is eternal or continuous. In Weil's view, it is only through acts of attentive concentration that a thinker can come even close to so-called 'eternal truths'. The highest form of attention is, for Weil, a form of devotion or prayerful reverence.

Although Weil's attention is not immediately associated with obedience or compliance, there is a very precise way in which her pedagogical attention involves a kind of "inner" obedience. For Weil, attention and obedience are closely aligned: we cannot *but* attend to the subject matter that is the centre of our attention. Our intellectual engagement is connected with our being attentive and sensitive to that material, and importantly, with that material being itself worthy of our attention. Weil acknowledges that to attain attention is likely to involve considerable effort, but she considers that repeated efforts will serve to improve our capacity for attention. Her notion of attention aligns with the aspirations of all philosophical inquiry—both are in a sense mobilised by a search for that which is true.

Although for Weil attention is 'mobilised' by a desire for the truth, she sees that attention is not something that can be simply summoned by an effort of will. Rather, attention is attained by long exercise of a patient disposition, under a steady yearning for a clearer understanding. Attention requires the capacity to wait without yet grasping, the willingness to be receptive, tirelessly to anticipate, and neither to hope for a breakthrough nor withdraw from reflection. Through attention, the mind is drawn away from the here-and-now of the material world—a liberation that enables it to connect with a wider reality, one

that for Weil spans both intellectual and spiritual dimensions. However, she also recognises that attention can be pursued in a secular fashion, quite apart from any specifically theological motivation: “For an adolescent, capable of grasping this truth...studies could have their fullest spiritual effect, quite apart from any particular religious belief” (Weil, 2009, p. 65).

Weil’s pedagogy involves the need to be intellectually curious and receptive, rather than the need to gain intellectual mastery. Her pedagogy involves the capacity to look for deeper meaning or to seek for alternative meanings. Weil reminds us of the limitations of a purely analytical approach to philosophical questions and she extols the virtue of a more intuitive, open-minded attitude. She states that in her view “philosophy (including problems of cognition, etc.) is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice. That is why it is difficult to write about it” (Weil, 1970, p. 362):

The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting. (p. 335)

Attention—an attitude of looking and waiting—enables thought by liberating the mind from the tethers of habit, fantasy, or wishful imagination. For Weil, attention is entirely separate from the imagination, which in her view, is a negative force because it is linked to the human ego and therefore works against being patient. Unlike her fellow philosopher, Iris Murdoch, who considers the imagination a promising source of intellectual energy, Weil mistrusts the imagination. She considers the imagination to be “essentially a liar” and “continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass” (Weil, 1997, p. 62). Weil considers the imagination to be an impediment to knowledge because in her view, the imagination works in ways that encourage an egocentric perspective. Weil considers that personal thoughts that focus on the subjective are self-limiting, and that without the elevating discipline of graceful attention, the human mind inevitably drifts towards trivia, towards an egotistical focus. By contrast, through the practice of contemplative attention, the mind is drawn gracefully outwards and upwards. Weil’s attention thus has metaphysical as well as epistemological qualities.

Although Weil directs her thoughts to school-based learning, her comments on attention are not limited to the young. She argues that as humans we all need to work hard to reclaim humility. We are, Weil, explains, by our very humanness, inclined both literally and

metaphorically, to a state of being lowered by our ego, as it were weighed down, grounded—expressed in French as *la pesanteur*—weightedness. (It is remarkable to read Weil as counterpoint to the “triumph des willens” pathology sweeping into Europe in her day.) We are, by nature, inclined to withdraw down into ourselves, into our own blinkered selfish interests, a condition that Weil termed “gravity”.¹⁶ (In Weil’s explanation we may easily render ourselves no less sight-impaired than earthworms.) Weil maintains that it is vital that we seek to reverse this natural gravitational pull or inclination towards self-preoccupation by instead concertedly reaching outwards and upwards.

Weil’s concept for achieving attention is, paradoxically, that of “decreation” (see Weil, 1997, pp. 78–86). To achieve decreation, Weil urges that we consciously cease to give attention to the “I” and call upon our powers of attention. Decreation is conscious, not passive. We must stop imposing our own reading on the world and be prepared—as also happens in the state of extreme suffering—to completely abandon the “I” and become, as it were, anonymous. Cameron (2007) describes Weil’s decreation as “the point of losing all personal being...to produce a void that could receive supernatural grace” (Cameron, 2007, p. 110). Decreation is a state “so alien to us that we barely have any concepts for it, so quick are we to find any attempt to eradicate egotism in terms this extremely repellent [sic]” (p. 110). Attention creates in the mind a void, it “decreates” the ego such that the individual self is utterly subdued.¹⁷

To arrive at a state of attention we must guard ourselves against distractions or wandering thoughts. We must involve our powers of humility, because humble thoughts serve to focus the mind:

Every time we catch ourselves involuntarily indulging in a proud thought, we must for a few seconds turn the full gaze of our attention upon the memory of some humiliation in our past life, choosing the most bitter, the most intolerable we can think of. (Weil, 1997, p. 178)

To activate one’s powers of attention involves both sensible preparation and a very particular selfless kind of mental effort, of which humility is no small part. If we are to understand anything at all, we must first exercise our capacity for humility, and to be humble we must be

¹⁶ Weil, 1997, p. 45.

¹⁷ For a more complete discussion of Weil’s notion of decreation, see Little, 1993, pp. 25–51.

able to efface ourselves to some higher order. Through humility we may demonstrate appropriate respect for others by seeing clearly their merits and their concerns. Weil grants, however, to give attention to another is “a very rare and difficult thing; it is so rare that achieving it is almost a miracle, it *is* a miracle” (Weil, 2009, p. 64).

Weil considers humility to be integral to attention since “in the intellectual order, the virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention” (Weil, 1997, p. 182). To activate one’s powers of attention involves both sensible preparation and a very particular, selfless kind of mental effort of which humility is no small part. To achieve humility, which Weil ranks as “the queen of virtues” (p. 87), we must learn to employ compassion and, more significantly, we must learn to subdue our ego. In this way we may, in Weil’s words, seek to “destroy the evil in ourselves” (Weil, 2009, p. 62).

Weil makes the link between humility and openness and generosity towards others. To exercise humility opens up one’s capacity for altruism: “Humility consists in acknowledging that in what we call ‘I’ there is no source of energy by which we can rise” (Weil, 1997, p. 76). Weil observes that humility can enable us to develop an appropriate regard for others wherein we see, with clear vision, the good in others and can respond to their concerns. Weil cautions that we must ensure we are not too intensely involved in our own efforts towards intellectual mastery, lest we become too preoccupied about our own outcomes.¹⁸ We must demonstrate a measure of humility and restraint in our expectations (Weil, 1997, p. 170). Weil considers humility to be integral to one’s efforts for attention, since “in the intellectual order, the virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention” (p. 182). This is why Weil asserts that “there is nothing nearer to true humility than intelligence” (p. 183).

Humility is relevant to education because to be able to learn anything involves being prepared to bestow interest on something other than one’s self. Weil’s interpretation of humility is also centrally relevant to education because in order to be able to understand anything properly involves acknowledgement that there is something we have yet to understand. Humility involves an acknowledgement of what we don’t know, an admission of our own mediocrity. Weil urges that each person should confront his or her own mediocrity

¹⁸“The wrong way of seeking. The attention fixed on a problem...The heat of the chase” (Weil, 1997, p. 170).

and limitations, and accept what Weil bluntly refers to as “stupidity” and “mediocrity” (Weil, 2009, p. 60).

Humility is relevant also, since if we exercise humility as we go along, we will increase the likelihood of being able to recognise, acknowledge and ideally surmount our mistakes—a virtue that Weil considers has much significance if we are to make intellectual progress. Weil acknowledges the human tendency, particularly in study, to overlook errors, to “give a sideways glance at the corrected exercise if it is bad and hide it forthwith” (p. 60). She counsels that we must “take great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is” (p. 59), and that “we work without making much progress when we refuse to give our attention to the faults we have made and our tutor’s corrections” (p. 60). Somehow, Weil urges, we need to look for what is instructive in any situation, even the most dire, to try to find a meaning that will teach us in some way that is morally improving.

Weil’s attention calls for a stringent level of self-discipline coupled with an austere degree of self-reflection. She invites us, through an attitude of humility about our own ordinariness, to enter a state of detachment that is outwardly-focussed and completely beyond selfish and self-oriented distractions, for it is only in a selfless, detached and immersive state that we might achieve the capacity to apprehend things differently, or with clarity of vision. Weil acknowledges that a person’s education in attention may involve considerable discomfort and struggle but for all that, she sees nobility in one’s conscientious effort. We must, according to Weil, work constantly to achieve a measure of humility and restraint in all our intellectual endeavours, in whatever sphere. Weil considers that through attention, the individual may, even in the face of innumerable false starts and frustrations, still be able to develop his or her capacity for attention in productive ways.

While we might balk at Weil’s uncompromising level of self-discipline, there is nevertheless educative sense in her argument that to give attention to anything or anyone else in a sustained and meaningful way calls for both focus on the task, and the active elimination of competing distractions. If our minds are too biddable then it is likely we will drift into our own world, or worse, that without our consent our minds may be deflected away from patient inquiry. Many educators would agree that if students lack the capacity to focus their attention through their own agency, they could be vulnerable and subject to persuasion from outside influences, including in the present day those that operate in unseen ways through complex algorithms within digital communication networks. The negative impact of these and other,

potentially coercive influences, have direct relevance to education. As Weil reminds us, “one does not know how much one is enslaved by social influences” (Weil, 1968, p. 98). She expresses concern about the human tendency to fall in with collective or unreflective thought, rather than to engage in careful reflection: “If we examine human society...closely and with real attention, we see that wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything is obedient to mechanical laws as blind and as exact as the laws of gravitation” (Weil, 2009, p. 75).

Although Weil’s notion of attention is mobilised by a desire for truth, it cannot be simply summoned by an effort of will, so much as by a patient, gracious disposition. Assiduous dedication to thought requires a particular kind of intellectual effort. Weil reminds us that we ought not confuse attention with determination or with force, since attention is not something that can be delivered on command. Ultimately, Weil considers that attention should be as natural as breathing. She admonishes that if students employ “muscular effort” they are likely simply to “stiffen their muscles” (p. 60). They will have stiffened themselves up physically rather than relaxing their minds. Weil provides a physiological analogy: “We have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out” (p. 61). This analogy captures Weil’s notions of gravity and grace. Through attention we effectively bridge the worlds of body and intellect.

Weil employs the metaphor of orientation to describe the “turn towards the source of wisdom...towards light that comes from elsewhere, from above” (Weil, 1968, p. 105). But Weil’s attention involves more than simply to “turn” in the right direction. Weil points also to the want of a method for attention: “Everything in creation is dependent upon method including the points of intersection between this world and the next” (Weil, 2002, p. 186). In attention, too, Weil states that “there is a method to be followed” (p. 186).

It is Weil’s conviction that her contemporary world unnecessarily separates out scientific thought from everyday thought (with the implication that everyday thought cannot be elevated to higher realms). This separation is, to Weil, entirely wrongheaded, and she proposes the method of pedagogical attention as a way to address this situation. She presents her method of attention in the form of a scientific proposition and a formal demonstration. She argues that just as the study of mathematics brings students into contact with paradoxes and ‘incommensurable’ notions such as irrational numbers, so must all meaningful study, whatever the discipline, involve encounters with difficult, ‘incommensurable’ problems.

Weil explains that attention involves two requirements. The first is that we must have ‘faith’ in the sovereignty of attention. Faith is “the indispensable condition” (Weil, 2009, p. 58). Weil insists that attention must be believed in and practised ahead of any “proof” or certainty of its results (p. 58). She acknowledges that “certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, we shall never have the experience that leads to such certainties” (p. 58). Weil insists that “to make this [attention] the sole and exclusive purpose of our studies is the first condition to be observed if we are to put them to the right use” (p. 59). Weil’s second condition is that through attention, we must be prepared to examine and critique our errors and faults and try to understand and overcome them. She admonishes that most of our errors will have come about through rushing: “All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style...all faulty connection of ideas...are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily” (p. 62).

Weil’s attention is not a state of total mental detachment, but a detachment from the self and the will, a detachment from any desire to obtain or to possess understanding for purposes that are driven by ego or acquisitiveness. She acknowledges that this quality of attention is not simply a state of being open to thought, but one that connects to “all particular and already formulated thoughts” (p. 62). She draws the analogy of “a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains” (p. 62). Through this image, Weil points to the way that sustained attention of the right quality involves the capacity to appreciate and find beauty in things that are not clear or not yet clearly understood.

For Weil, the apprehension of beauty is a route to attention, since the apprehension of beauty is both inspirational and other-regarding. Attention to the beautiful is a means to enable the mind to let go, to attend, in order (possibly) to come to a deeper understanding, a more nuanced expression, a more beautiful solution. Scarry (1999) reminds us that to see beauty, as Weil guides us to do, by way of attention, is to be reminded of one’s own relative insignificance, and to accept that very insignificance entirely without qualms:

It is not that we cease to stand even at the centre of our own world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the centre of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us. (Scarry, 1999, p. 112)

The student of attention, absorbed in the intellectual task loses entirely his or her sense of selfhood. He or she no longer has a desire to ‘master’ a problem or challenge, but ‘confronts’ it in a more open way, perhaps to consider why this is an interesting problem. In this detached and immersive state, the attentive student may, like the man on the mountaintop, achieve the capacity to see things in a newly configured way. Thus, Weil places emphasis on contemplation far ahead of the quantifiable results of industry and effort—such as achieving good marks or meritorious examination results, which she deprecates when such a favoured outcome is viewed as an end in itself: “The youth of our schools are as much obsessed by their examinations as our workmen engaged in piece-work are by their pay packets” (Weil, 2002, p. 46).

Weil’s standards for intellectual commitment are high. She values genuine intellectual effort: “When we set out to do a piece of work, it is necessary to wish to do it correctly, because such a wish is indispensable in any true effort” (p. 59). Academic rigor remains paramount, for it is by dint of intellectual application that the student of attention focuses their thoughts. In her terms, attention to the academic task is a sign of love for the work. She argues that it does not even matter “whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so”, since, in Weil’s view, “genuine efforts of attention are never wasted” (p. 58). Drawing on Platonic ideas, Weil suggests that the object of instruction is itself something quite beyond instruction (Weil, 1997, p. 173). The student who starts off in a state of ‘unknowingness’ may, through attention and humility, be transported to a state that is as it were outwardly-focused and completely beyond selfish distractions. In this detached and immersive state, the attentive student may achieve the capacity to see things in a new, better way.

Weil aligns attention to the concept of goodness. She argues that good actions come about when people direct their attention towards finding the good in situations, in and for people, and in aesthetic achievements: “It is untrue that there is no connection between perfect beauty, perfect truth, perfect justice: they are far more than just connected: they form a single mysterious unity, for the good is one” (Weil, 2002, p. 232). She considers that the context of quietness or solitude leads to a greater likelihood of achieving pedagogical attention, for then there is less likelihood of distraction from others or from ourselves. Weil urges that we use attention as the means to look beyond the senses, to ideas, in order to improve our quality of thought. She writes, “the authentic and pure values, truth, beauty and

goodness, in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object” (Weil, 1997, p. 173).

1.3. *Weil and Plato*

There are strong resonances in Weil’s notion of attention to wider issues of truth, morality and goodness, and in this we see links to Plato. Weil reflects Platonic thinking when she draws a connection between the right use of attention and moral perception: “We do not have to understand new things, but by dint of patience, effort, and method to come to understand with our whole self the truths which are evident” (Weil, 1997, p. 169). For Weil, philosophical activity involves encounters with mystery, with irreconcilable and complex concepts—not with the expectation of finding answers, but rather to provide opportunities to reflect further on the implications of their complexity. Weil considers that the best philosophical approach is one that eliminates the ego and any preoccupation with the self. She considers that Plato’s philosophical approach exemplifies this method.¹⁹

Weil aligns her understanding of attention to the Platonic concept of the Good. She argues that good actions come about when people attend to the good in other people, in situations, or in aesthetic achievements. For Weil, the Good is a “transcendent reality”, and until we turn to the Good, we remain at the mercy of our human nature which Weil characterises in terms of the forces of gravity. Weil sees that we are inclined to be weighed down by our own nature: “Descending movements are the only ones within our power” (Weil, 1970, p. 297). To withstand such gravitational force is to experience the void. Such reversal can be achieved only through what Weil terms “grace”.²⁰

Like Plato, who holds that the Good is not a Form (because the Good stands as necessary for the very possibility of any Form, and so precedes them), Weil seems intent to imply that the Good, in lifting us to any knowledge that we may possess, could not possibly be either private to an individual, or an element of what may be known. The Good is beyond any self in the exact way that it is a condition on knowledge. But its way of being beyond the self at the same time leaves it common to all selves—even the plainest self with the humblest intellect. The Good cannot be required or achieved by desire; it has to come from God itself. If we can attend impartially, we may truly be able to open our minds to what is true. But,

¹⁹ These and related ideas are discussed in detail in Springstead & Schmidt, 2015, pp. 1–18.

²⁰ See further Weil’s writings in *Gravity and grace* (1997).

Weil cautions, we can only really have experiences that will lead, in her view, to God (or to the unachievable seeking for the Good), if we act on the kind of faith Weil has outlined—that is to say, if we open our minds in a disciplined, humble and non-pressured way. If we are successful in doing this, and if we are able to experience a new way to see, then we will have made a connection, and (in very rare cases) we may even gain knowledge, certainty, and wisdom.

Reflecting Plato, Weil believes that education ought to be oriented in ways that enable people to grow and flourish as independent thinkers. For Weil, philosophical activity is that which involves encounters with mystery, with concepts that are complex and possibly ultimately irreconcilable. Weil's preferred philosophical approach is one based on meditation and reflective thought, rather than on expecting to find answers. She notes that both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions employ various routes to destroy the ego and foster lucid thought: "The Zen Buddhist technique of the koan is a method for effecting this destruction. And perhaps Plato possessed a method of this kind, in what he called dialectics?" (Weil, 1970, p. 292). Weil considers that education, if it is truly to support the development of students' capacity to think well, must include silent, contemplative activities in balance with other more interactive, modes.²¹

Weil considers that in order to arrive at such a state of ready attention, we must consciously and patiently prepare the mind, and such preparation is best achieved in meditative quietness, if not in solitude. To consider things from different perspectives, as well as to consider the great intellects of earlier times, requires time for individual reflection. In Weil's view, twentieth century education of her day has lost the love of truth and beauty altogether. She looks back to Ancient Greece and points to the Greek's unification of science and religion as the ideal: "The true definition of science is this: the study of the beauty of the world" (Weil, 2002, p. 258). She thereby proposes a unified approach as the way forward for her own time (and for ours). Her method of attention is pivotal to this view.

Following Plato, Weil considers understanding as a kind of recollection—the student calls attention to what is already in the mind, and effectively seeks to awaken the mind. This view is quite contrary to the contemporary notion of the active student in pursuit of answers that are "out there", and who is busy seeking and searching for data as evidence and

²¹ Caranfa, (2004, 2010a, b, and 2016) defends these ideas also.

justification. Weil, by contrast, is taken by the mysterious workings of the mind and the memory. She provides an example of something that is both fairly commonplace and also rather mysterious, whereby a thought, for a time entirely forgotten is unaccountably re-discovered:

Suppose I had had a thought and have forgotten it two hours later...I direct my attention for a few minutes towards an empty space; empty but real. Then suddenly the thought is there, beyond all possible doubt. I did not know what it was, and yet now I recognise it as being what I was waiting for. An everyday experience, and an unfathomable mystery. (Weil, 1968, p. 121)

This account calls to mind a scene in *The Meno* (81d), where Socrates declares that “nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (Plato, 1997, p. 880).

Similarly, Weil effectively challenges us to rethink entirely how we understand the process of education. The student who starts off in a state of “unknowingness” may, through attention and humility, enter a state that is, as it were, outwardly-focussed and completely beyond selfish distractions and, in this detached and immersive state, the student may achieve the capacity to see things in a better or more insightful way.

Weil’s ethics of attention also informs her interpretation of aesthetic experience. Weil invokes Plato’s image of artistic creation as an analogy for divine creation:

In creating a work of art...the artist’s attention is oriented towards silence and the void; from this...there descends an inspiration which develops into words or forms. There the model is the source of transcendent inspiration. (Weil, 1968, p. 133)

Weil calls up the Platonic notion of mediation (*metaxu*)—a term drawn from the character of the priestess/midwife Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*. (It is Diotima who mediates, and who shows Socrates that things can be apprehended by different people in different ways.) For Weil, beauty is a bridge (*metaxu*) that provides a vital connection between the ‘here and now’ of everyday experience and that which is transcendent and eternal. Through *metaxu* (such as by way of nature, beauty, art, and literature), the human mind may be drawn to a higher plane. As Weil explains “the authentic and pure values, truth, beauty and goodness, in the

activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object” (Weil, 1997, p. 173).

1.4. Attention and contradiction

A key concept in Weil’s epistemology is that of contradiction. Weil considers contradiction to be “the test of necessity”, the very crux of learning (Weil, 1997, p. 151). Weil acknowledges Plato’s recognition that everything the human intelligence can represent to itself involves contradiction, and that to explore the very point of contradiction, one’s thought may be elevated to a higher level of understanding: “Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the feeling of our wretchedness is the feeling of reality” (Weil, 1956, p. 411). Cognitive ambiguities that are jarring to thought are, to Weil, the very events that deserve our attention. These events are for Weil (and, as we shall see, also for Murdoch) essential elements of reality, and not obstacles to it: “The contradictions the mind comes up against, these are the only realities, the criterion of the real. There is no contradiction in what is imaginary. Contradiction is the test of necessity” (Weil 1997, p. 151).

Such cognitive puzzles are instructive, according to Weil, because it is precisely by virtue of facing impasse that the mind is truly challenged. As an example of contradiction, she instances the way in which we accept that a straight line is something that is definite and measurable, and of finite length, but at the same time we agree that it is made up of a countless (infinite) series of points. In another example, she explains her notion of attention in terms of a contradiction—as a “passive activity” (Weil, 2009, p. 126), and elsewhere, as a “non-active action” (Weil, 1956, p. 124). Weil argues that it is precisely in the face of contradictions that the human intelligence must call upon attention: “We make decisive progress if we decide to expose honestly the contradictions essential to thought instead of vainly trying to brush them aside” (Springsted and Schmidt, 2015, p. 36).

Enigmas or ambiguities that are mentally puzzling, intriguing, or dissonant are for Weil (and, as we shall see also for Iris Murdoch), important and essential elements of reality, and not obstacles to it: “When the attention has revealed the contradiction in something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. By persevering in this direction, we attain detachment” (Weil, 1997, p. 151). Analogously, Weil shows us that thinking itself calls for a particular state of focussed attention. The attentive student can neither demand, nor take charge of, the thought process. The state of mind that is thinking requires first and foremost, a particular, attentive state of mind.

Weil's ethics of attention also informs her interpretation of aesthetic experience. She invokes Plato's image of artistic creation as an analogy for divine creation:

In creating a work of art...the artist's attention is oriented towards silence and the void; from this...there descends an inspiration which develops into words or forms. There the model is the source of transcendent inspiration. (Weil, 1968, p. 133)

Following Plato, Weil draws on the notions of 'attention' and 'wonder' as means of developing moral perception. With Plato, Weil believes that the teacher's role is to bring out that which is already latent in the student. The student literally "unfurls" or blossoms under the guidance of the teacher. The teacher's task is to mobilise the student's own readiness for immersion in the object of study, whatever the area. Weil summarises what she sees as the most important part of teaching: "The most important part of teaching = to teach what it is to know (in the scientific sense)" (Weil, 1956, p. 364). Weil draws on Plato's notion of beauty as something so powerful that it can shock or startle, and that engenders both respect and love. She describes this in terms of a contradiction: "One is both attracted and kept at a distance" (Weil, 1968, p. 124). Weil references Plato's suggestion that the contemplation of the beauty of intellectual work can lead to a "quest for perfection" (p. 129). The attention that beauty invokes itself sharpens the viewer's capacity for attention, raises the awareness.

For Weil, beauty can serve as a bridge to God (or, on a secular reading, and one which Iris Murdoch assumes, as a bridge, or ladder, to the Good). Beauty, which represents for Weil the "implicit love of God" (p. 99), can be found in various places, including in nature, art, aesthetics, and in great literary works. Beauty is characterised by form, proportion, order and balance. Weil explains that the aesthetic experience of beauty leads the mind to a higher plane. Something beautiful is apprehended, and this startles us, renders us breathless, and invites us to look for some way to make sense of it. This, according to Weil, is how beautiful things lead us to God: "The truly precious things are those forming ladders reaching towards the beauty of the world, openings onto it" (p. 116). Beauty also draws our respect.

When we apprehend something beautiful, we appreciate it respectfully and at a distance—we regard it not as something to be seized or possessed, but rather as something to be contemplated, and to be shared (Weil, 1997, p. 206). We apprehend beauty as something impersonal and external and awe-inspiring, and this is morally enlarging. Weil also draws on

Plato's claim that the contemplation of beauty is not possible without love: "We cannot contemplate without a certain love" (Weil, 2009, p. 108). Weil notes the importance of love to Plato's philosophy. She quotes from Plato's *Republic* VI, 493 (Weil, 1968, p. 101) that "the love of God is the root and foundation of Plato's philosophy". Love is also at the root and foundation of Weil's pedagogy of attention. In her account, attentive love is what frees the individual from the shackles of selfhood, and this is the means by which thought can be diverted from the false seductions of self-importance, self-love, and self-centredness. Attention also liberates the individual from fantasies about power, possessions or group entitlement.

Following Plato, Weil's metaphysics emphasises the function of the mediator/bridge (*metaxu*). Mediation, which was fundamental to Plato's thought, is a way to bridge between the human and the divine. Weil notes that the Greeks: "perceived a divine relation in geometry...they invented the method of rigorous demonstration...a bridge leading towards God—not by diminishing, but by increasing precision, demonstration, verification and supposition" (Weil, 1956, p. 441). Plato, through his Socratic dialogues, held that moral education involved inducting the youth of the day into socially acceptable ways of being. Plato has his speaker, Socrates articulate the idea that education involves obedience to the idea of knowledge of what is good, and acceptance through reason. Plato's education is neither conformist nor self-promoting. Plato's education is a combination of dialectics (oral debates) and gymnastics (physical strength), thought and action.

Weil, like Plato, draws on the metaphor of a physical wall as a middle way, a mediator. The wall represents both a barrier and a conduit. It is "is a closed door, it is a barrier and at the same time it is the way through" (Weil, 1997, p. 132). Just as the wall between two prisoner's cells presents a physical separation but does not delimit communication between them, so too might we come to understand mental concepts through encounter with contradictions that literally 'awaken' the mind.

Weil's attitude is that an educational approach that is motivated by the quest for definitive answers or explanations is entirely misled. Her philosophy does not seek for a systematic and thoroughgoing interpretation of the world. Rather, she identifies a sense of mystery or contradiction as the means by which inspiration is revealed. The world is such that reason cannot fully account for everything. Thus Weil considers that the ultimate purpose of teaching is "not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them, which makes them capable of receiving the teaching" (Weil, 1997, p. 135), and that "teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by

training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. All other advantages of instruction are without interest” (p. 173). In Weil’s view, the teacher’s role is not to instruct students on what to think, how to pass tests, and nor is it the teacher’s role to impose on students a particular interpretation of the world. Rather, the teacher’s role is to help develop in each student his or her capacity to look at things in contemplative and questioning ways, so that each student’s individual capacity for rational thought and intelligence is developed.

Echoing Plato, Weil considers thought as a kind of recollection—the student calls attention to what is already in the mind, and effectively seeks to awaken the mind. (This is quite the opposite of the contemporary western education view of the diligent student who is busy and active, working collaboratively and constantly in pursuit of evidence, data, or answers, who is forever in search of material to gather and provide as evidence and justification.) Weil deems that to spend time developing the educative faculty of attention is a worthy pursuit in and of itself—whether in the context of attempting to solve an algebraic equation, or in developing one’s proficiency in playing a musical instrument, or in encountering the complex structures of a new language. Classroom pursuits that call for repetition, concentration, dedication and sustained attention are all, in her view, worthy pursuits.

Similarly, pursuits such as to give sustained and compassionate attention to other people, or to the beauty of nature, or to the beauty of a great work of art or literature are, if practised in humility, likely to bring the individual closer to that which is of most worth:

There is something else which has the power to awaken us to the truth. It is the works of writers of genius, or at least of those with genius of the very first order and when it has reached its full maturity. They are outside the realm of fiction, and they release us from it. They give us, in the guise of fiction, something equivalent to the actual density of the real, that density which life offers us every day but which we are unable to grasp because we are amusing ourselves with lies. (Weil, 1968, p. 162)

Following Plato, Weil uses the metaphor of vision to capture the process of thinking itself. She describes thought in terms of what she considers to be a “method for the exercise of the intelligence which consists of looking” (Weil, 1997, p. 174). Weil’s account of a person who is immobile, detached, held in deep concentration and yet still receptive, epitomises her conception of deep and attentive thought. In this state, she argues, “a transformation then

takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions” (Weil, 2009, p. 100). This experience of contemplative reverie may, she argues, be so intense that “with time we are altered and if, as we change, we keep our gaze directed toward the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible” (Weil, 1997, p. 174).

1.5. Education’s chief purpose

Weil considers that attention is critically important to education—to the extent that it is education’s chief purpose to foster in students their faculty of attention: “Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure” (Weil, 2009, p. 64), and that “for an adolescent, capable of grasping this truth and generous enough to desire this fruit above all others, studies could have their fullest spiritual effect quite apart from any particular religious belief” (p. 65). Significantly, although Weil’s personal account of attention is spiritually oriented, she acknowledges that attention has importance even if it falls short of a theological commitment.

As a Platonist, Weil considers that a balance between participatory dialogue with periods of silence is fundamental to clear thinking. She considers that education ought to include contemplative activities in balance with more interactive tasks. To have the opportunity to develop perspective, and to mull, critique, revisit, remember, to consider things from different perspectives, to be able to learn from the great minds of the past—calls for opportunity for individual reflection. Attention involves the disposition of waiting without grasping, of being receptive and ready, waiting tirelessly, in expectation. Weil considers that in order to arrive at such a state of ready attention, we must consciously and patiently prepare the mind, and such preparation is best achieved in meditative quietness, if not in solitude.

In Weil’s view, the opportunity to silently mull over, to critique, to revisit and remember, helps the mind to develop perspective. It is unlikely that there is room for these priorities (whether figuratively or literally) within the busy, inquiry-focussed, assessment-focussed contemporary classroom. To consider things from different perspectives, as well as to consider the great intellects of earlier times, requires dedicated space and time for individual reflection and contemplation.

The context for Weil’s readiness is far from that of the active contemporary learner in the “driver’s seat”, whose purpose it is to gather and garner evidence for their own questions in the context of a busy classroom. In particular, the so called “modern learning

environment” with its vast, flexible teaching spaces, sometimes without fixed walls, delimits quite significantly any opportunities for fostering attention in Weil’s understanding of that word. In Weil’s vision of education, thinking is a solitary, not a collective activity.

Caranfa (2010a, 2010b and 2016) argues that today’s western educational methods which typically deny a place for contemplation and reflection, not only fail to equip students with opportunities to reflect on and think about larger moral issues, but they also deflect student attention away from developing a sense of aesthetic appreciation, for example, by effectively denying opportunities to study works of literature. Caranfa argues that “by neglecting or separating speech from silence, today’s educational methods do not prepare students to respond to life’s questions; neither do they enable students to infuse their conversation with an appreciation of life’s beauty” (2010, p. 577). Caranfa urges that the reciprocity of speech and silence be reconsidered and resurrected. In Weil’s words, education must provide students with “the opportunity to reach even higher levels of attention, some solitude, some silence” (Weil, cited in Caranfa, 2010, p. 577).

As part of her view of education, Weil considers it a virtue to expose young students to the wonders of possibility and to enliven in them a sense of their own (limited) autonomy. She values exposing students to aesthetic beauty:

But above all, one would try to make the children feel all the beauty contained therein. If they ask: “is this true?” we should answer: “it is so beautiful that it must certainly contain a lot of truth. As for knowing whether it, or is not, absolutely true, try to become capable of deciding that for yourselves when you grow up. (Weil, 2002, p. 92)

We might wonder how the contemporary classroom teacher might respond to such an enquiry from a student, given that contemporary pedagogy holds that the object is for the student to define their own inspiration for development. Faced with such a question, the teacher is likely to defer to the authority of the internet, and to guide the student to search online to find or the answer to their question. Then at least there would be in some sense the following by the student of their own inspiration. But the exercise, however consonant with contemporary priorities for education, pales compared to Weil’s injunction, that the student must aspire (in this order) towards beauty, goodness, and truth. This observation is not intended as a polemic against the use of electronic media, nor to dismiss the usefulness of the

vast and growing resource of information on the internet, but is given simply to contrast these contemporary priorities with Weil's pedagogy of attention.

A follower of Weil, Scarry (1999) likewise addresses beauty as precedent to possible learning:

The willingness continually to revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education. One submits oneself to other minds (teachers) in order to increase the chance that one will be looking in the right direction when a comet makes its sweep through a certain patch of sky. The arts and sciences, like Plato's dialogues, have at their centre the drive to confer greater clarity on what already has clear discernibility, as well as to confer initial clarity on what originally has none. (Scarry, 1999, pp. 7–8)

Weil believes that a worthy education is one that ensures that people use their intelligence well in order that they make best sense of the world. Her philosophy of attention calls for fairness, tolerance and decency as mainstay values. Weil's account of attention calls for us to revise completely our understanding of what it is to think well:

Every time...a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his efforts produce no visible fruit. (Weil, 2009, p. 59)

In Weil's view, education is not at all to do with discovering talent, but has rather more to do with developing in each and every student, their faculty of attention:

It is true that talent has no connexion with morality; but then, there is no greatness about talent, it is untrue that there is no connection between perfect beauty, perfect truth, perfect justice: they are far more than just connected: they form a single, mysterious unity, for the good is one. (Weil, 2002, p. 232)

Weil's educational philosophy discourages altogether questions of the form "is this true?" Instead, Weil's pedagogy encourages students to be challenged by questions of the form "why is this an interesting question?". Weil would reframe personally-directed questions such as "why should I care", or "how does this affect me?" into more outwardly-focussed questions such as "why does this matter?" Her pedagogy also emphasises taking time to think for oneself rather than rushing to find the answer. She argues that to achieve this requires the attributes of thoughtful persistence, resilience, humility—attributes that are worlds away from

the contemporary school emphasis on team-work and collaboration. Weil considers that one ought not to be in too much of a hurry, not too much seduced or motivated by goals, outputs, results, easily-found conclusions.

Weil urges the careful use of language both to clarify thought and to preserve the ability to draw fine distinctions in meaning. She laments the human tendency to use language to employ what she calls “absolutes”, rather than making use of conditional verbs or phrases to modify or qualify ideas. Weil considers the tendency to employ “absolutes” to be an erosion of a vocabulary of value. Weil considers that when language is simplified in instrumental ways, the expression of more fine-grained thinking is, in important respects, diluted:

Words like vice, nobility, honour, generosity, have become almost impossible to use or else they have acquired bastard meanings; language is no longer legitimately equipped for praising a man’s character. It is slightly, but only slightly, better equipped for praising a mind; the very word mind, and the words intelligence, intelligent, and others like them, have also become degraded. The fate of words is a touchstone of the progressive weakening of the idea of value.
(Weil 1968, p. 168)

Weil warns that “the desire to discover something new prevents people from allowing their thoughts to dwell on the transcendent, undemonstrable meaning of what has already been discovered” (Weil, 1997, p. 184). Harking back to the Greeks, she notes that “Greek science was based on piety. Ours is based on pride” (Weil, 1956, p. 548). Weil argues that as humans we all need to work very hard to reclaim humility in our interactions with the world, and we must work hard not to rush to seize upon an easy or ready answer.

Weil considers that all truly meaningful human achievements are only achieved through efforts of attention. All cultural and intellectual achievements, whether mathematical, literary, musical, or whatever the field, are the result of sustained human efforts of selfless attention. She assigns a spiritual quality to all such achievements. She views them as the product of egoless human effort, which lifts them to a spiritual plane. Weil considers that this egoless effort amounts to willingness to wait, and is, at its most intensely pure, one and the same as seeking for God:

The longing to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the longing for the incarnation. It is mistaken if it thinks it is anything else. The

incarnation alone can satisfy it. (Weil, 2009, p. 109)

As a Platonist, Weil considers that a balance between participatory discussion and silent contemplation is fundamental to thinking. She considers that education must include a balance of contemplative and interactive activities. Opportunities to develop perspective, to mull, to critique, to revisit and remember, to consider things from different perspectives, to be able learn from the great minds of the past are, in her view, vital. Weil acknowledges that her approach to education has no guarantee of immediate or even long-term success, and counsels that the direct “seeking out” of knowledge often goes unrewarded, and that “we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them, but by waiting for them” (Weil, 2009, p. 62). In a similar fashion, we might help our children to know not to ask for gifts, since one does not give a gift because it has been requested, and one does not receive a gift as a result of grasping for it. Gifts are, by definition, things that come to us unsolicited. Weil also insists that the practice of training the mind through attention ought essentially be a positive, even joyful experience:

The intelligence can only lead by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students but only poor caricatures of apprentices who at the end of their apprenticeship will not even have a trade. (p. 61)

Although Weil is opposed to the delivery of a rigid curriculum, she nevertheless advocates lessons that expose students to different systems of value and thought. Weil believes that teachers should expose children to a range of spiritual ideas and concepts, and that all school students be given the opportunity to become acquainted with, and to critique, different systems of thought. She considers that there ought to be a spiritual aspect to children’s education and asserts that “an educational course in which no reference is made to religion is an absurdity” (Weil, 2002, p. 92). She considers that insights into the religious and mystical thought of past civilizations have value in that they serve to broaden students’ horizons and their tolerance. Further, she warns that in her view, “if children are not brought up to think about God, they will become fascists and communists for want of something to give themselves” (p. 91). Weil’s point here is not necessarily that religious studies ought to be taught in schools, but that without being given a sense of what it means to hold dear

particular values or ideals, students may themselves become unwittingly susceptible to dangerous or manipulative external influences.

1.6. *Reading as sense-making*

In an essay written in 1941, Weil employs the concept of reading as a metaphor for the way that we make sense of the world. She explains that reading (by which Weil means interpreting), is an activity we are all actively involved in on a daily basis: “What we call a correction of a sensory illusion is actually a modified reading” (Springsted and Schmidt, 2015, p. 23). Weil observes that in the same way that we experience physical sensations as “brute fact”, reading may also evoke in us a response that is immediate and visceral. She instances two women who each receive a letter that contains the same tragic news. Only one of the two women can read, and for her, the written words have a powerful effect, whereas the illiterate woman can draw no meaning whatsoever. Weil’s point is that what we read may convey powerful, even profound meaning. She reminds us that we mix our labour with what we read:

The world is a text with several meanings, and we must pass from one meaning to another by a process of work. It must be work in which the body constantly bears a part as, for example, when we learn the alphabet of a foreign language: this alphabet has to enter into our hand by dint of forming the letters. If this condition is not fulfilled, every change in our way of thinking is illusory. (Weil, 1997, p. 131)

Reading has, for Weil, an ethical or moral dimension. Our lives are affected by the ways in which we interpret the world, and further, once we know how to read, we cannot *but* read. She also warns just how difficult to change or challenge one’s own reading can be, for, as she says, readings can “seize us as if they were external” (Springsted and Schmidt, 2015, p. 22). She says further that “meanings impose themselves on us successively, and each of them, when it appears and enters into us through the senses, reduces all opposing ideas to the status of phantoms” (p. 26). Weil argues that when we read, whether we are reading a human situation, a natural scene, or a written text, there is always potential for a kind of gestalt transformation, not simply a transfer of information, but an illumination.

In Weil’s view, if we are to be truly thinking people, it is critical that we exercise our ability to review and possibly alter the ways that we ‘read’ the world, including other people. Attention to the quality of how we read is the means to achieve this. Weil acknowledges that to master our capacity to read with attention calls for considerable effort, but she argues that such efforts are always beneficial insofar as they help to shape our thinking processes in

morally significant ways. In Weil's view, the most promising way to 'read' the world is to try to read as it were 'objectively' in order to keep the interpretation open. She proposes that if we view reading in terms of the concept of *value*, and to keep in mind what is of most worth, we may be able to see how the concept of reading aligns with the values of truth, beauty and, ultimately, the good. In Weil's view, these values are all intertwined: "We do not know how to think these things as one and yet they cannot be thought separately" (p. 27). How does Weil's concept of reading illuminate her concept of attention, and what might we learn from this?

According to Weil, although we each interpret the world in light of our own individuality, the *quality* of our reading is something that rests with each individual person, this can be improved through attention. For example, it is within our powers to 'read' another person respectfully, but it is also possible (and is sometimes easier) to read that person superficially, disrespectfully, disdainfully, even cruelly. She reminds us that the way we read is not a neutral or passive activity, but is value-laden and informed by all manner of prevailing factors. The way we read is never neutral:

We read, but we also *we are read by* others. Interpenetrations in these readings.

Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest). A mechanical process. More often than not a dialogue between deaf people. (Weil, 1997, pp. 188–189)

Weil's point is that our default readings or interpretations are subject to what she considers a gravitational pull downwards, towards egotistical priorities and self-interest. It is only by way of engaging our minds in "a higher quality of attention" (p. 190) that we may achieve a finer, more elevated sense of balance in our reading.

For Weil, attention involves the capacity to see beyond one's own limited point of view—the capacity to see creatively, to find a stance outside of the self, to break from customary or habitual thought-ways. Weil's discussion of reading the world also applies to our attention to literature. Just as the attentive student, through detachment, respect and humility, may become better orientated to intelligent thought, so too may the attentive reader of a literary work be opened to a wider view. To give literary attention calls for undivided, focussed attention. It calls for contemplation and solitude. Weil concedes that attention to

literature, if that literature is of the highest order, offers us the opportunity to widen our realm of experience and knowing.²²

Weil considers that attentive reading of the finest literary texts involves encounters with mysteries and contradictions, and that this feature of the reading process exercises processes that are “essential to thought” (Springsted and Schmidt, 2015, p. 35). Weil argues that “a work of art, like knowledge, and like love, contains *inspiration*” (Weil, 1968, p. 132). She draws a parallel between divinity and what she considers to be artistic creativity of the highest order: “In creating a work of art of the highest class the artist’s attention is oriented towards silence and the void; from this silence and void there descends an inspiration which develops into words or forms” (p. 133).

Weil acknowledges that reading literary fiction has the potential to provide rich and suggestive lessons in attention, perhaps because aspects of engaging with narrative text have a relation to aspects of mystical thought. (Weil says famously that attention in its purest form is prayer.) She argues that in the best examples, literature enables readers to experience what she terms the “density of the real” (Weil, 1968, p. 162). Of the greatest of literary writers she states:

Their contemplation is the ever-flowing source of an inspiration which may legitimately guide us. For this inspiration, if we know how to receive it, tends—as Plato said—to make us grow wings to overcome gravity. (p. 165)

Weil’s statements on attention have a direct relation to the act of reading literature, since the act of reading also consists in “suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (Weil, 2009, p. 62). The expectant reader presents himself as someone whose “thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive” (p. 62). The reader (or re-reader), embarking on a literary text, is in a sense not unlike like “a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains” (p. 62).

Attentive reading calls for contemplative and yet active mental engagement, a state that is both open and neutral, where we must let go of other thoughts or worldly distractions if we are to connect with the text as well as make sense of it. If our thoughts wander, we must retrace our steps, and re-read, in order to reconnect with the narrative. Reading is also an

²² See Weil, 1968, pp. 160–165.

entirely individual process. No-one can read for us (although they may, of course, read to us, even “with” us). Weil considers reading literature to be morally instructive because it can illustrate difficult and different philosophical questions in terms of concrete, lived situations. In the best examples, literature depicts, in all manner of different ways, human encounters where moral questions are, so to speak, “lived”. (I am indebted to my supervisor Peter Roberts, for this line of thought.)

Activities that nurture application, concentration, dedication and sustained attention to the beautiful achievements of others are always worthy pursuits. Practices that involve sustained and compassionate attention—to other people, to the natural world, or to a great work of art or of literature, are, if practised with the right kind of humility, likely to bring us closer to that which is of the greatest aesthetic and moral value.

Weil’s is an idealistic model of education. She insists that “an educational method which is not inspired by the conception of a certain form of human perfection is not worth very much” (Weil, 2002, p. 216). Significantly, Weil identifies education with apprenticeship, such that time, repeated effort, and dedicated commitment to the overall project, are all required:

Education—whether its object be children or adults, individuals or an entire people, or even oneself—consists in creating motives. To show what is beneficial, what is obligatory, what is good—that is the task of education. Education concerns itself with the motives for effective action. (p. 188)

1.7. Summary

Weil shows us that, properly applied, pedagogical attention develops abstract thinking, logical connections, and she shows us too, that attention has important parallels for ethical thought and conduct. The capacity to think independently and well, to seek to become more cognitively adept and more morally sensitive, the capacity to think through rationally rather than respond on impulse, are all tied in to Weil’s notion of attention.

For Weil, attention is the means by which we come to see in new ways, how things in the world connect and relate to one other—not unlike the way a child who has mastered the ability to form letters, discovers that those letters carry power in the way they can combine to make words that carry meaning and offer new ways to make sense of the world. Attention enables us to be stretched, in order to understand the world better. Weil’s attention involves

an attempt to approach paradox, and find ways to navigate between what is known and what is yet unclear. In these ways, Weil's attention draws us back to Plato.

Weil's writing on attention foregrounds aspects of schooling and education that are entirely undervalued at the present time—the value of contemplation, respect for the achievement of earlier thinkers, the virtue and importance of an inquisitive disposition, the value of reading literature. Her view of education is one that incorporates contemplative activities as well as verbal exchanges. Her notion of attention (a disposition that embraces mental, moral, and even spiritual dimensions), brings together themes of ethics and aesthetics in a meaningful way. Attention has important parallels for ethical thought and behaviour. Weil's emphasis on attention (and its attendant notions of humility, sensitivity to others, and responsiveness to beauty, justice) is relevant to a discussion of twentieth-century education priorities, particularly at a time when personal remoteness and disengagement are likely to be exacerbated by so called innovative open classrooms and the proliferation of digital devices in classroom programmes.

Weil challenges us to rethink the priorities of our contemporary educational approach. On one level, the contemporary notion of self-directed or collaborative learning would make little sense to Weil, for hers is a much more disciplined, reflective and contemplative approach to education. Whereas the contemporary student is encouraged to put personal meaning and subjective conviction first, Weil's students must first humbly orient themselves appropriately to their studies in order to access ideal and necessary truths. She considers that aesthetic experience, such as may be achieved through the reading of appropriately inspirational literature, develops powers of attention that are vital to learning itself. As we will see in the following chapter, fellow philosopher Iris Murdoch adopts and develops Weil's account of attention to further enlarge our understanding of thinking and moral progress. As the following chapter seeks to show, Murdoch adapts and builds on Weil's insights to form the foundation for her theory of ethics, and shares with Weil a particularly high regard for encounters with literature as a means to grow people's powers of attention.

Chapter 2: Iris Murdoch

2.0. *Introduction*

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) is known perhaps less as an influential moral philosopher than as a distinguished novelist. She was a teacher of philosophy at Oxford University from 1940 to 1963 before turning to novel writing full time. Murdoch's prolific published output includes various philosophical treatises and twenty-six works of fiction. Literature illuminates philosophy as well as conversely for Murdoch. Her literary writing often reflects her philosophical thinking, and her philosophical treatises frequently invoke literary encounters. The current study focuses not on Murdoch's fiction, but rather, on her often overlooked moral philosophy.

Central to Murdoch's philosophical position is the significance of aesthetic appreciation for moral growth, a theme that positions aesthetics at the very centre of education. Murdoch argues that behind both moral behaviour and acts of genuine moral growth is an element of aesthetic appreciation—an elevation to a particular way of seeing, one that involves a distinct clarity of vision. The faculty by which one may attain this clarity of vision is that of *attention*. Murdoch borrows the concept of attention from fellow philosopher and teacher, Simone Weil. Murdoch's interpretation of attention, although more secular than that of Weil, is also informed by Plato's thought. Murdoch develops Weil's concept of attention towards interpreting for herself the meaning of Plato's notion of the Good. Murdoch thereby shapes a philosophy of metaphysical experience that connects to education in the broadest sense. Murdoch's consideration of education and moral growth is not specifically addressed to school-based or institutional contexts. In Murdoch's estimation, all education is moral education and this concerns making of life as a whole something worthy to be chosen actively, not something that is merely passively received.

As a philosopher, Murdoch quests to know how people progress intellectually and morally. The example she sets as an intellectual is both to think well, and to live a morally good, positive, creative life. She seeks furthermore to show that there is no real separation between these two ambitions. Recognised in the latter half of the twentieth century for her bold criticism of the analytic philosophy of her day, Murdoch's philosophical writing has much to tell us about connections between morality, art, and human progress, and therefore, about priorities for education. A question for the present day concerns whether contemporary education has side-lined this conviction of Murdoch's to its own detriment. This question is

addressed not exclusively in the present chapter but across the thesis as a whole. From the outset however, it should be clear that the question is answered in the affirmative.

Murdoch challenges what philosophical aspirations should amount to, and proposes that goodness is a virtue to aspire to. Her overarching theme is that intelligence fundamentally and ineluctably concerns how to live well. That is, wisdom is inseparable from morally good conduct and existence. Ethics cannot legitimately be thought to be an afterthought in philosophy. Ethics cannot be crowded to one side by epistemology. To know well and to act well are inseparably connected: epistemology grows out of ethics, metaphysics from morals, and conversely. Across the three essays that make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch argues that on-going attention is the “essential feature of the active moral agent” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 33). The active moral agent is one who seeks to pursue consistency between thought and practice. In her philosophical writing, Murdoch interweaves concepts of goodness and virtue, and argues that the experience of beauty is integral to how we grow morally. She displays Plato’s sense that beauty is prior to goodness and goodness is prior to truth. Her interpretation of the Platonic notion of good, as well as her use of analogy and metaphor to explain metaphysical concepts, informs her overall discussion.

The following chapter is organised into four sections. It opens with a discussion of Murdoch’s aspirations for moral philosophy, and her argument for the significance of the concept of attention, and the importance of language. The second section discusses Murdoch’s debt to Plato and the ways that Murdoch draws on Plato’s concept of the Good to develop her philosophical perspective. Section three explores Murdoch’s argument for the importance of imaginative and aesthetic involvement and its influence on the way we see and experience the world. Section 4 discusses Murdoch’s view that the attentive reading of literature can heighten our understanding not only of ourselves but also of ourselves in relation to others, thereby strengthening our moral connection with the society of which we are a part.

2.1. *Attention and human agency*

In *The Sovereignty of Good* (2014), Murdoch finds fault with what she considers to be false intellectual values of her day. She considers that contemporary moral philosophy is defective in that it fails to depict the human character as it really is, particularly in relation to individual experience and what it is that ‘makes us tick’ morally. Murdoch faults the moral philosophy of her day on several counts: firstly, it is based on a narrow view of what morality amounts to;

secondly, it provides only a partial account of human agency; and thirdly, it portrays a view of morality that is in her view implausible since it does not connect to everyday human ethical situations. As Nussbaum (2012, p. 261) notes, Murdoch is interested in philosophy as it relates to the problems of real life. Against the tide of contemporary analytic thought of her day, Murdoch argues that the notion of reality needs to be radically reinterpreted if it is to relate to ordinary everyday experience. Our notion of reality is but partial and distorted if we link it only to morally disinterested observation and morally disinterested explanation. Such a notion of reality would not only create artificial separation of fact and value but would relegate value to unreality. Yet in ordinary everyday experience matters of value stand out as very real, and can knock a person no less surely than being knocked by a bus.

Utilitarian analysis of moral questions emerged as the ascendant moral perspective in Murdoch's time. Moral reflection, according to utilitarians, takes into account a particular kind of given or a particular kind of fact, namely facts concerning happiness or unhappiness. It suggests that the morally right action will be that which yields the greatest happiness. Utilitarians' accountancy is merely additive: the more who are happy the better, the more any person is happy the better, all in direct additive proportionality to the "number of utiles". Utilitarians reduce moral reflection to the scientific work of considering causality, about utility, and what could maximise it. Murdoch argues that all this admits to consideration only "the ordinary world of rational argument" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 32) and fatefully omits from consideration "a reality infinitely more complex and various than that of science" (p. 33). She considers that the language of moral reflection refers us in fact to this "infinitely more complex and various" reality, involving subjective intricacies far beyond the ken or interest of utilitarians.

Murdoch faults utilitarianism because it obliterates good understanding of ordinary everyday experience. Murdoch is equally sure, however, that confusion concerning ordinary everyday experience arises as well in everyday ways. What she calls "states of illusion" (p. 36) may be brought about quite independently of philosophy, simply by the limitations of the human ego. Murdoch equates the surmounting of these limitations with the attainment of attention, very much in Weil's sense of the word. In particular, Murdoch proposes an account of moral freedom that involves the faculty of attention. To focus one's mental energy sufficiently to surmount potential illusions, is in Murdoch's view to work towards an apprehension of what she terms the Good.

Murdoch's account of attention is well-known. She uses the term "to express an idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" and this she considers to be "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (p. 33). For Murdoch, our human capacity to bestow reflective, loving attention is the central means by which we develop ourselves morally. Attention involves "looking carefully at something and holding it before the mind" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 3). The practice of attention involves both mental discipline and cognitive focus, such that the mind is emptied of self-preoccupied thoughts. This mental state opens the mind to think new thoughts, to see things from other perspectives, to find other interpretations, to consider alternative readings. Attention works to discipline the mind away from thoughts that are innately self-oriented or simply aimless. Moral improvement and change does not arise from specific acts of will or choice or obligation, but differently:

...attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily, of course other people but also other things. Such a view accords with oriental wisdom...ultimately we ought to have no will. (p. 52)

Attention, Murdoch tells us, involves a diminished sense of the individual self, and a deflection outward of one's inward-facing gaze towards another person (or object, or happening). Murdoch's attention encompasses a Platonic belief (for Plato a truism), that there is intrinsic worth in the pursuit of goodness for its own sake. Indeed, Murdoch's conception is that the pursuit of goodness is the highest and most defining pursuit of all. All other pursuits are to be understood in light of that pursuit. Murdoch's debt to Plato for this conception is a theme that will be discussed in detail in the following section.

In Murdoch's ethics of attention, attention effectively humbles the ego because attention involves one's being subject to what is subjectless, transcendent of any self but consequently accessible to all selves equally. Murdoch identifies the need for selflessness in order for the other to 'be'. She invokes giving human attention to the artistic achievement of others as an excellent example of this phenomenon: "We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 58).

Attention is important because it is attention that gives access to an essential kind of selflessness, a kind of assimilation morally to there being something much larger than oneself. Similarly and relatedly, Murdoch argues that a person recognises beauty only when the pleasure being felt towards something is intertwined with that very pleasure being *appropriately*

felt—that is, felt as though the pleasing apprehension is greater than the individual. For these reasons, human ego is made out by Murdoch to be essentially limiting, essentially worthy only of being transcended and thereby let go. At the same time, the needed transcending of ego is alone what can make life as a whole something worthy to be chosen actively, and not merely passively received.

Murdoch purposes Weil's concept of 'attention' as the central instrument for our moral learning, and it is this concept that forms the core of her own moral vision. With Weil, Murdoch defends the view that moral (for Weil, spiritual) progress is achieved not through particular specific deeds or choices or resolve, but rather through the on-going application of careful and particular attention. Murdoch's philosophical writing makes repeated references to her debt to Weil, and to their shared belief in the primacy of attention as the foundation for thinking and acting ethically and morally.

Murdoch acknowledges that to achieve the quality of attention to other people or other things can involve quite some degree of discomfort, and that to maintain a "just and loving gaze"—the essence of attention, calls for patience and a very particular kind of focus. She insists too, that "concentrated attention" (which might be explained in terms of an intensely-held regard) is to be distinguished from the "hazy, muddled unclarified states of mind wherein one is content with a second best. The second best should be exchanged for void. (Try again. *Wait*)" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 506).

Yet she also agrees that this "objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 50). We must remain constantly alert and practice active vigilance against deeply-held prejudices and self-deceptions (p. 39). Attention, Murdoch argues, is "not something that is switched on and off in between occurrences of explicit moral choices" (p. 36), since it is a demanding, ongoing cognitive process: "The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results" (p. 40). Murdoch does not clarify whether she considers that every single individual will always merit the same level or degree of just and loving attention, and in this respect her vision is idealized.

To convey her idea of attention as an everyday, reflective process, Murdoch presents an analogy in terms of a parable in which a fictional character whom she calls M, radically alters her view of her daughter-in-law, D, after careful reflection. Initially very critical of D's

conduct, dress, and overall manner, M “reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters...the change is not in D’s behaviour, but in M’s mind” (p. 17).

The quality of M’s attention, Murdoch argues, is simply that of “an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her” (p. 17). M engages in a process that Murdoch calls “unselfing” (akin to Weil’s notion of decreation)—whereby M draws on her powers of reflection to revise her initially quite uncharitable view of her daughter-in-law D, and in so doing, she reorients her initial self-centred judgement to one that is based more on Murdoch’s well-known “just and loving gaze” (p. 33). This change in orientation in M’s way of looking, occurs privately. It involves M’s effort to see D more truthfully, more fairly, and in a more balanced way. This, Murdoch argues, is what moral growth is like—it is individual, complex, exacting, and ongoing.²³

It is not entirely clear just what prompts M’s internal reflections regarding her daughter-in-law, or what motivates M to “look again” (p. 17). It is implied that M initially views D in light of some gender or racial stereotype: she initially dislikes her daughter-in-law’s accent and clothing so it is possible that the younger D is of a different ethnic, religious or social group, or arouses some other deep-seated bias that causes M to view the younger woman as in some ways unworthy. In any case, M’s growth in moral respect for D, which comes about through M’s internal exercise of attention is, as Murdoch demonstrates, a process that involves M’s moral imagination. It is M’s imaginative attention that enables her to imagine D in a more generous way. M’s mental revisions enable her to see, with hindsight, what was unjust about her previous reading. M’s moral view is thus enlarged, through attention. As Murdoch says, “we use our imagination not to escape the word, but to join it” (p. 8).

Murdoch’s sketch illustrates the ways that people are involved in making moral judgements all the time, and as well, that the quality of these judgements connects to their capacity to attend. The implication here is that constraints on our moral reasoning may relate to limitations of our disposition to attend—our disposition to be ‘other-regarding’. Murdoch acknowledges that a person’s sense of what good is, is one that will continue to develop over a

²³ Some may ask how we can reconcile Murdoch’s emphasis on “unselfing” with the ethical practice of self-reflection or self-scrutiny. An answer is that in order to “grow” ethically, we must try to look critically at ourselves, and such self-scrutiny does not contradict the notion of selfless attention, since ethical self-critique, if genuine, will involve consideration of perspectives that go beyond one’s own.

lifetime, and is never simple: “Moral change and achievement are slow: we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by” (p. 38).

To undergo moral reflection or review in search of self-improvement is a Platonic notion. Also Platonic is the notion that our capacity to understand anything new opens us up progressively to new awareness, and hence to further readings of the world. These are themes to which we will return in a subsequent section of this chapter. Murdoch’s sketch to explain M’s deepening grasp of moral concepts also demonstrates how deeply relevant to human beings learning through narrative and storytelling is, and as well, it is a reminder of the ways that narrative is importantly connected to our very humanness.²⁴ In Bruner’s essay “The narrative construction of reality” (1991, p. 4), he notes that “we organize our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on.”

Murdoch reminds us that such private revisions of interpretation as that which M engages in, are themselves the stuff of literature. Readers of literary fiction repeatedly encounter such complex reinterpretations or re-interpretations: “Innumerable novels contain accounts of what such struggles are like. Anybody could describe one without being at a loss for words” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 22). Readers of novels are attuned from an early age to the ways that literature both demands from readers, and also invites readers, to take up ideas and subsequently interrogate, reflect on, and rearrange them. Murdoch observes that when we read fiction, “we follow, in context, these descriptions of states of consciousness with no difficulty” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 171).

Murdoch’s anecdote about M and D points to wider questions about how we use stories to develop and refine our ideas about justice, love, and the pursuit of goodness. As Murdoch notes, “any story which we tell ourselves consoles us since it imposes patterns upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 87). Literature is also a means to “unself” (p. 91)—that is to say, to get outside of one’s own self in order to view things from a more nearly neutral perspective. When we read attentively, we effectively “unself” ourselves. In this sense, literature represents, for Murdoch, the paradigm not only of moral awareness but of *awareness* itself. The seriousness with which

²⁴ Boyd (2009) provides a detailed discussion of the ways in which storytelling is an integral part of our very humanity and humanness.

Murdoch takes this matter is clear. In Murdoch's view the novelist, as artist, "has always been important, and is *essential*, as a truth-teller and as a defender of words...It may be that in the end the novelist may prove to be the saviour of the human race" (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 232–233).

...great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. (Murdoch, 2014, p. 64)

Murdoch poses the rhetorical question whether or not reading literature can in any way "improve" us, and although the question remains unanswered, she nevertheless reminds us that stories involve us in attentive and imaginative contemplation, and that that activity is itself consequential for how we reflect on and understand ourselves and how we interact with others. Stories, Murdoch suggests, thereby have the potential to be educative in the sense that they engage our capacity for what she calls "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" (p. 64).

While Murdoch instances the ways that a person's attentive engagement with literature may support their on-going personal moral growth, she also questions the character portrayals that she finds in much of the fiction of her day. She faults the novelistic depiction of character in terms of an ideal individual who is "free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave...increasingly aware of his alienation" (p. 78). This, in Murdoch's view, is unhelpful, and is in her words behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian. By contrast, she advocates a much more nuanced interpretation of the human condition, whether in philosophy or in literature, if we are wont to make sense of questions of human morality:

Morality is, and ought to be, connected with the whole of our being...The moral life is not intermittent, or specialized, it is not a peculiar separate area of our existence. It is into ourselves that we must look...Life is made up of details...Aesthetic insight connects with moral insight, respect for things connects with respect for persons. (Education). (Murdoch, 1992, p. 495)

2.2. *Metaphor and meaning*

Murdoch is well known for her emphasis upon the fundamental importance of metaphor for understanding. “Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition (Murdoch 2014, p. 75). She observes that “we are creatures who use irreplaceable metaphors in many of our most important activities” (p. 91), and that “metaphors can be a mode of understanding, and so of acting upon, our condition.” Platonic metaphors inspire Murdoch’s conceptual understanding of what the Good is. She draws on the concept of the Good to make sense of the ethical practice of attention as something that occurs as an everyday happening in the real world.

Whereas analytic philosophy puzzles over how metaphor can be meaningful at all, Murdoch’s view is that metaphorical meaning precedes the possibility of any other meaning. As she says, “metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision” (p. 75). Murdoch argues that moral apprehension underlies the apprehension of any concept whatsoever, and that “moral concepts themselves are deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical concepts without a loss of substance” (p. 75). By this, Murdoch means that any literal thought is tutored by a metaphor, such that one is, by one’s attention, made to regard what is universal and so what is far greater than one’s self. This is to propose that literal thinking is not necessary for the very possibility of metaphorical thinking, but rather, that the very reverse is the case: we cannot think about subjective experience and judgements *without* appealing to metaphor, and metaphors enable us deftly to traverse the inferential entanglements of complex thought. The mystery is not so much how metaphor can be meaningful, as how literal meanings are possible. The mystery is solved only by recognition of the worth of living life by a metaphor.²⁵ To step, as Murdoch does, from Weil’s questions about ‘spiritual’ advancement to questions instead about a progression (a pilgrimage) in the apprehension of meaning, Murdoch underlines that metaphor makes real for us what is not truly real. Yet she has also helped identify for us the true depth and significance of Weil’s own understanding.

²⁵ This idea is developed by Lakoff & Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (2003).

Murdoch argues that we develop our ethical understanding largely through anecdote and through narrative: “Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril” (p. 33). It is through language that we develop “a rich and diversified vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness” (p. 56). In her 1961 essay “Against dryness”, Murdoch talks of the need for what she calls a new “vocabulary of attention” and for “more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being” since “it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 293). She makes a similar point in her 1976 essay “The fire and the sun: Why Plato banished the artists”, where she refers to Plato’s use of metaphor:

Plato...was also the master, indeed the inventor, of a pure clean relaxed mode of philosophical exposition which is a high literary form and a model for ever. Of course he used metaphor, but philosophy needs metaphor and metaphor is basic; how basic is the most basic philosophical question. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 463)

Murdoch acknowledges that metaphor is a means by which we deepen our understanding of abstract concepts, and that conceptual metaphors can usefully challenge and broaden our literal understanding because of the insights and inter-connections they provide. She considers that the metaphors we use to describe both moral progress and aesthetic appreciation are crucial to the shape of our moral thinking. She proposes that what is common to both moral behaviour and aesthetic appreciation is a particular way of ‘seeing’, one that calls for a distinct clarity of vision.

Murdoch repeatedly draws on metaphors of vision in order to explain her notion of attention: “I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of “see” which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 37). To achieve “clear vision” is difficult, she argues, since moral thinking is hard thinking, and has to be worked at in a rigorous and disciplined way. This, Murdoch reminds us, is because the human ego works relentlessly to limit or curtail our sense of connection with the reality of other individuals or the world: “We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continual active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world” (p. 82). Murdoch considers that when this “clear vision” is achieved, by way of attention, “the self is a correspondingly much smaller and much less interesting object” (p. 66).

Importantly for the current study, Murdoch considers that we are able to foster the ability to see more clearly in this metaphorical sense by virtue of the literature we read. This is because literature can enable us to enter a realm of experience where we are not ourselves caught up in the distractions of self or of the moment. Direct involvement of the ego is thereby to some extent curbed. Reading literature invites us to pause and ponder, to see things in altered, possibly unexpected or different relations to other things. Literature enables us to rehearse what it is to reflect on our values, and in so doing enables us to revise our way of looking at things, such as we do when we change our position, recognise our fault, forgive, exercise remorse, or admit error.

Murdoch's appreciation for the potential of the novel form to convey powerful moral truths, as well as her willingness to give serious treatment to an unfashionable subject, is evident even in her first published book, a work on J. P. Sartre. Here, stating that she finds aspects of Sartre's characters too clinical (Murdoch, 1953, p. 59), she urges that "the novel, the novel proper that is, is about people's treatment of each other, and so it is about human values" (p. 138).

To return to the metaphor of sight, Murdoch suggests that if we can't "see" sufficiently clearly in a particular situation this may be because we are not, or are not sufficiently accustomed, to look carefully. She reminds us that we need to pay careful attention not simply to the surface of things, but also, to what we unwittingly assume or take for granted more broadly: "Our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 55). That is to say, our lives are enriched by the quality of our capacity for attention.

In Murdoch's ethics of attention, humility and respect are equally significant: humility is required if we are to make any progress intellectually and morally. Attention humbles the ego because attention involves one's being subject to what is subject-less, transcendent of any self but consequently accessible to all selves equally. Murdoch identifies the need for selflessness in order to enable others to "be", and she invokes human attention to the artistic achievement of others as an excellent example of this phenomenon:

We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. (p. 58)

Murdoch reminds us that “humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, but is rather more like having “an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues” (p. 93). Once we cease to be preoccupied with ourselves, we are then in a position to be able to focus on the existence of someone or something else. Murdoch reminds us too, that to use our capacity to adjust our thoughts and beliefs is a vital part of what makes us human, and that to achieve a discerning moral awareness calls for an on-going and patient orientation to attention. “It is also a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps the idea of goodness itself” (p. 55).

Murdoch considers that our moral progress is to some extent correlated with a deepened attention not just to our inner lives (through our thoughts and memories), as shown in the tale of M and D, but also to an awareness of other people and the world. Murdoch proposes various ways consciously to direct our mental focus outwards and upwards, away from the self and towards others—such as by giving attention to great art, to the intellectual challenge of learning a new language, or to the attentive enjoyment of nature—attention, that is to say, to anything that alters our consciousness away from selfishness. She argues that it is through the faculty of attention that we can come to know what she terms the void—and to get ourselves to this state, we have to exercise selflessness. Selflessness opens the way to moral growth.

To illustrate what she means by selflessness, Murdoch offers several examples. The first is of being suddenly arrested by the sight of a beautiful kestrel flying past her window: “Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel...the brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel” (p. 82). In her second example, Murdoch’s experience of learning a new language (Russian) requires all her cognitive attention. In such contexts as these, Murdoch explains that her individual ego confronts a new kind of humility, “something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow, deny or make unreal”, not pretending “to know what one does not know” (p. 87). Through such experiences, she is humbled and awed, she experiences personal growth and is she changed for the good:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of

something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 373)

The authoritative structure of the new language, Russian, with its unfamiliar rules and demanding syntactical patterns and structures, draws her out of herself, and at the same time, commands her respect. The new language makes possible a shared communication with a community of others, one that was previously not available to her, and the prospect of this linguistic challenge, while it is daunting, and one that Murdoch judges she is unlikely ever fully to master, nevertheless gives her pleasure, and elicits in her a love of the language.

Having pointed to the way that various personal experiences can draw us out of ourselves in ways that are morally improving (since they overcome our tendencies to selfishness), Murdoch turns to a consideration of aesthetic experience. She points to the ways in which the coherence and unity of form in art enables us to attend with imaginative sympathy, even with love. Engagement with art draws us out, and by this our ego “resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 83). Murdoch reminds us of the way that that artistically created aesthetic works can give structure and form to experiences that in daily life we are more likely to experience as formless or chaotic happenings. Aesthetic experience can awaken in us what she calls “a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession” (p. 83). The perfection of the created and crafted work of art itself invites attention through what Murdoch terms “unpossessive contemplation” (p. 83).

Murdoch acknowledges that to achieve, let alone sustain, attention of the quality she is aspiring to, is fraught with difficulty, and will inevitably involve fumbles and failures. Attention calls for considerable effort, and discipline of a very particular kind. She admits that any attempts to as it were “pierce the veil of consciousness and join the world as it really is” (p. 93), requires both concerted and repeated individual efforts, since the human ego works actively to prevent connection with the reality of other individuals and with the world. To this extent, Murdoch, like Weil, considers the successful inculcation of attention to be almost a form of moral training.

In this regard Murdoch invokes what she terms Weil’s “profoundly disciplined” philosophy (Murdoch, 1997, p. 157) and she applauds Weil’s “unity of a passionate search for

truth with a simplicity and austerity of personal living which gives to what she writes an authority which cannot be imitated” (pp. 157–160). Moreover, since by nature humans cannot hope entirely to eliminate impulses towards distraction and daydreaming (which Murdoch terms “fantasizing”), she recommends that we take effort to mitigate these impulses, in order to minimise their negative effects. She grants that “[w]e are ineluctably imperfect and goodness is not a continuously active organic part of our purposes and wishes. However good a life is, it includes moral failure” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 509). Nevertheless, moral growth and change, even if fraught with setbacks, is in her view entirely possible and eminently worthy to pursue: “Truth and progress (or some truth and progress) are the reward of some exercise of virtue, courage, humility and patience” (p. 400).

Murdoch argues, perhaps not entirely convincingly, that by appeal to attention, the mind can be usefully shifted from even the most intense of emotional states:

Where strong emotions of sexual love, or of hatred, resentment, or jealousy are concerned, ‘pure will’ can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source.

(Murdoch, 2014, p. 54)

Even in situations as compelling as these, Murdoch argues that the mind can, with the right kind of intellectual effort, be redirected elsewhere, and towards more promising ends.

Although she insists that her take on attention is largely secular, Murdoch grants that the contemplative energy that attention calls for is also in a sense noetic (prayerful) in character. She identifies ways in which her understanding of attention has some indirect, but nevertheless connected, relation to prayer, which she considers to be “the most profound and effective of religious techniques” (p. 67). This is not to invoke adherence to a particular religious dogma, nor to the practice of recitations to a specific Deity, but rather, an appeal to a kind of “selfless” orientation, which Murdoch describes as an energy for good action, and “simply an attention to God which is a form of love” (pp. 53–4). She explains that her notion of contemplative attention is not to be interpreted as “a quasi-religious meditative technique, but rather as something which belongs very much to the ordinary life of the moral person” (p. 67).

In Murdoch’s view, to learn anything properly has an important moral dimension and therefore demands our moral attention. She argues that moral growth can be fostered

through attention not just to introspective thought, as in the tale of M and D, but in other ways that call for one's full attention—such as through considering the beauty of nature, or by immersing oneself in the achievements of great works of art, or any other activity that involves a suppression of the active self:

To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline. A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man, and, in the true sense, a free man. The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it...The appreciation of beauty in art and nature is...the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real.
(p. 63)

Our capacity for attention is inculcated, for example, through due appreciation of other people, through the sheer beauty of nature, through learning the systems and structures of an entirely new language, through practising religion, or, as we will discuss later, through immersion in works of literature.

Across *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch outlines her philosophy of attention in terms of a fundamental moral activity. She draws frequent parallels between morality and art. In our encounters with art, and especially with literature, she argues, there is something to be discovered or revealed. Similarly, as moral beings we attend to others through observation, imagination, introspection and revision. In both realms, this project of discovery is a work-in-progress, a process that “goes on all the time”, never entirely complete (p. 42). Murdoch identifies the fundamental value of the arts as a means to promote understanding of others. She emphasises the role of aesthetics as a means of liberating the self from the mechanisms of self-preoccupation.

Murdoch argues that we make moral progress as we develop opportunities to develop shared understanding of other people. She reminds us that there is no neutrality in regard to moral issues, and in her words, “would-be neutral philosophers merely take sides surreptitiously” (p. 76). The same applies to teachers, since teaching is not value-free either. Murdoch reminds us that moral concepts and themes guide all our values all the time, across all aspects of our lives: “We learn moral concepts. Not only ‘true’ and ‘good’ but the vast numbers of secondary more specialised moral terms are for us instruments of discrimination and mentors of desire” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 385). Murdoch argues that “we *need* a moral

vocabulary, a detailed value terminology, morally loaded words” (p. 35). She identifies “the way in which our moral experience shares in the peculiar density of art, and in its imaginative cognitive activity” (p. 341), and reminds us that “as we move from generalities toward the accidental and particular we introduce muddle but also variety and space” (p. 349).

For a teacher to develop with his or her class a shared understanding of the character of Murdoch’s “variety and space”, the assembled students need to be able to listen to, hear, and respond to, the ideas of others. This is likely to involve interactions with an attentive teacher who orchestrates and develops the growing and ongoing relationship of the class. The task of the teacher, whatever the level, is to orchestrate and develop opportunities to work with students and to help them clarify their own thinking. Such a process, Murdoch argues, is simultaneously epistemological and moral:

As moral agents we have to try to understand the world and thereby to construct ‘our world’. Since morality is compulsory (we cannot avoid moral choices) some form of moral cognition is compulsory and we have to set up at least the forms of a distinction between what is real and what is not....These are considerations which must be fundamentally important in education, where a good teacher teaches accuracy and truth. The importance of getting things right. (p. 385)

Murdoch is aware of just how difficult it is to understand not only ourselves, but also the world and other people: “We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot)” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 31):

In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real. (p. 88)

In particular, Murdoch recommends that art, and especially literature, can guide the reader towards beauty, which is itself a path towards goodness.

2.3. *Plato and the Good*

Murdoch draws on the ideas of Plato to develop her theory that Goodness is connected with reality. She says: Goodness is an idea, an ideal, yet it is also evidently and

actively incarnate all around us” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 478). She argues that our moral progress may be slow, painful.

Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. And if there is any sense of unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it. (Murdoch, 2014, p. 77)

The Platonic idea of the Good is a way of doing without God without dispensing with the notion of aspiration towards the highest of ideals. For Murdoch, the notion of the Good is something that is unifying. She considers that through our appreciation of artistic achievement, we are able to experience the unity of the moral life. Moral behavior involves respecting the reality of others. To live morally involves paying constant attention to the otherness of human life. It involves continually seeking to deflect one’s mind away from self-interest and self-preoccupations, as well as seeking to avoid wasting attention and time on frivolous distractions (which Murdoch terms ‘fantasies’). Murdoch describes attention as “the effort to counteract such “states of illusion” (p. 36).

Murdoch, a Platonist, sees that the goal in life is to be moral, and to be moral requires letting go of self-limiting fantasies in order to deliberately and consciously seek for that which is good. To turn towards the other is one way to diminish one’s sense of self, and to gaze lovingly outward away from the self is to pursue a quest for the Good, even if that Good can itself never be fully apprehended. “The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic center seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections on the moral life” (p. 74). Murdoch’s notion of the Good “as a transcendent magnetic centre” towards which we are constantly striving is, as she agrees, difficult to understand, and something we can really only come to understand through particular instances or examples that help illuminate what the Good amounts to. By way of these “instances” of the Good, we build up an understanding of what Goodness entails:

The authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. *The necessity of the good is then an aspect of the kind of necessity involved in any technique for exhibiting fact.* In thus treating realism, whether of artist or of agent, as a moral achievement, there is of course a further assumption to be made in the fields of

morals: that true vision occasions right conduct. (p. 64)

The pursuit of the Good is, for Murdoch, related to living a morally good life, and this, Murdoch shows us, is precisely the life to aspire to. The Good is both inspirational and aspirational, but it is real. It is “the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves” (p. 100). “Good is indefinable ...because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality” (p. 41). Murdoch argues that:

The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies. Equally we recognize the real existence of evil: cynicism, cruelty, indifference to suffering. (p. 95)

Murdoch explores Platonic themes of goodness and moral progress to outline her interpretation of morality. She proposes a neo-Platonic conception of the Good (Murdoch’s secular interpretation of God), combined with a commitment to live a morally good life, as the nub of moral (or, as Weil would call it, spiritual) thinking. Murdoch draws on the metaphysics of Plato’s theory of Forms and argues for the immanence (i.e. the idea that it is everywhere and present in everything) of the Good.

Murdoch’s Good is essentially an enlarged kind of love, one that draws the individual out of their own preoccupations and into a clearer view of the world. She describes the Good in Platonic terms as “*a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*” (p. 54). She refers specifically to sections from Plato’s *Republic* to elaborate her idea of the Good as indefinable, while simultaneously considering that contemplating the inaccessibility of the Good has a vital place. She considers this to be “an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection” (p. 99). She argues further that “this attempt, which is a turning attention away from the particular, may be the thing that helps most when difficulties seem insoluble” (p. 99).

Plato, Murdoch shows, connects knowledge (truthfulness) and learning with goodness in ways that can help us understand moral growth:

...we must come back to that which we know about great art and about the moral insight which it contains and the moral achievement which it represents.

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. Plato, who tells us that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good. So that aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals. Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature: something which is easy to name but very hard to achieve. (p. 40)

Murdoch argues that there is a genuine human obligation to work towards the Good, not for any other purpose than because it is virtuous to work towards that which is good: “The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose” (p. 69). How we come to grips with this, according to Murdoch, is a matter of attention. She asks “Can good be in any sense an object of attention?” (p. 67), and concludes as follows:

When true Good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it...And when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. The mother loving the retarded child or loving the tiresome elderly relation...it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun. (p. 100)

Murdoch links morality with the indefinable Good, which she describes as something “non-representable and indefinable” (p. 72). “We are all mortal”, she argues, “and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance. These are true aspects in which all men are brothers” (p. 72). She also links goodness with the virtue of humility. “The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue and its unique value and the endless extent of its demand” (p. 101). Murdoch considers that the very ‘indefinability’ of Good is connected with what she calls the pointlessness of virtue: “In this respect there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and

Chance. A genuine sense of morality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth..." (p. 96). Again, she brings our thoughts back to literature:

The great deaths of literature are few, but they show us with an exemplary clarity the way in which art invigorates us by a juxtaposition almost an identification of pointlessness and value. (p. 85)

Murdoch employs a variety of Plato's metaphors (the sun, sight, vision, perception) to represent the idea of that which is Good: "In its light we see the things of the world in their true relationships" (p. 90). By this she means that although Plato's "sun" is far distant, we can still enjoy its effects, and, despite the distance, our world benefits from its heat and light. Similarly, the Good has a positive influence for our lives:

A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good. This is a mystery with several aspects. The indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue... Good is mysterious because of human frailty, because of the immense distance which is involved... And if we look outside the self we see scattered imitations of Good. There are few places where virtue plainly shines: great art, humble people who serve others. And can we, without improving ourselves, really see these things clearly? (pp. 96-97)

Goodness represents a standard of perfection that is transcendent and timeless. Murdoch understands from Plato that virtue is not something that can be explicitly taught, and nor is it innate in any individual. What is innate, in Plato's view, still requires help in order to form as virtue. Help is needed from the unconscious mind through attention. Only the cultivation of attention, and so of reflection, can bring about truly moral change, or can help an individual to become, in themselves, truly virtuous.

Murdoch reminds us that we may encounter aspects of the good only if we are truly able to look beyond ourselves, to see beyond our own limitations and relentlessly selfish cares, and she challenges us to recall ways in which we might be able to improve ourselves morally. Our mediocre inclinations may to some extent be checked through attention to the good—in Murdoch's terms by the apprehension of some "magnetic but inexhaustible reality" (p. 41). "There are", she insists, "few places where virtue plainly shines: great art, humble people who serve others. And can we, without improving ourselves, really see these things clearly" (p. 97).

Murdoch considers that morality and aesthetics are deeply inter-connected to the extent that they represent “two aspects of a single struggle” (Murdoch, pp. 39–40). Both morality and aesthetics invite contemplation and reflection, and both extend to considerations that reach beyond the limits of the self. In Murdoch’s view aesthetics, and especially literature, enlivens our capacity for understanding, and our capacity to develop a loving regard for others. She considers too, that artistic endeavours meaningfully direct our attention towards that which is good—towards that which moves us to love. Morality and aesthetics are inter-connected in their capacity to arouse an awareness of the reality of something other than the self—an awareness that is in Murdoch’s view, quintessentially that of giving love: “Art and morals are, with certain provisos...one...Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 215).

Murdoch, like Weil, sees that fostering attention enlarges our capacity for altruism. Murdoch considers that the more, and the more readily, we appreciate the separateness and difference of other people from ourselves, the more readily we recognise that another person has their own legitimate needs and wants, “the harder it becomes for us to treat another person as a thing” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 64). To apprehend a reality beyond our selves—which is the crux of the engagement with the arts and literature—when combined with the ability to see that there are various different ways of seeing things, fosters a more empathic and attentive attitude towards others.

Murdoch shows us how and why literature is a means of advancing both moral perception and a respect for the *otherness* of our human fellows. She argues that literature can address moral questions in ways that fulfil a separate but related purpose from that of philosophical analysis, and furthermore, that literature can reveal the world to us in ways that philosophy simply cannot: “If moral philosophy is the examination of the most important human activities” then art is “the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*” (p. 85).

Artistic disciplines, then, are essentially moral because of the way they engage our powers of attention. Literature describes and depicts human behaviour and may thereby provide guidance or insight into questions concerning moral growth and improvement. For instance, in literature, we see the details of a fictional individual’s thoughts, motivations, reactions, suppositions, etc., as well as the impacts and effects of their behaviour, in surprising

and remarkable detail. The very process of attending to literature establishes in the reader a focus towards something other than the self. “Aesthetic insight connects with moral insight, respect for things connects with respect for persons. (Education.)... (‘But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?’ Yes, roughly)” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 495).

Murdoch observes that while we may be able to relate to particular moments of selflessness attention, for example when absorbed in a scene of natural beauty, or when we master a piano piece fluently and without regard to the technical demands we have mastered, it is less clear how we might harness the power of these recognisable but incidental moments of selflessness into a more systematic approach. Murdoch’s recommendation in this regard is that we should look to aesthetics. She proposes that engagement with art and aesthetics (as well as intellectual study) not only advances our moral understanding, but can also help to make us better people. She proposes that through imaginative engagement with a literary artist’s crafted work, readers can confront, contemplate, and ideally widen their own experiences without those hair-trigger egotistical defence mechanisms coming into play.

In her view, fostering attention to art and aesthetics provides a path towards that which is good. Moral thinking and aspirations for moral improvement may be cultivated by way of literary encounters. This is not to suggest that in Murdoch’s view engagement with literature, or with art and aesthetics is to be viewed as specifically ‘educative’. On the contrary, Murdoch sees the primary aim of aesthetic appreciation to be the apprehension of beauty and form. She considers that art and literature are promising places for our moral growth and progress precisely because through the arts we may readily detach ourselves imaginatively and un sentimentally, in ways that are broadening of our perspective: “It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 64).

2.4. *Aesthetic education*

Murdoch addresses herself to the question of what education is for, and what schools should teach. Her emphasis on the kind of teaching that most connects with the mind centres on inculcating powers of attention and bears markedly little resemblance to contemporary approaches:

Learning is moral progress because it is an asceticism, it diminishes our egotism and enlarges our conception of truth, it provides deeper, subtler and wiser visions

of the world. What should be taught in schools: to attend and get things right....To attend is to care, to learn is to desire to learn...evidence examples of education and teaching, where the 'intellectual' connects with the 'moral' and where apparently 'neutral' words naturally take on a glow of value. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 179)

Murdoch's view of education here aligns directly with that of Weil. The overarching purpose of education ought to be very much to instil the disposition to understand, the disposition to care and the disposition to persist.

In Murdoch's view, to learn anything properly has an important moral dimension, and therefore demands virtuous attention. "Any serious learning is a moral-spiritual activity" (p. 338). Her views on what should be emphasised in a formal education setting resonate with those of fellow philosopher, Weil. Both Murdoch and Weil consider that the first priority of formal education ought very much to be to emphasise attention and the inculcation of a desire to learn and to understand, to care and to persist. For Murdoch, learning anything properly has an important moral dimension, and it therefore demands virtuous attention. Murdoch's enquiry emphasises the agency of the learner and points to the ultimate or original importance of aesthetic sensibility—that is, the ability to appreciate beauty—as key to the ability to learn anything at all.

Murdoch considers that the capacity for attention can be inculcated even in very young children who, "if they are lucky, are invited to attend to pictures or objects, or listen quietly to music or stories and verses" (p. 3). She argues that children, even in the early years, can be guided to develop a sense of curiosity and exploration of the creative work of others, and, with adult help, they can be guided to attend closely say, to a painting, a dance, a story. They can be guided to pay attention to both the totality of the work and to the crafted fine details, and they can be invited to experience the work in an open-ended way. Even young children can learn to view a work of art respectfully, sympathetically and with a sense of curiosity and connection. In this way they may begin to develop the ability to be adept at reading and interpreting. Murdoch considers that fostering such attention or contemplation is itself moral education:

Children, if they are lucky, are invited to attend to pictures or objects, or listen quietly to music or stories or verses, and readily understand in what spirit they are to treat these apparently dissimilar things. They may also be encouraged to

contemplate works of nature, which are unlike works of art, yet also like them in being 'beautiful'. (p. 3)

Murdoch identifies several further pedagogical considerations that are in her view fundamental to the inculcation of attention. For Murdoch the good teacher is “one who teaches accuracy and truth” (p. 484). She underlines the importance of positive modelling and warns that “[t]he child...who is led by his observations to conclude that ‘Do not lie’ is part of an espionage system directed against himself, since the prohibition obviously means nothing to his elders, is being misled concerning the crucial position of truth in human life” (p. 385).

The effective teacher is not merely a neutral presence, since education involves challenge, forward momentum, the desire to improve and to progress in both an intellectual and a moral sense. In this regard, Murdoch sees the role of teacher that of being actively attentive and attuned, assisting students to discover new questions, to examine issues and events from different perspectives, and to value and respect the ideas, insights and achievements of others. Murdoch acknowledges the educative importance of listening, and questioning, whether ideas from the past, or of contemporary times. She observes that these moral concepts are grounded in daily experience. Just as the little child learns about nurturing through being cared for and loved and comes by this route to appreciate what it is to care for other people and things, so too does this child, through exposure to stories, learn to have feeling for the experience of others. Exposure to literature fosters, through the accomplishment of attention, an appreciation for the efforts of others, for works of art, for how to be valued by others and for how to value.

Murdoch is in no doubt that great aesthetic experiences can direct our minds to things which are worthwhile, and can teach us how to attend imaginatively to other persons with patience and love. She considers that the more these kinds of experiences are in our lives the better, since these experiences are likely to guide us well. Murdoch champions our capacity to discover, through the arts, the value of being able to “forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly” (p. 88). This is particularly so in our engagement with literature, where, she notes, “[w]e use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it” (p. 88).

Murdoch argues (as have other literary philosophers, including Nussbaum (1990, 1992), Palmer (1992), Roberts (2018), that reading literature can give us a unique connection to the world and that this connection can be a powerful source of moral improvement or edification. Murdoch recognises that reading such literature can assist us by, as it were,

showing us precisely those otherwise unobservable inward mental happenings, those moral dilemmas, dramas and perplexities of fellow persons, and by our intellectually coming to terms with these, to enable a context in which development of our moral selves may best occur:

We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which may be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which any of us are capable of contemplating it at all. Art transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer. It is a kind of goodness by proxy. (Murdoch, 2014, pp. 84–5)

Murdoch considers that aesthetic experiences that call for attentiveness and contemplation such as reading literature, provide us with meaning because they offer us a sense of there being some greater unity to the world. She considers that the human mind innately seeks out such coherence, and that this is why the unity of artistic works can offer such a reassuring sense of congruence in the world (p. 51). She quotes Plato's comment in *Republic* (VII, 532) "that 'the *technai* have the power to lead the best part of the soul to the view of what is most excellent in reality'. This well describes the role of great art as an educator and revealer" (p. 63). Earlier in the same essay she underlines the view that "reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity" (p. 56).

Murdoch is interested in the way that ideas work on and challenge the mind. She considers that not to shy away from, but rather to seek out and be challenged by ideas is crucial for acquiring virtue. Murdoch quotes from a passage near the end of Plato's *Meno* to emphasise this point:

I cannot swear to everything I have said in this argument—but one thing I am ready to fight for in word and deed, that we shall be better, braver and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we do not know, than if we think we cannot discover it and have no duty to seek it. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 180)

Within that same dialogue, the slave boy's 'remembrance' (anamnesis) "comes as the reward of a sort of morally disciplined attention" (p. 23). The slave boy "is orientating himself towards, bringing his attention to bear upon, something dark and alien, on which the light then falls, and which he 'makes his own'" (p. 400). The slave boy, who is his master's

possession, nevertheless now has something that is his own, and that cannot be taken from him.

Murdoch does not have a specific definition of the good, asserting rather that the good can be found in everyday life: “There is not a complicated secret doctrine” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 74). Further, that which is good has nothing to do with intention or purpose—in fact for Murdoch the good specifically excludes the idea of purpose. Murdoch’s notion of good is entirely impersonal:

The only genuine way to be good is to be good ‘for nothing’ in the midst of a scene where every ‘natural’ thing, including one’s own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That ‘for nothing’ is indeed the experienced correlate of the indivisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself. (pp. 69–70)

Murdoch admits that her Platonic notion of “good” is difficult—“both rare and hard to picture” (p. 51). She proposes that we may develop our capacity to discriminate that which is good only by our ongoing efforts to give attention. If we determine that a person is truly good, “we are led also to reflect on his states of consciousness, his capacity for recollection, for reflection, for *attention*, for the deep intuitive syntheses of moral vision” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 378.) She contends that we only encounter aspects of the good if we are able to look beyond ourselves, “turn our attention away from the particular”, (Murdoch, 2014, p. 99), from the “avaricious tentacles of the self”, (p. 101), in order to look beyond our individual limitations and relentlessly selfish cares.

Murdoch’s attention has connections to wider questions of objectivity, goodness and virtue, although she acknowledges that “clarity of thought and purity of attention becomes harder and more ambiguous when the object of attention is something moral” (p. 68). Murdoch aligns attention with moral sensibility, and explains that morality has a continuous forward momentum, and as such, is “essentially connected with change and progress” (p. 28). She argues, not unlike Weil, that since we are human historical individuals, the trajectory of our moral understanding is naturally “onward into increasing privacy, in the direction of the ideal limit and not backwards towards a genesis in the rulings of an impersonal public language” (p. 28). Murdoch also describes her notion of attention as “human consciousness at its most highly textured” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 419).

As we saw in the previous section, Murdoch argues that evidence of the Good can come in the form of great art: “Great art inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing, it is

for itself. It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified, presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex” (p. 8). Furthermore, “Goodness is needful, one has to be good, for nothing, for immediate and obvious reasons, because somebody is hungry or somebody is crying” (Murdoch 1997, p. 233.) Murdoch shows us that there is much to be learned both from connecting with works of art that are the product of attention, and from recognising the important ways in which engagement with the arts cultivates our powers of attention. Both art and morality call for “imaginative cognitive activity” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 341).

2.5. *Reading and ‘unselfing’*

Murdoch’s argument for the integral connection between reading literature and moral progress rests on her claim that attention to literature cultivates moral perception and that literary enactments can enable us to see the world “as it really is”. She considers that we are improved by the mental work that attentive reading calls for—not in the colloquial sense of ‘self-improvement’, but in the deeper and more difficult moral sense of engaging in the virtue of ‘unselfing’ (Murdoch, 2014, p. 82)—a concept that is related to Weil’s concept of “de-creation”. Murdoch argues that reading novels redirects our attention away from the self and outwards, towards others, towards some greater unity. Literature thus provides intrinsically beneficial moral value. Attentive reading helps us to “unself”—by which Murdoch means it enables us to better envisage our life as a shared or collective, rather than seeing it as an utterly self-bound experience. She proposes that literature can cultivate our moral sensibility and help us move beyond self-preoccupation, and further, that “anything which alters consciousness in the direction of “unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue” (p. 82).

Murdoch considers that the more we have imaginative reading experiences in our lives the better, since such learning lays down in us not only habits to exercise our imagination, but that when literature calls up in us ways to see how reason and insight and humility guide thinking, this can also inform our capacity for right judgment in situations beyond the world of fiction:

There is nothing odd or mystical about this, nor about the fact that our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention. (p. 55)

As Murdoch insists, “the novel form more frankly admits, indeed embraces, the instability of art and the invincible variety, contingency, and scarcely communicable frightfulness of life” (p. 96). The novelist, as does the teacher, enables the receiver by reading the literary work, to recognize, interpret, conclude, and to discriminate evaluatively among interpretations and between different possible readings. Murdoch also suggests that in the very best literary examples, the reader is provided with an example view of what it might be to live a truly principled life.

Murdoch argues repeatedly that the world of literature is educative since it provides a continuity of experience that connects us with others. Although reading literature may, to a non-reader, appear a solitary, silent and inwardly-focused pursuit, it is, paradoxically, an activity that fundamentally connects the reader, through imagination, with the wider world of humanity. This experience can be energizing and can increase our ability to exercise control over our own lived experience. “Art then is not a diversion or a side-issue, it is the most educative of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*” (p. 85).

Murdoch draws on the Platonic notion that we all possess deep within our individual selves much that originally connects us all together, so that the sense that that each of us has of our own sense of self, of authenticity, and that constitutes our sense of separateness and uniqueness, at the same time purposes us to mutuality. We could not be selves at all without more originally than this being fellows, or thus without belonging to a society. Murdoch is aware of appreciable contrast between the complexity of our individual experience, and the neatness and unity of the artist’s fully formed work of art, and she considers that that difference recommends all the more highly that we should develop ourselves morally through the reading of literary art.

Art and literature represent a rich site for moral thinking, according to Murdoch, because they condense and clarify the world for us in particular ways. Art directs our attention towards particular and specific details of experience: “Art illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 8). She argues that finely crafted literature can give form to aspects of human experience in ways that are cognitively deeply satisfying. These are points that Boyd (2009) also develops, in his argument that story-making fulfils a very deep human need.

While Murdoch defends the aesthetic value of literature by arguing that literature has a broadly educative role in enhancing moral perception and developing unselfish, loving attention. She considers literature to be neither *overtly* morally instructive nor limited to a narrowly didactic or educative function. (See further Murdoch, 1997, p. 218). Rather, she argues, attention to literature cultivates our capacity for relational thinking:

To say that the essence of art is love is not to say, is nothing to do with saying, that art is didactic or educational. . . . The level at which love works which is art is deeper than the level at which we deliberate concerning improvement. . . . the work of the great artists shows up ‘art for art’s sake’ as a flimsy frivolous doctrine. Art is for life’s sake, in the sense in which I have tried to indicate. Or else it is worthless. (p. 218)

In further consideration of why, in an age preoccupied with consumption, the aesthetic experience of reading actually matters, Murdoch observes that “great art teaches us how real things, and beautiful things, can be regarded and loved, quite without their needing to be being seized or appropriated” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 64). This idea also has obvious implications for human conduct in relation to matters of human morality.

Murdoch shows us that aesthetic experience is not simply incidental, but is integral to, our moral development. She defends the view that reading literature opens the door to finding a wider meaning—to themes that touch on wider or more fundamental truths about our subjective existence. She argues that reading literature is important because it connects us to an inner sense of self, one that is both mysterious and unique, one that possibly cannot be fully understood, and towards which humility is essential. It is from that inner self we find ourselves connected inescapably to others:

Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention. It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy.

Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can arm us against consolation and fantasy. (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 293–294)

Murdoch reminds us that great art, and especially great literature, is a medium for both education and enlightenment. To read attentively calls for and develops a disciplined, ready state of mind, one that is devoid of self-awareness and ready to apprehend beauty. To

give due attention to literature enables us to develop what Murdoch calls a “judicious respectful sensibility to something which is very like another organism” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 87). Literature’s power lies in its capacity to extend our experience of the world, for as art, it “pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond experience” (p. 86).

Attention to literature is instructive in the sense that it can lead to improved perception, deeper interpretation, a more informed and loving understanding of others. Attentive reading draws us out of our default state of being utterly self-preoccupied. In the literary examples that Murdoch holds in the highest regard (nineteenth century literature), characters navigate their way through situations of moral ambiguity and challenge. Both during and after reading, readers need to take time to reflect, to ponder and withhold hasty judgment, to bestow Murdoch’s gentle regard for each character’s situation.

Murdoch considers that the study of literature is the ideal site for developing our moral imagination and moral sense precisely because literary engagement engenders the capacity for a ‘patient, loving regard’ of others. In this regard Murdoch rates literature ahead of other modes of aesthetic experience. In her view, literature is the most interesting of the arts, since it offers unique possibilities for intellectual and cultural insight: “We read great novels with all our knowledge of life engaged, the experience is cognitive and moral in the highest degree” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 97).

Our experiences of art and literature, Murdoch argues, can satisfy a human yearning for coherence and unity, and thus art and literature can be educative and morally instructive in relation to the most important values in life. “Art indeed, so far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the centre to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return” (Murdoch, 2014, pp. 71–2). Murdoch also suggests that by way of the best literary examples, the reader is drawn into a deeper understanding of what a morally principled life might amount to.

2.6. *Reading as “embodied attentiveness”*

Murdoch argues that literature is a vital site for moral learning, declaring that “life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 27). Murdoch considers that the literary novel (she is particularly interested in novels of the nineteenth century) is in a sense ethically educative because of the way it portrays human situations, and because of what it elicits from, and what it to, the reader. When we read literary fiction, we

can respond to the fictional characters as if they were real people confronted with real moral dilemmas and questions, even while knowing that those “made up” characters are contending with fictionally-created situations. As Felski (2015, p. 176), notes, “reading...is not just a cognitive activity but an embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, registering, and engaging.”

Through attentive reading, we not only learn about the lives of others, but we are also ourselves potentially changed by our reading experience. When we read we forge a kind of fellowship with the writer. We “sit with” and attend to the writer’s text, we accept it, tolerate it, follow its lead, even if we sometimes also question its directions. We cannot give our reading only partial attention, but must attend fully. Literary reading draws us into an imagined realm that is beyond the limitations of our own sense of self, or rather, that extends that self. Reading enables us to give *cognizance* to, and *re-cognize* in new ways—to develop insight, to cultivate reflective thought.

Murdoch insists that attention to the arts generally, and to literature in particular, can satisfy and assist us by informing those innate curiosities, and, as it were, revealing precisely those otherwise private mental happenings (as in the narrative about M and D). We encounter the world of fiction in a way that we could never experience the actual world, and our moral understanding may be enhanced by the experience. Murdoch argues repeatedly that the world of literature is rewarding since it provides us with a continuity of experience that connects us to the lives of others.

Murdoch invokes the image of an artist, possibly a writer, who is deeply engaged with a thinking task. This person is held in attention as if waiting for or experiencing some sort of revelation:

The artist or thinker concentrates on the problem, grasps it as a problem with some degree of clarity, and waits. Something is apprehended as *there* which is not yet *known*. Then something comes; as we sometimes say from the unconscious. It comes to us out of the dark of non-being, as a reward for loving attention.

(Murdoch, 1992, p. 505)

Literature, both in the way it is crafted, and in the manner in which it is recreated imaginatively by the reader, emblemizes how a clear vision is achieved—by way of attention.

In Murdoch's view, "good art" provides us with sources of wonder that are so moving that our sense of our own selfish self is literally "usurped". She considers that works of literature, if of the right quality, can draw us out of ourselves and provoke us to energetic and selfless thought: "We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all" (Murdoch, 2014, pp. 84–85). Engagement with such humanly created works invites us to step outside of the self, and to detach ourselves in a way that can energise and disarm us—and in this way be truly 'educative'. Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita (1991) expresses a similar view when he argues that literary descriptions of moral actions model and reveal to us useful ways of reflection:

Descriptions of actions and character through which we explore our sense of what we have done and what we are, of what is fine and what is tawdry, of what is shallow and what is deep, of what is noble and what is base, and so on, are not merely descriptions of convenience. (p. 40)

Literature vitally enhances reflective capabilities for attention such that the reader is able to draw his or her own original insights and lay claim to particular moral values that are truly their own. Reading literature animates and enlivens a sense of *actual* experience, which can then enable readers to gain knowledge about the world, about themselves, and even about the sort of persons they would most value being or becoming. Murdoch reminds us that literature draws us in by calling attention to the very way it unfolds and develops, and that literature insists on its own presence—and thus that reading literature, far from being a form of withdrawal or escapism, draws us into the very texture of experience. Attention to literature literally 'opens our eyes' to the world.

When we take up a work of literary fiction, we do not hope for some simple "take-home message". Our expectation could never be so simple or shallow, given that the undertaking is large, and we must commit to investing into the work very appreciable time, emotion and cognitive attention. As readers, we tacitly agree that there is something worthwhile beyond ourselves in this activity. While we are reading, our awareness, regard, and consideration of, fictional others is engaged. In the act of reading we are drawn out of ourselves and into a realm where we can encounter and contemplate a view of the world that we might not otherwise experience in our ordinary everyday life.

While Murdoch identifies examples of what she considers to be truly great literature and names various literary artists whose works she considers exemplary, she also observes that a “great deal of art, perhaps most art, actually is self-consoling fantasy” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 83). Murdoch’s recommendation of what constitutes truly great literature could be contested on various counts. Her nominated authors and titles include only a handful of names and only those from the western literary tradition. Some might disagree with her judgement that Tolstoi [Murdoch’s spelling] did not manage greatness in *The Death of Ivan Illych*, or her judgement that *King Lear* is Shakespeare’s greatest play. Many would consider that seeking to make a determination of what constitutes literary greatness is by no means straightforward. Murdoch would herself have been aware that to instantiate particular titles or authors is to provoke challenge. But it is not Murdoch’s wont to provide a definitive checklist of literary greatness any more than it her wont to provide a specific, definitive account of goodness. Rather, her purpose is to instantiate examples of literary works that elicit and foster the reader’s moral attention.

The effort to engage attentively with literature serves to silence and annihilate the self. To silence and annihilate the self is necessary in order to attain an objective point of view, just as philosopher Nagel in *The view from nowhere* (1986), calls objectivity “the view from nowhere”, or a “centreless view.” In his introduction, Nagel grants the existence of what he calls “conflicts between the [objective and subjective] standpoints and the discomfort caused by obstacles to their integration.” He observes that “certain forms of perplexity for example, about freedom, knowledge, and the meaning of life seem to me to embody more insight than any of the supposed solutions to these problems” (Nagel, 1986, p. 4).

In this way, we can see that the experience of reading literary fiction is instructive of what it even is to know. The effort of engaging attentively with literature may be entertaining, morally inspiring and broadly pedagogical all at the same time—a reminder of the uniqueness and otherness of all persons, and this reminder may ultimately help to bring us face-to-face with our own potentially deeply flawed assumptions about what it is to be a person. Through the attentive reading of literature we are made aware of a reality other than our own. The virtue of reading lies in the way we are caught up in attending, in seeking to understand, to make sense, and waiting to see rather than hastening to make an uninformed judgement.

The reader of literature experiences the world vicariously but nevertheless with full imaginative engagement. The reader is both engaged, and also distanced from, what is

presented. Through reading fiction, readers' eyes are opened to other lives, other ways of being. They witness characters' belief systems under strain, they see the tensions that arise from decision and consequences, as well as from chance, they see different ways in which characters' think, process, reflect, respond, interpret and redefine experience, and how they advance thought as they cast about for their best next steps. Readers see the consequences of choices being played out in detail. In all these ways, novels are morally instructive. "How is truthfulness tested? How is memory tested? By consequences!" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 276).

Murdoch points to the way that art is doubly created—initially by the literary artist, and subsequently, through imagination, by the reader. Murdoch considers that these "imaginative and intellectual activities may be said to be the point or essence of art" (pp. 2–3):

Art illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us. It creates an authoritative public human world, a treasury of past experience, it preserves the past. Art makes places and open spaces for reflection, it is a defence against materialism and against pseudo-scientific attitudes to life. It calms and invigorates, it gives us energy by unifying, possibly by purifying, our feelings. In enjoying great art we experience a clarification and concentration and perfection of our own consciousness. Emotion and intellect are unified into a limited whole... [Art] inspires intuitions of ideal form and symbolic unity which enables us to cooperate with the artist and to be, as we enjoy the work, artists ourselves. (p. 8)

2.7. *Summary*

Murdoch shows us that the concept of attention is fundamental to our capacity to learn and to grow, and that the quality of attention that is called for in the imaginative engagement with a literary text gives us insight into the way that attention links to our capacity to learn anything at all. Attention to reading prose literature can afford us a unique connection to the world, and as a result, it can be a powerful and personal source not only for our moral learning but also and still more deeply, for learning what it even is to come to know.

Over against certain threats to taking value seriously in times that vaunt algorithmic reduction and logical analysis, and that have displaced spirituality by secularism, Murdoch defends the idea of the objective value of the good. Beauty signals no state of the beholder,

but signals rather a call to selflessness. Murdoch reminds us that matters such as knowledge, friendship, and aesthetic appreciation of beauty all have intrinsic value, value of a kind that is prior to selfhood of any kind, not simply of value because egoistically we desire or want to have them.

Murdoch argues that human morality is grounded in our relations with other people, and that morality lies in the specific ways that we interact—seeking to treat others as we would want to be treated, to respect, enjoy and be “uplifted” by the aesthetic achievements of others, to be inspired to work towards a better version of our individual self. She acknowledges that human self-interest is a powerful de-motivating force, and that humankind is naturally inclined not only to look to improve conditions for the individual even at the expense of the community but even, to applaud such behaviour in others as legitimate.

Murdoch’s view of the usefulness of literature, not in an instructive sense, but as a stimulus for thinking, brings us to the theme of the place of literature in education. Murdoch reminds us of the aesthetic and moral power of literature as a site for moral learning, and this reminder leads us to consider the place and value of literature in contemporary education. It seems that the contemporary view of the value of literature is one that is at best ambivalent. Murdoch provides a compelling argument for placing a greater, rather than a lesser, emphasis on the virtue and value of reading literature in our schools and in our lives.

Murdoch reminds us of the enriching opportunities that literature affords. Yet at the present time in human history her thesis is likely to be unappealing on at least several counts. In the first place, her support for a quasi-spiritual moral life and her emphasis on the moral virtues of truthfulness, goodness and morality are out of step with the cultural priorities our secular and largely cynical age. Secondly, Murdoch’s argument in favour of the patient and attentive reading of literary texts is likely to be considered anachronistic at a time when people are hard pressed to find time for any reading at all beyond what can be accessed on their smart phone, and at a time when the term ‘text’ has itself come to be understood as a truncated cell phone message or “tweet” of not more than 140 characters.

Murdoch’s overall argument is that cognitive attention to crafted literature can play a fundamental role in supporting moral growth and development. The fact that she turned from her career as a philosopher to dedicate her life to full-time novel writing reflects Murdoch’s conviction regarding the importance of literature. She shows us that reading literature is deeply rooted to our capacity to be enlarged intellectually and morally, and so the

very practice of imaginative reading engages, exercises and improves what is fundamental to learning itself. Through reading, the reader cognitively “realizes” (i.e. makes real) the text, in a way that is equivalent to, though not the same as, living the experience in the real world.

In the following four chapters, Weil and Murdoch’s theoretical concept of attention is applied to four separate literary works. These four case studies seek to exemplify, through detailed literary interpretation, the ways that the concept of attention as a notion that has both aesthetic and moral power, is played out in four, quite different and distinctive, literary works. These four chapters offer reflections on the ways that literature can be both aesthetically unified and morally instructive, and can turn the gaze way from self. These four works provide opportunity to “stretch the imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgement” (Murdoch, 2014, pp. 87–88).

In the immediately following chapter, the notion of attention is interpreted by a fictional teacher, the main character in Muriel Spark’s 1961 novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. This novel centres on a singular, somewhat maverick educator who delivers powerfully effective teaching from within her own classroom. Brodie ensures that her students are not restricted to learning from within those four walls, and regularly leads her class out, both into the school gardens and to the city beyond the school gates. She attends to each of her students and to their intellectual growth. She enlarges their appreciation of the world, and provides them with a challenging, varied and open-ended curriculum based on the arts. Above all, she inculcates their powers of attention. Spark’s Jean Brodie is an independent classroom teacher who is a vital, inspirational and provocative figure in the lives of her students.

Chapter 3: Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

3.0. Introduction

Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) is her best-known and most celebrated novel. It brought the then 43-year-old Scottish author Spark (1918–2006) into the literary limelight internationally. The novel, her sixth, is now considered one of the 100 top English-language books of the 20th century, and it has been adapted for both theatre and screen. Some other work of Spark's also qualify her as a thinker who is vitally concerned about education and self-authorship.

Educational themes and minor educational figures appear in various of her works, including *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) and *The Driver's Seat* (1970). Her final novel, *The Finishing School* (2004), which is in part a study in creative jealousy and narcissism, may also be read as an incisive and biting prescient satire on 21st-century education priorities. Yet, educationists and philosophers of education have to date scarcely paid to Spark's work the scrutiny that is owed to it in that quarter. In order to redress this matter, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is the focus of the present chapter.

To date, little has been written on the pedagogical themes within Spark's writing, and in particular, on Spark's exploration of attention and its educative power. Spark's life was significantly contemporaneous with the lives of French philosopher and teacher Simone Weil (1909-1943) and Anglo-Irish philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), both of whom concerned themselves very much with how one thinks and how one learns from life. Weil and Murdoch, inspired by Plato, concern themselves with how one thinks and how one grows intellectually and morally. Attention is a pivotal concept in their philosophies. To argue that this concept is pivotal as well in Muriel Spark's sixth and most famous novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, is the purpose of the current chapter.

Set in a conservative school for girls in Edinburgh in the 1930s, Spark's novel both provokes reflection and piques debate about the values underlying education, as well as about the methods and substance of pedagogy. The power of the book to shock has waxed and waned and arguably waxed again across the decades. Courageously, Spark charges the attentive readers of this book the task of interpreting what its message about ideals and realities in education might best be made out to be. Like Miss Brodie herself, Spark expects us, her charges, to think for ourselves, and she does not protect us from issues to think

through that are complex and debatable. It is this approach of Spark's, together with the message of her book as I interpret it, that bear further investigation in the present day.

This chapter considers parallels in the evident intellection of Spark and that of her two fellow female philosophers. In so doing the chapter considers Spark herself as likewise a philosopher, specifically as a fellow moral philosopher and a fellow philosopher of education. This chapter argues that Spark's signal concern in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* seems to have been to accentuate the place for attention in pedagogy. It seeks to show that Brodie's teacher-led classroom, where the faculty of attention is central, is a site of richly meaningful, even transformational learning. The first section provides some contextual information about the novel. The second discusses Spark's cultivation of attention in her readers and considers some of the key features of the novel. This is followed by a more focussed examination of Spark's text in relation to Weil's and Murdoch's concept of attention. The final section explores some of the broader educational implications of Spark's novel in relation to the pedagogical notion of attention.

3.1. *The primacy of attention*

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie chronicles the experiences of a group of schoolgirls under the tutelage of their memorable and extraordinarily compelling, while simultaneously controversial, teacher. Brodie is a redoubtable, if also maverick teacher—someone who is personally committed to shape and influence the young girls in her charge, to whom she attributes elite status, describing them extravagantly as “the crème de la crème” (Spark, 1961, p. 8). Brodie's morally ambiguous mantra is “give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life” (p. 9).

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie develops and continues motifs that are evident in Spark's other novels—the strangeness of life, the importance (and unreliability) of memory and recollection, the significance of noticing, as well as issues of influence and authority. These motifs, while present in other of her novels—*Memento Mori*, *The Finishing School*, are particularly to the forefront in this novel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is to a great extent a study of the opportunities of education as well as of the forces that impel learners towards mere conformity that threaten to extinguish those very opportunities. It is biting in its critique of rules, rigidity, Establishment culture, and potential straight-jacketing of minds by school examination systems. At the same time, the novel shows, through the efforts and iconoclasm of Brodie, an education for young teenagers that is rich in intellectual and cultural challenge.

The uptake of literary heritage is made out to bear the best pedagogical fruits. Thus is the cultivation of imagination extolled. Spark foregrounds the educational virtues of application and discipline. She portrays an education that, above all, fosters and develops that faculty of attention.

Spark's novel critiques the common misunderstanding of education as a 'putting in' of knowledge. Brodie herself points out that literal meaning of the Latin '*educare*' is a 'leading out' not a 'putting in'. As will be discussed in a subsequent section, Brodie's teaching approach is very much that of widening her girls' horizons both literally and metaphorically. Spark draws on Platonic themes: to be a thinking person is to be able to reflect independently and for oneself, but at the same time to be able to draw upwards and away from the plane of mere personal opinion or conviction. A person needs other persons if he or she is to progress thought, for thought is progressed through dialectic, and a person's community with others is partly from being a fellow discussant with others. Dialectical progress is possible not only by the intellectual jousting of Socrates, the ancient Greek male intellectual hero and his young male interlocutors, but equally by an inspired school mistress through her stimulating teaching of girls.

Exactly as Plato's Socrates becomes a martyr for the cause of reason, so does Spark's Brodie become a martyr for the cause of a somewhat related ideal or quality. Brodie becomes a martyr for the cause of cultivating in her girls the capacity for attention. Socrates loses his very life, and Brodie suffers her own fate: she is caused to exit from her prime. Her employment as teacher is terminated. The possibility of her own continued iconoclasm is thereby snuffed out. Yet Brodie conditions deeply how, forever more, her selected students will understand themselves. She remains with them in their thoughts and in their characters and dispositions for independent reflection and debate for all the rest of their lives. Each girl makes of herself something different, and not every girl makes of herself what might be best, but Brodie's aspiration for each of them—that they should be self-determining—affects them and stays with them all enduringly.

First published over half a century ago, Spark's novel provokes reflection and debate about the values underlying education as well as about the methods and substance of pedagogy. Like Brodie herself, Spark expects us, her charges, to think for ourselves, and she does not protect us from issues to think through that are complex and debatable. Spark's work *nurtures* attention in the sense of this word that has been developed fully by Weil and Murdoch, just as Spark's work also *portrays* attention in this sense as vital to true pedagogy.

Attention thus understood is something active, yet at the same time something not willed—something that is emptied of any direct expression of the ego. Attention frees students to grasp some new thing that (should they reflect at all back upon their grasping of it), they will recognise, with ready humility, is far larger than themselves.

According to the view promulgated by Weil and Murdoch and taken up and amplified by Spark, nothing will render one's life truly worthy to have been lived if one is incapable of attention—that is to say, if one's ego is forever to the fore. Attention emblematises the connection that there is between true respect for others and true self-respect. Brodie nurtures her students' capacity to be attentive, to think for themselves, with self-respect. The effect is, in the fullness of its development, not for Brodie alone to determine, for attention both engages the thinking spirit of her students and also emboldens that spirit. Further, while any two people who read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are liable to debate it, in this very debate they aim towards worth in their way of thinking, as well as towards worth in their way of expressing what they think. They aim in short towards what is higher than any individual self. This is Spark's accomplishment, even if no two such debates are the same and Spark could not have anticipated their every form or character.

Exploring philosophically the experience of being a classroom teacher, Spark's novel not only challenges Establishment ideas of schooling and educational delivery, but ranges across themes of authority, truth, moral influence and moral ambiguity. By inviting as it does, philosophical reflection upon the very ideal for the teacher/pupil relationship, the novel causes its readers to attend to the limitations, as well as to the power, of charismatic instruction. It confronts us with the need to evaluate iconoclasm, to recognise its fatefulness, yet also acknowledge the value of its enduring expression. The novel also forthrightly concerns itself with issues of truth, goodness and beauty, as well as with the centrality of aesthetics and aesthetic appreciation for education. In particular, the novel explores the pedagogical notion that attention demands from the student exertion of his or her own agency, and is at the same time, indispensably the basis for truly developing the mind.

The group of young students who are directly under Brodie's influence include Sandy Stranger, a book lover with poor eyesight, and to whom Brodie attributes "insight". Mary Macgregor is careless, clumsy, inattentive, and impulsive, and she will die young. Rose Stanley, who is beautiful, is attributed with "instinct" and will later be famous for sex. Other students in the set include Eunice Gardner, adept at cartwheels, Monica Douglas, whose special acumen is mathematics, and Joyce Hammond (based by Spark upon the persona of

Weil), a delinquent outsider who will die trying to get to the Spanish Civil War. Spark's wider cast of characters includes various female teaching staff at Marcie Blaine school, including Miss MacKay, the school's stern and disapproving Headmistress, Miss Lockheart, the beloved science teacher, and the two sewing teachers (two elderly sisters who spend their time in class patiently reconstructing the girls' dismal sewing efforts). There are only two men on the staff, both of whom are said to be in love with Miss Brodie—Mr Gordon Lowther, the Music Master, and Mr Terry Lloyd, the one-armed Art Master.

Spark's novel is concise—a mere 128 pages in length. The early and middle parts of the work reveal Brodie's charisma, although they also contain faint hints of her guile as well, and there are occasional hints that Brodie's conduct is possibly morally questionable. We learn in Chapter Three of the lives and careers of the many single women living in Edinburgh in the 1930s, and how their lives are impacted by the loss of so many young men during 1914–1918. The novel also reveals details of the Brodie girls' adult lives, including Sandy's conversion to Catholicism and her entry to a convent. By the end of the novel we have pieced together various biographical details about the characters—Mary has died, Rose is married, Eunice is a nurse married to a doctor, Sandy, now Sister Helena, has published a religious treatise, and Brodie has died of cancer. These biographical details, however, are not allowed to eclipse, but are merely there to season or round out, the prevailing themes of the novel. These themes relate very centrally to attention and to individual self-authorship.

The primacy of *attention* in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is almost a pun. Brodie's prime is precisely contemporaneous with her being an arresting teacher, one who commands attention, instills the power of attention, and who speaks for the value of attention as yet without anyone's being able effectively to gainsay her. Brodie's personal prime terminates before the novel has finished, yet this further arrests the reader's attention onto attention itself and its value.

3.2. *Spark's cultivation of attention in her readers*

Brodie's ambitions to inculcate her girls as protégées, and the hints that she coerces and even manipulates them to implement her own plans and ambitions for them, are the seeds of her ultimate downfall. Her closest student, Sandy, is the very one to betray her to the school principal. In the course of her growing up, Sandy comes to the point where she can see the flaws in her teacher. When she considers her teacher in this new light, she suddenly sees something she had never previously considered—that Brodie is trying to make all of her

protégées into her own likeness (pp. 32–33). Sandy reasons out for herself the dangers inherent in Brodie’s call for her girls’ allegiance to her. It is only after many more years that Sandy is finally able to reconcile fully the nature and impact of Brodie’s teaching on her own life. In this, Sandy’s growth reflects the Platonic view of the intellect moving from uncritical acceptance to a more sophisticated and ultimately more enlightened understanding.

Spark is not the less courageous with respect to her readers than her creation Brodie is with the students at Brodie’s school. Stylistically and structurally, Spark’s text plays with the reader’s attention. Spark calls upon her readers to be constantly alert and to reflect constantly on what is known about what is revealed. While Brodie’s betrayal is disclosed early on in the novel, this proves not to be the central moment or the focal point around which the novel’s action revolves. Other, seemingly more trivial details, are, by repeated mention, themselves magnified and given much more importance. Importantly, the details of Brodie’s personality that are announced to the reader first, and which therefore take primacy in the reader’s mind in forming an overall impression of Brodie’s personality, are of her charm, her exhilarating influence on her girls, and her challenging interpretation of the role of the teacher and the meaning of education. While much of the novel in fact concerns the complexity (and perhaps the original or ultimate unknowability) of Brodie’s character, the impression of Brodie is established that she is an inspirational teacher, a mentor. S. E. Asch’s 1946 empirical study ‘Forming Impressions of Personality’, provides a detailed picture of the so called ‘primacy effect’ in relation to how impressions of personality are formed on the basis of first impressions. In line with Asch’s findings, the reader’s initial impressions of Brodie prevail even at the end of the novel, and despite all the deliberate ambiguity.

To be truly attentive when reading Spark’s novel is to ponder constantly just whose point of view is being given, and even whether or not ever to accept the veracity of the shifting narrative voice. Brodie’s direct command to her girls to “follow me” (p. 10) is ambiguous—does she mean that they are to follow her directly to the elm tree outside where they will have their lesson; is this a metaphorical command for the girls’ unflagging allegiance to their teacher; or is this a more general reaching out to her students, an invitation to each of them, to explore the possibilities of the world as Brodie herself does, but for the determining by each of her own life.²⁶

²⁶ Anne Reynaud’s personal recollections of her own teacher, Simone Weil, include memories of lessons delivered outside “under the shade of a fine cedar tree.” Reynaud also recollects “the headmistress coming to

Spark's reader is required to attend in a particular and somewhat detached or open-ended fashion to the tale as it unfolds. The constant and deliberate disruptions to a commonplace narrative sequence require her reader to give full attention to the work. The novel is complex in design. It is meticulously constructed and calls for attentive and repeated reading. Displaced or fractured time sequences and overlaid events are so prevalent that initially the novel appears disordered. Discernment of the structure itself of the narrative is difficult when there are abrupt almost random-seeming changes in time or location. Key scenes and phrases are repeated, and we read comments or phrases that we sense we have already encountered some pages earlier, but we are not quite sure where. In this way our faith in our memory, and our ability to distinguish what is familiar from what is new, becomes unsettled. Our trust in what we are sure we remember is itself disturbed.

In the characters' relationships, too, there are similar ambiguities: characters' thoughts are elided, their identities are blurred, and role boundaries (especially those between teacher and pupil) are transgressed, to the point that ultimately, trust becomes complicity. It is frequently unclear who is speaking or whose point of view is being given—that of the character, or of the interpretative narrator. Unlike the third person (extra-diegetic) narrator of, for example, the novels of Jane Austen, who reliably takes the reader aside and gives dependable information as it were out of earshot of the remaining characters, Spark's (homodiegetic) narrator plays with the reader, suddenly revealing what would seem to be critical aspects of the plot completely out of the expected sequence.²⁷

While we are summarily told what happens to Brodie (that she is betrayed), yet we are given no supporting information to substantiate this allegation. At other times the narrator is playfully equivocal, even flippant. We are told of the Brodie girls' lack of knowledge of certain basic skills—skills that one might reasonably regard as fundamental to being educated, in a very glib fashion: “all of the Brodie set, save one, counted on its fingers, as had Miss Brodie, with accurate results, more or less” (Spark, 1961, p. 6). While these features of Spark's writing may initially appear haphazard, on closer inspection they are seen to be entirely purposeful and as well, to serve several important narrative functions. Similarly, the novel's linear chronology is interrupted by frequent dislocation, uncertainty and elision. Details of the plot are revealed as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle or random clues to an unsolved mystery, piece by

look for marks and positions which Simone Weil usually refused to give” (Weil, 1978, p. 24). These details may have inspired Muriel Spark's portrayal of Jean Brodie.

²⁷ David Lodge (1992, pp 151–173) offers detailed comparisons between Muriel Spark and Jane Austen.

piece, although these the author crafts so that they contribute in the end positively to the novel's overall coherence. Thus they function to illuminate in Jean Brodie someone who is complex—both genuinely good, but also quite able to cause harm or injury.

The novel's shifting point of view underlines the overall sense of uncertainty in the prose, and maybe serves as a reminder of the inter-subjectivity of selves, a theme that connects Spark's novel to the philosophical thinking of Murdoch. An example of this 'slippage' of viewpoint involves Sandy's active engagement with her inner thoughts as she imagines herself in conversation with the main character of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*, while the class group is walking the streets of the Old Town (p. 32). On another occasion, Sandy becomes engaged in an intense inner dialogue with the Lady of Shalott while Brodie is reading Tennyson's poem aloud to the class. Such transfers of viewpoint underline for us the instability of the novel's narrative point of view. They also serve to remind us that thinking and attending are complicated processes, and that there are many things going on inside these young students' minds, while under the instruction of their teacher.²⁸

If we are truly attentive when reading Spark's novel, we will have cause to ponder constantly just whose point of view is being given, and whether or indeed ever to accept the narrative voice as fact. The novel's narrative point of view glides from one character to another, and only very rarely is Brodie's own voice definitely heard. There are times when the reader may wonder whether Brodie really is so dazzling. Can we even trust the narrator to give us an impartial view, or is the narrative view always being to some extent being filtered through the eyes of the younger girls? There are examples of literal ambiguity in the text, such as when Brodie admonishes her girls: "But Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me" (Spark, 1961, p. 10).

Ultimately, it is Sandy (the student on whom Brodie appears to have the strongest influence) who comes to suspect that Brodie deliberately embellishes the narratives that Brodie relates to her class that are purportedly true accounts of Brodie's travels and romances. Once Sandy suspects that Brodie crafts and embroiders her stories, Sandy finds herself torn, "fascinated by this method of making patterns with facts" and "divided between her admiration for the technique and the pressing need to prove Miss Brodie guilty of misconduct" (p. 72). Similarly Spark's reader is torn between a fascination with Brodie's

²⁸ Such matters form the central core of Graeme Nuttall's 2007 empirical study of New Zealand student classroom behaviour, *The Hidden Lives of Learners*.

seeming innocence, and a growing uneasiness about the inherent recklessness of Brodie's conduct.

There is another and more primary function that these disruptions serve also, and this pertains to the reader. Because the reader's narrative expectations are so regularly undercut, Spark's reader is required to attend in a particular and somewhat detached or open-minded fashion to the tale that unfolds. The constant and deliberate disruptions to a commonplace narrative sequence require the reader to give full attention to the work. Otherwise they might miss an important detail or be diverted from the path to proper understanding. The fractured time structure of this novel also serves as a reminder that this is a piece of crafted fiction, as well perhaps, as a reminder of the somewhat fractured and chaotic way that we experience the real world. As in life, some details of the story are immediately clarified, while other aspects or motivations are only revealed in time, or remain forever mysterious or unknown.

Although we learn relatively early that Mary McGregor is killed in a hotel fire, that Sandy becomes a cloistered nun, and that Brodie is betrayed, what takes much longer to be revealed is the precise nature and significance of each of these events. Spark's readers are essentially invited to draw their own conclusions about the ideas being expressed in the work, and not necessarily to agree with everything that the narrative voice presents as 'fact'. Spark enables us as her readers (and also in a sense as pupils of Brodie), to take any view we want, or even to hold contradictory views. As readers we are constantly given alternatives for authentic deliberation about the interpretations being given.

To some extent *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* can be seen as a *Bildungsroman*, a moral tale about emergent adulthood, as well as a nostalgic reflection on the best of school days. We see Brodie's students as it were simultaneously—both as a group of awkward, impressionable pre-teens who have not yet discovered their individual potential, and as mature, individual grown-ups living out their fully-fledged adult lives. As pre-teens the Brodie girls are captivated by their teacher's seeming magnificence and they are held in thrall to her stories of her romantic exploits. It is noticeable that Brodie has the most persuasive power over her girls when they are around age ten, before they reach womanhood and start to discover their own individual identity and power. Later, the girls' loyalties are significantly altered: "...now they were all fifteen there was a lot they did not tell each other" (p. 101).

At the opening of the novel, Brodie's girls are at a developmental stage where we might expect that they would benefit from having a relationship with their own classroom

teacher, someone who gives them a clear sense of their own moral and personal identity. Yet Spark seems deliberately to make debatable the value to the girls of their association with their teacher. A one-sided picture of obvious benefit would be a telling to readers of what they should think. Only by leaving debatable the central question of whether or not Brodie is a benefit can the educative value of attention itself become manifest via the novel.

University educated and financially independent, Brodie has wide interests and travels extensively to Europe and the East during the school's summer breaks. As a woman of independent means, and one dedicated to the education of girls, Brodie's purpose calls to mind the educational aspirations that are expressed by Virginia Woolf in her 1928 treatise *A Room of One's Own*. Brodie is a stickler for independent thought: she regularly deviates from the required curriculum, and she never allows her own teaching to be constrained by the limitations of the school's rigid timetable. Brodie is a maverick who resists accountability based on strict adherence to the rules. Her stated educational mission is to challenge the minds of her young charges to whom she constantly implores that they must discover the best use of their minds that they are capable of as the way to reach their highest potential.

Brodie is spirited and independent-minded. She declares that she has little time for unreflective collective opinion. She separates herself both physically and socially from the other teachers on the staff, whom she dismisses as narrow-minded, compliant and fixed thinkers:

Outwardly she differed from the rest of the teaching staff in that she was still in a state of fluctuating development, whereas they had only too understandably not trusted themselves to change their minds, particularly on ethical questions, after the age of twenty. There was nothing Miss Brodie could not yet learn, she boasted of it. (Spark, 1961, p. 43)

Brodie, however, appears capable of a certain fixity of thinking of her own. When we look closely at Brodie's classroom teaching techniques, it is evident that she can be unduly assertive and demanding. She appears to require her students to hold views that confirm Brodie's own tastes and attitudes and so she insists to the class that Giotto is the greatest Italian painter because "he is my favourite" (p. 11). (Curiously, Weil in *Gravity and Grace*, 1997 p. 49, Weil herself singles out Giotto's frescoes as art of the highest order, never to be sullied or thought poorly of. Weil's praise of Giotto is, however, far less dogmatic and personal than Brodie's, and is given in support of Giotto's art's uplifting qualities.) Moreover, Brodie's

treatment of Mary Macgregor is highly questionable. Acquiescent and biddable, Mary is an easy target for her teacher's frustration, and she is at times treated as a scapegoat. The narrator is unconscionably belittling of Mary, as in the following description taken from the end of Chapter One:

Mary McGregor, lumpy, with merely two eyes, a nose and a mouth like a snowman, who was later famous for being stupid and always to blame and who at the age of twenty-three, lost her life in a hotel fire, ventured "Golden". (Spark, 1961, pp. 13–14)

This account, while expressed through the words of the narrator rather than of Brodie herself, are nevertheless made to appear to be Brodie's own view.

Brodie does not wish for her girls' intellectual perspectives to be limited to a narrow range of academic offerings. She offers a culturally diverse education, and actively promotes the creative arts. Her students receive an education that is rich in literature and classical history. Brodie is fully committed to a project that will enlarge the intellectual horizons of her charges:

Meanwhile I follow my principles of education and give of my best in my prime. The word "education" comes from the root, *e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion, from the Latin root prefix *in* meaning in and the stem *trudo*, I thrust. Miss Mackay's method is to thrust a lot of information into the pupil's head; mine is a leading out of knowledge, and that is true education as is proved by the root meaning. Now Miss Mackay has accused me of putting ideas into my girls' heads, but the fact is that it is *her* practice and mine is quite the opposite. (pp. 36–37)

Following the Latin meaning of *educare* to the letter, Brodie leads her students out, both metaphorically and physically, into the world. She literally widens her girls' horizons. The class visit to the old town of Edinburgh is for one of her students the "first experience of a foreign country" (p. 32):

And many times throughout her life Sandy knew with a shock, when speaking to people whose childhood had been in Edinburgh, that there were other people's

Edinburghs quite different from hers...Similarly, there were other people's nineteen thirties. (p. 33)

While exploring the old city, Brodie's girls are exposed to what Brodie terms the "idle" as a way of underlining the virtues of intellectual attention and application:

A very long queue of men lined this part of the street. They were without collars, in shabby suits. They were talking and spitting and smoking little bits of cigarette held between middle finger and thumb. (p. 39)

Brodie's teaching philosophy of the 1930s reflects priorities for education that remain pertinent to this day. Brodie's class visit to the poorer parts of Edinburgh also underlines her method of teaching—by showing rather than telling, also a feature of Muriel Spark's craft as author of the novel. Indeed, this aspect of the novel's structure and design, where the reader's attention is called upon constantly to consider the aspects of both "showing" and "telling", is a central characteristic of the novel.

Brodie is an inspiring yet ambiguous figure. She is charming, witty, puzzling, even shocking. The young Brodie girls perceive her as mercurial, dynamic, ever changing. To their keen eyes she appears to change shape, sometimes seeming shapely and buxom, at other times as flat-chested as they are themselves:

Some days it seemed to Sandy that Miss Brodie's chest was flat, no bulges at all, but straight as her back. On other days her chest was breast-shaped and large, very noticeable...staring out of the window like Joan of Arc as she spoke. (p. 11)

To Sandy in particular, Brodie is entrancing: "She was really an exciting woman as a woman. Her eyes flashed, her nose arched proudly, her hair was still brown, and coiled matriarchally at the nape of her neck" (p. 116). To Sandy she is many things at once: "Miss Brodie as the leader of the set, Miss Brodie as a Roman matron, Miss Brodie as an educational reformer" (p. 111). Sandy has difficulty summing Brodie up: "She thinks she is Providence, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end. And Sandy thought too, the woman is an unconscious Lesbian" (p. 120). Thus a further open-ended question in the novel is the nature of Sandy's emotions towards Brodie. Does Sandy herself have nascent sexual feelings for Brodie? In Ancient Greece, the notions of *agape* and *eros* (spiritual and sensual love respectively), were considered acceptable and even beneficial features of a relationship between teacher and pupil, though this societal point of view was

carefully critiqued by Plato, whose Socrates has only students who are forever safe whether they wish to be or not from Socrates's acting out any sexual feelings. Similarly perhaps, Spark raises the inevitable questions, yet leaves them unexplored. (Wanitzec, 2012, discusses in detail the implied erotic subtext in the relationship between Sandy and Brodie, pp. 3–33.)

In subsequent years Sandy observes that Brodie appears slimmer, a slighter, smaller version of herself. And even later, when, a year after the war, Brodie meets with Sandy declares herself to be no longer in her prime, the former teacher appears diminished, huddled and reduced: “Miss Brodie sat shrivelled and betrayed in her long-preserved dark musquash coat. She had been retired before time. She said ‘I am past my prime’” (Spark, 1961, p. 56). In her own later years, Sandy wonders “to what extent it was Miss Brodie who had developed complications throughout the years, and to what extent it was her own concept of Miss Brodie that had changed” (p. 120).

Brodie the teacher is also very much also a student herself, keenly interested in her own formative development. She studies comparative religion part-time at the university and, in a curious (and contemporary) reversal of roles, arranges for two her former students to instruct her in Greek, which the girls are learning now that they are in the senior school. Under the tutelage of her two former students, Brodie makes some progress in Greek, “although she was somewhat muddled about the accents, being differently informed by Jenny and Sandy, who took turns to impart to her their weekly intake of the language (p. 82). Brodie assiduously reminds her girls that John Stuart Mill was similarly dedicated to his study of Greek. (Spark's biographer Stannard (1963, p. 22) reminds us that Spark herself had a passion for the writings of J. S. Mill, and especially for his translation of Plato's *Symposium*. (It is a matter of further minor interest that Spark's nineteenth novel, entitled *Symposium*, itself contains an epigraph from Plato's work.)

Platonic references in the novel are frequent. Towards the end of the school Easter Break, Jenny is accosted by a man “joyfully exposing himself” beside the Water of Leith (Spark, 1961, p. 66). Jenny runs away, startled but unharmed, and both Jenny's mother and the local woman policeman who becomes involved, advise her to forget the incident and not to talk about it further “and so they forgot the man by the Water of Leith” (p. 71). This scene relates to the themes of memory and concealment in Spark's novel. (In Greek, the literal meaning of the word ‘lethe’ is forgetfulness, oblivion and lost memories, and in Greek legend, the Lethe is a river in Hades whose waters cause forgetfulness.) Sandy later refers to this person as “a terrible beast”, a reference that brings to mind the great beast [of conformist

thinking] in Book 6 of Plato's *Republic*, also the subject of the chapter entitled "The Great Beast" in Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, p. 216.

The very idea of the inspiring teacher extends back as far as Ancient Greece. Socrates and his pupil Plato epitomise the ideal of the teacher and pupil relationship. (See further, Steiner, 2013, Chapter 4). While Brodie's relationship with her own pupils is Platonic, and while she insists that her love for Teddy Lloyd, the married Art teacher, with whom she shares an artistic temperament, remains Platonic, Brodie's ambitions for her students in this regard are less than clear.

It is revealed that Brodie considers Rose a suitable artist model for Lloyd, and further, that Sandy has a brief sexual affair with her former teacher, Lloyd. Sandy's motivations are not entirely clear—does she do this to usurp Rose's position, or perhaps to eclipse Lloyd's prevailing interest in Brodie? Whatever her motivation, Sandy is unsuccessful. Rose is shown to have little interest in Lloyd, and all of Lloyd's paintings continue, as before, to resemble Brodie. Sandy subsequently loses all interest in her former Art teacher, and shifts the focus of her attention from Lloyd to that of his religion, Catholicism:

By the end of the year it happened that she had quite lost interest in the man himself, but was deeply absorbed in his mind, from which she extracted, among other things, his religion as a pith from a husk. Her mind was as full of his religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible. She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time. (p. 123)

3.3. *Greek and Roman overtones*

The complex structure of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* brings with it a sense of inevitability. The novel is built around the literary device of prolepsis (also sometimes referred to as fast-forwarding or flash forward)—a structuring device by which a future event is treated as though it has already been accomplished. Brodie's betrayal, revealed almost at the opening of the work, is repeated several times throughout, although no details are given. By virtue of this, the novel unfolds simultaneously both as a puzzle to be solved and a prophecy to be fulfilled. As in the Greek story of Oedipus, the measures that are undertaken to prevent the prophecy (here Brodie's betrayal) from being fulfilled, are the very measures that ultimately bring about the tragedy. Brodie's ambitions to inculcate her girls as her protégées, and the hints that she coerces and even manipulates them to implement her own plans and ambitions

for them, are the seeds of her ultimate downfall. Her closest student, Sandy, is the very one to betray her to the school principal.

Further connections to Plato are found by way of references to Plato's *Republic*, particularly through the depiction of Sandy Stranger, with her small, blinking eyes—as if she is permanently in semi-darkness, unused to daylight and quite unable to see clearly. Brodie frequently admonishes Sandy for peering at people, and recommends that Sandy should get glasses: “I’ll swear you are short-sighted, the way you peer at people. You must get spectacles”(p. 107). The only time that Sandy (to whom Brodie attributes “insight”) seems to be able to see clearly, is when she is fully engaged with her fictional imaginings. When authoring or reading aloud her own fictional works (such as *The Mountains of Eyrie*), Sandy describes herself as having large brown, sparking eyes. In the course of her growing up to the point where she can see the flaws in her teacher, Sandy, like Plato’s released prisoner, comes to the realization that Brodie is trying to make all of her protégées into her likeness:

It occurred to Sandy...that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie’s fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along. That was all right, but it seemed, too, that Miss Brodie’s disapproval of the Girl Guides had jealousy in it, there was an inconsistency, a fault. (pp. 31–32)

Nevertheless, it is only after many more years that Sandy is finally able to reconcile fully the nature and impact of Brodie’s teaching on her life. At this point we may wonder if Sandy’s act of reporting Jean Brodie remains for Sandy in tension—both a necessary action and also a point of genuine contrition. Perhaps Sandy’s action is best understood not in terms of action or volition, but rather in terms of a kind of “necessity” that is linked to a particular kind of attention. Sandy’s gradual recovery from her action connects her realization of Jean Brodie’s influence to the novel’s key themes of educative influence and transformation:

It was twenty-five years before Sandy had so far recovered from a creeping vision of disorder that she could look back and recognise that Miss Brodie’s defective sense of self-criticism had not been without its beneficent and enlarging effects; by which time Sandy had already betrayed Miss Brodie and Miss Brodie was laid in her grave. (p. 86)

The title of Sister Helena’s “odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception” (p. 35)—*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*—suggests that over time, Sandy may have reconciled her experiences and memories. It appears that Sandy may have critically reflected on her earlier experiences, and the title of her dissertation suggests that she may even have experienced some sort of transformation through that reflection. Yet Sandy remains a puzzling character. When Sandy, now Sister Helena, is asked about the key influences of one’s teen years, she muses that these are very significant “even if they provide something to react against” (p. 35). And although she has chosen a religious path, the description of Sister Helena closed up in her nun’s cell is not an altogether happy one. Sister Helena appears to shun the dimness of her cell, and to seek the light of day:

She clutched the bars of the grille as if she wanted to escape from the dim parlour beyond, for she was not composed like the other nuns who sat, when they received the rare visitors, well back in the darkness with folded hands. But Sandy always leaned forward and peered, clutching the bars with both hands, and the other sisters remarked it and said that Sister Helena had too much to bear from the world since she had published her psychological book which was so unexpectedly famed. (p. 35)

Then, when asked by a researcher what she considers to be her greatest childhood influence, Sister Helena (Sandy) humbly recalls her maverick teacher.

“What were the main influences of your school days, Sister Helena? Were they literary or political or personal? Was it Calvinism?”

Sandy said “There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.” (p. 128)

Spark’s novel invites comparison to various elements of a Greek tragedy. Themes of prophecy, destiny and predestination prevail, and the chorus of character traits that are repeated through the work suggest echoes of the incantations of the chorus in a Greek drama. Brodie both “labels” her students and also predicts their futures—Sandy has “insight”, Rose has “instinct”, Rose will be “famous for sex”. Brodie is at times in prophetic mood, and she intones various incantatory phrases and epigrams that carry a powerful oratorical effect despite their puzzling content—“There needs must be a leaven in the lump” (p. 112); “the age of chivalry is past” (p. 8); and “I am putting old heads on young shoulders” (p. 8). There are Greek influences too, in some of the character names. The name Sandra is a Greek version of Alexander. Sandy’s religious name is Sister Helena, also Greek (reminiscent of

Helen of Troy), a name that means “shining light”, with its metaphorical and Platonic implications.

Spark’s novel also invokes details from Roman history. Brodie is said to have a fine Roman profile, and Sandy envisions Brodie as an Ancient Roman in the time of Caesar, holding her proud head high. The narrator describes Brodie’s sense of her disdain towards her scornful teaching colleagues in terms of her “flattening their scorn beneath the chariot wheels of her superiority” (p. 54). One of the few statements that can be directly attributable to Brodie is when she is recounting her vacation travels to Europe. She tells the girls “In Rome I saw the Forum and I saw the Colosseum where the gladiators died and the slaves were thrown to the lions” (p. 45).

3.4. Teacher/student relationship

Spark’s work explores the complex relation between teacher and student most particularly through Brodie’s relationship with her student Sandy Stranger. Sandy’s philosophical consciousness is awakened as she grows older, and eventually she comes to see that her teacher Brodie is a flawed individual—although later still, Sandy comes to accept that Brodie remains a powerful influence in her life. In this Sandy’s growth reflects the Platonic view of the intellect moving from uncritical acceptance of Brodie to a more sophisticated and ultimately more enlightened understanding. Eventually, Sandy reasons out for herself the dangers inherent in Miss Brodie’s calls for her girls’ unquestioned allegiance. It is when Sandy hears that Brodie has encouraged the new girl to go to fight as an anarchist in the Spanish Civil War, that she reflects on the depths of the group’s allegiance to Brodie, and decides to take steps to stop it. It remains unclear, however, whether Sandy reports Brodie to the headmistress because she does not fully subscribe to Brodie’s requirements for loyalty, or because Sandy has genuinely come to know her own mind, thereby fulfilling the precise objective of Brodie’s educational methods, and Brodie’s repeated assertion that Sandy has “insight”.

Although Brodie’s teaching appears to have little effect on some of her other pupils, her influence on Sandy is pronounced. Over time, Sandy gradually comes closer to grasping previously undeveloped thoughts. Ultimately, she shows herself capable of thinking for herself, and beyond that she truly gains perspective, insight, precisely as Brodie had claimed she would. By the time of the novel’s close, Sandy is literally transformed both in name and nature: she is a converted Catholic and a practising nun. In certain respects, Sandy follows a

path of renunciation that is reminiscent of Weil's own biographical trajectory, although Weil herself never formally embraced any Christian religion, preferring always to remain, as it were on the threshold of organised religion.

These changes in direction in Sandy's life put her once again in the role of author, the very role she was rehearsing in her mind in her very first year as a member of the Brodie set. Yet the seeming haplessness of Sandy's adult situation may also attest to something about the still unreconstructed sexist culture of Edinburgh in the 1930s. Spark suggests that a self-authoring woman in this era was almost bound to suffer for her self-authoring qualities. In this, Spark's novel contrasts the situation in which Socrates leaves his charges, and the way that Brodie is shown to leave her own charges: insofar as Socrates' protégées are left thinking for themselves their lives are higher and better, yet insofar as Brodie's protégées are left thinking for themselves, they are, perhaps because of the ambient sexism of their context, liable to have rather fraught lives. Could Spark have intended us to see things in this way, thence possibly to draw attention to the implicit limitations of Brodie's time?

The fictional Jean Brodie is interested not so much in the content of what is taught, but in how it is taught. Brodie inculcates in her girls the development of memory, their sense of recollection, and of social awareness. She fosters in them a sense of culture and belonging. Most importantly, she fosters in her girls their powers of attention, a notion that is central to both Weil's and Murdoch's accounts of how we learn and how we develop morally.

3.5. *Echoes of Weil and Murdoch*

Weil considered that the overriding purpose of education is not so much to deliver curriculum content as to train the mind to think well—that is, to develop in students their faculty of attention. There are frequent echoes of Weil's teaching philosophy in Brodie's independent-minded commitment to deliver the kind of education that will help her students think differently. Hence her pupils are “vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum” (p. 5). Brodie fosters in her students the faculty of attention in precisely Weil's sense of attending, taking notice, being patient, and learning to regard something as potentially interesting or important. As did Weil, the fictional Brodie considers that to arrive at a state of ready attention, one must conscientiously and patiently prepare the mind, and that such preparation is best received in focussed quietness, if not in solitude.

There are regular echoes of Weil's notion of attention too, in Brodie's regular admonishments to her girls to be attentive:

“Attend to me girls. One’s prime is the moment one was born for. Now that my prime has begun—Sandy, your attention is wandering. What have I been talking about?”

“Your prime, Miss Brodie.” (Spark, 1961, p. 12)

Brodie both requires and monitors her student’ attention, and she demands that they maintain that attentiveness. She poses questions in the classroom by calling on students unsolicited rather than waiting for hands to be raised, thereby requiring her students to be constantly attentive. Brodie is always alert to her students’ responses and quick to get their concentration back on track if she senses that their minds have been wandering:

“Are you listening, Sandy?”

“Yes, I’m listening.”

“You look as if you were thinking of something else, my dear. Well, as I say, that is the whole story.”

Sandy was thinking of something else. She was thinking that it was not the whole story. (p. 60)

Spark’s emphasis on training the mind calls to mind Weil’s emphasis on the beneficial effects of mental agility, and which Weil termed “a form of gymnastics of the attention” (Weil, 1997 p. 173). We learn of the Brodie girls participating “unbrainfully in the gymnasium, swinging about on parallel bars, hanging upside down on wall bars, or climbing ropes up to the ceiling...” (Spark, 1961, p. 83). Spark underlines the fundamental importance of the intellectual faculty of attention, and of the disastrous, even tragic consequences if attention is absent. It comes about that Mary Macgregor, who persistently fails to apply her powers of attention, meets an untimely death in a hotel fire at the age of just twenty-three. Mary, despite the efforts of her various teachers, fails to develop her powers of concentration. As a result, in a moment of crisis, she is left literally directionless and unable to select an intelligent course of action. Caught in a hotel fire, Mary panics, lost in a mental confusion that results in her tragic and untimely death.

Brodie’s relationship with her students seems initially more mischievous than conspiratorial. She colludes with her pupils and freely discusses with them, almost as a point of morality, the various oppositions she encounters from the staff. Her girls adore her openness with them, and in this way she wins their hearts and minds:

“Hold up your books”, said Miss Brodie quite often that autumn, “prop them up

in your hands, in case of intruders. If there are any intruders we are doing our history lesson...our poetry...English grammar...Meantime I will tell you about my last summer holidays in Egypt...I will tell you about care of the skin, and of the hands...about the Frenchman I met in the train to Biarritz...and I must tell you about the Italian paintings I saw.” (pp. 10–11)

Brodie encourages her to girls to use their books as if they will serve as a defence against intruders. She reinforces for the girls the notion that books represent a kind of protection against compliance. The girls are to use their books as a kind of totem for liberty and imaginative freedom, and as a way to ward off the prying eyes of the school authorities. Yet Brodie, we gradually learn, is not entirely faultless. We learn that she is careful to select as her favourites only those girls “whose parents she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy” (p. 26).

Brodie becomes increasingly intimate with her set, disclosing attitudes that are quite in opposition to the other teachers on the staff. She is openly contemptuous of the kinds of examination questions that are set for the girls to answer (p. 82). Such disclosures are quite thrilling to her girls. So it comes about that while initially Brodie’s influence does not seem altogether ill-judged, we as readers come to question her approach – for example, her tendency to respond to what is beyond her scope of influence with scorn. Brodie is defiantly determined to have a powerful effect on her pupils and she makes this intention quite explicit to her charges:

“It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools, where my methods would be more suited to the system than they are at Blaine. But I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory. There needs must be a leaven in the lump. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life.” (p. 9)

In sharing this vision with her girls, however, Brodie also requires of them a code of compliance to her own ways of thinking: “It is because you are mine”, said Miss Brodie. “I mean of my stamp and cut, and I am in my prime” (p. 97). Brodie appears completely without guile in her stated ambition to build herself a legacy through her set – surely a trap of vanity for any susceptible teacher. She appears to have a certain disconnection from the consequences of her actions, and to have few, if any, misgivings about herself, her teaching methods, or her inevitable errors of judgement. In this, Brodie creates the possibility of her

own demise. Ultimately the way she uses her authority over her girls becomes her dilemma, for Brodie appears increasingly tempted to use and exploit the influence she has over her students.

There are frequent echoes of Weil's teaching philosophy in Brodie's independent-minded commitment to deliver the kind of education that will help her students think differently. Brodie's pupils are "vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum" (p. 5). Under Brodie's guidance, her girls learn what is educative about whatever it is they are studying. Brodie seeks to open her students' eyes to the world. We know from historical records that Weil, also a classroom teacher for a time, pursued a similar educational philosophy to foster creative thought and to awaken her students' minds.²⁹

Also like Weil, Brodie is disdainful of an educational philosophy that would prioritise factual knowledge over systems of thought: "I trust you girls to work hard and try and scrape through, even if you learn up the stuff and forget it next day" (Spark, 1961, 38). She shows herself to be rather proud that her students "knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland" (Spark, 1961, p. 6). A further implicit reference to Weil comes with the arrival of the new student, Joyce Emily Hammond, into the Brodie set. Joyce Emily, labelled a delinquent, has been dismissed from various schools prior to her arrival at Marcia Blaine. (The name 'Joyce Emily' bears some resemblance to the anagram *Emile Novis*, which Weil sometimes uses in place of her own name.) Joyce Emily's brother has gone to fight in the Spanish Civil War and we learn from Sandy, that it is with Brodie's encouragement that Joyce Emily runs away to join her brother in this fight:

This dark, rather mad girl wanted to go too, and to wear a white blouse and a black skirt and march with a gun...six weeks later, it was reported that she had run away to Spain and had been killed in an accident when the train she was travelling in had been attacked. (p. 118)

The narrator tells us that the year is 1936. This is the same year that Weil set off to enlist as one of the first foreign volunteers with the anarchist militia in the Spanish Civil War. Brodie's comment to Sandy, years later, about this sorrowful event, is to Sandy quite unconscionable. Brodie muses with a seemingly dismissive tone:

²⁹ For further biographical information on Weil, detailed biographical accounts of Weil's life are provided by Fielder (2001), Nevin (1997), Roberts (2011), and Tubbs (2005).

“Truth is stranger than fiction. I wanted Rose for him, I admit, and sometimes I regretted urging young Joyce Emily to go to Spain to fight for Franco, she would have done admirably for him [Teddy Lloyd], a girl of instinct, a—”

“Did she go to fight for Franco?” said Sandy.

“That was the intention. I made her see sense. However, she didn’t have the chance to fight at all, poor girl.” (p. 124)

It is not clear to the reader whether, or to what extent, Brodie herself ever sees the moral tensions inherent in her position in quite the way that Sandy does. It does appear, however, that this late admission by Brodie of her earlier influence over Joyce Emily might confirm for Sandy the rightness of her own decision to inform the school principal of Brodie’s undue interest in the politics of fascism. It remains unclear whether Brodie’s subsequent removal from the school is due to her political, or to her pedagogical convictions.

Like Weil, Brodie the teacher forever seeks out learning opportunities that will engage her students as individuals. Brodie is open-minded about what and how lessons will be taught and is open to opportunities—lessons outdoors under the shade of an elm tree when weather permits, somersaults from the class gymnast for comic relief. She gives her students insights into the complexities of adult life. She takes her girls to the opera and to the ballet. She shares with them her love of painting and poetry, and offers the girls her own insights into the world of romance and sexuality. Brodie both expects, and inculcates, tremendous levels of loyalty from her charges:

By the time their friendship with Miss Brodie was of seven years’ standing, it had worked itself into their bones, so that they could not break away without, as it were, splitting their bones to do so. (p. 115)

Through these opportunities, Brodie wins her pupils’ loyalty, and that they become, over time, ever more deeply enlisted as members of her very private and exclusive set. As with all teachers, the depth of Brodie’s influence is various, so while Rose “shook off Miss Brodie’s influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat” (p. 119), Sandy is affected profoundly by her teacher and is, as it were, literally, transformed.

Spark’s Brodie sees education itself as a worthy subject of study, one that does not rely on other disciplines to give it coherence and relevance. Echoing Weil’s thinking on this matter, the fictional Brodie understands that the teacher’s role is not to tell her students what to think, but rather to illuminate for her students, other ways of looking at things. Weil

considered that the most important part of being a teacher is to teach what it is to know, and that quite apart from any particular curriculum content or specified learning outcomes, the teacher's primary function is to foster the students' own faculties of attention. As noted earlier, Weil famously stated that the ultimate role of the teacher is help students develop their own capacity for attention and, compared to that, "all the other advantages of instruction are without interest" (Weil, 1997, p. 173).

There are marked parallels too, between Jean Brodie's emphasis on teaching her girls about history and about the past and Weil's own respect for ancient learning and the achievements of millennia. Both teachers also place a far greater honouring of the need for quietness, time, and reflection than is generally afforded today. Solitude's value, Weil tells us, "lies in the greater possibility of attention" (p. 175). Brodie uses words like 'virtue', 'honour', and 'tradition' when declaiming to her class—words that Weil herself considers to be an essential part of what she termed a 'vocabulary of value', as she explains in her essay "The responsibility of writers" (Weil 1968, p. 168).

Unsurprisingly, Brodie's educational philosophy is considerably at odds with that of the school's headmistress, Miss Mackay. Similarly, Weil's teaching career featured several dismissals because she failed to teach to the prescribed curriculum. Brodie confides to her girls: "We differ at root, the headmistress and I, upon the question whether we are employed to educate the minds of girls or to intrude upon them" (p. 38). McKay is increasingly suspicious of Brodie and is constantly spying on Brodie. McKay dislikes Brodie's pedagogical approach, and she is also very critical of what she considers to be the disproportionate amount of influence that Brodie exercises over her charges. Unlike Brodie, Mackay requires that her girls show loyalty to the institution rather than derive inspiration from any particular individual teacher:

"Culture cannot compensate for lack of hard knowledge. I am happy to see you are devoted to Miss Brodie. Your loyalty is due to the school rather than to any one individual." (p. 66)

Brodie, for her part, is aware of the liberties that she is taking with the curriculum. She sets up various strategies as a cover for her failure to deliver the timetabled lessons. For example, she keeps a long division sum on the board to imply that maths is being taught, and she trains her students to hold their textbooks as if they were reading them, while she expostulates to them on a range of issues including her travels, her lovers, her political

enthusiasm for Mussolini. Brodie's educational philosophy is essentially to work in the interests of the girls' higher selves. This commitment seems eventually to lead her to a greater, and flawed presumption—that she can influence the girls' individual autonomy and possibly assume responsibility for their destinies. It is in these latter ways that we are led to consider that Spark's literary heroine very much deviates from Weil's purity of thought and pedagogical understanding.

Echoes of Iris Murdoch's values for education also resonate in Jean Brodie's various declarations regarding what she considers to be the most important educative pursuits. Just as Weil holds that "the authentic and pure values, truth, beauty, and goodness, in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object" (Weil, 1997 p. 173), Murdoch also sees the importance of learning through aesthetic experience. There are echoes of Murdoch's philosophy in Brodie's declaration to her girls:

"Art is greater than science. Art comes first, and then science... Art and religion first; then philosophy; lastly science. That is the order of the great subjects of life, that's their order of importance." (Spark, 1961, p. 25)

Murdoch's ideas on the fundamental connection between aesthetic appreciation and moral growth are reflected in several important ways in Spark's novel, and they become clearer as the novel progresses. Murdoch, as does the fictional Brodie, sees that the relationship between aesthetic experience and moral development is central to learning. Spark, like Murdoch, is interested in how, through our social interactions and our interactions with art and literature, we are able to make moral sense of the world. This theme is developed through Brodie's relationship with the one-armed Art Master, Teddy Lloyd.

During an introductory art lesson Lloyd explains to the girls the details of form in a Botticelli painting, *La Primavera*. This painting, sometimes known as Birth of Spring (p. 44) and which features a group of female figures and two male figures along with a cupid in an orange grove, is sometimes interpreted as an illustration of the ideal of Platonic love. As Lloyd directs the girls' attention to the lines of the female form, the girls giggle nervously, prompting Brodie to scold them for acting like "Philistines" (p. 44). These pre-adolescent girls cannot see the human forms in the painting in terms of artistic achievement, but only in terms of bodies and sexuality. Brodie and Lloyd, by contrast, are united in their complicit smiles. Their

exchange of glances implies that they, as mature individuals, and unlike the undeveloped young students, are the true appreciators of the arts.

Lloyd is very much charmed by Miss Brodie. He is also a recreational painter, although his art is shown to be second-rate. His painting is mimicry, a kind of fake “truthfulness” which, in Platonic terms, degrades goodness rather than uplifting it. Lloyd objectifies Jean Brodie in his paintings to the extent that all his depictions of whatever subject come out the same, as if all from the same mould. He literally transfigures each of his subjects into the image of Brodie:

Teddy Lloyd’s passion for Jean Brodie was greatly in evidence in all the portraits he did of the various members of the Brodie set. He did them in a group during one summer term, wearing their panama hats each in a different way, each hat adorning, in a magical transfiguration, a different Jean Brodie under the forms of Rose, Sandy, Jenny, Mary, Monica and Eunice. (p. 111)

Perhaps Lloyd’s flaw is implicitly also Brodie’s flaw—perhaps, like Lloyd as painter, Brodie as teacher becomes too much concerned to shape her girls in her own image, or at any rate, in accordance with her own vision of how to flourish in the world. Then possibly Lloyd’s art tells something true. But *Spark* provides no clue about her meaning behind the foible of Lloyd’s, and the foible may simply underline the hopelessness of Lloyd’s infatuation with Brodie.

Jean Brodie fosters in her students the faculty of attention in precisely Weil and Murdoch’s sense of attending, taking notice, showing interest, and looking carefully. As did Weil, the fictional Brodie considers that to arrive at a state of ready attention, one must consciously and patiently prepare the mind, and that such preparation is best achieved in focussed quietness, of not in solitude. Brodie is vigilant in her attention to her students and quick to get their concentration back on track if she senses that their mind have been wandering.

Weil considers that the overriding purpose of education is not so much to deliver curriculum content or to find answers to questions, but to train the mind to think well – that is, to develop in students their faculty of attention. There are frequent echoes of Weil’s teaching philosophy in Brodie’s independent-minded commitment to deliver the kind of education that will help her students to think differently. Hence her pupils are “vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum” (p. 5). Like Weil, the

fictional Brodie understands that the teacher's role is not to tell her students what to think, but rather to illuminate for her students other ways of looking at things. Brodie, as did Weil, disdains her school's educational emphasis on exam preparation, and the pursuit of a qualification ahead of the development of cultural awareness (p. 38). Like Weil, Brodie is disdainful of an educational philosophy that would prioritise factual knowledge over systems of thought. She shows herself to be rather proud that her students "knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland" (p. 6).

In her philosophical writing, Murdoch repeatedly articulates the central connections between aesthetics and education, and the underlying educative value of art and literature (Murdoch, 2014, p. 33). She argues that encounters with art and literature can be educative and, in particular, they can be morally instructive. Murdoch argues, as does the fictional Brodie, that aesthetic experience is central to education and that art "so far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight" (pp. 71–72). Murdoch considers that education's chief purpose is to promote an essential kind of selflessness, a kind of assimilation morally to there being something larger than one's self. Murdoch asserts that we can be easily deflected from what we ought best focus on by shallow collective thinking, distractions, egotistical preoccupations. To be morally aware requires a conscious and deliberate pursuit of that which is good. For Murdoch, the good education is the one that leads to an understanding of how to live well.

These are the very values that underpin Jean Brodie's education philosophy. Brodie steps away from the stodgy, traditional conformism of the Marcia Blaine school curriculum and instead tries to create a curriculum that is built around the creative arts. In so doing, she deliberately exposes her girls to dissonant viewpoints, to alternative or superimposed readings of the world. This philosophy is immediately evocative of Weil and Murdoch's understanding of attention as the primary mechanism for education. Spark's novel explores and plays with these notions and ultimately shows us just how difficult such an orientation can be.

Drawing as she does on Weil's own regard for the power of attention, Murdoch considers language to be the foundation of attention: "Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends upon them" (p. 33). Murdoch emphasises the fundamental importance of language as a tool to re-orient our attention:

Learning takes place when such [normative-descriptive] words are used, either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention... We learn through

attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. ... Uses of words by persons grouped around a common object is a central and vital human activity. (p. 31)

Murdoch believes that moral learning involves paying attention to the otherness of human life, and that we best learn about ourselves precisely by attending to our understanding of others. Murdoch values the learning we can experience by being immersed in art and literature of the highest order. Similarly, Brodie ensures that her girls are immersed in a wealth of literature and classical studies. They are exposed to the writings of a raft of celebrated literary figures in their daily programme. This includes both reading by and also reading to the students. Brodie regularly accompanies her girls to their sewing class and while the girls toil somewhat unsuccessfully over their sewing projects, Brodie reads aloud to them from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

Murdoch reminds us that as human beings we can be easily deflected from what we ought best to focus on, by shallow collective thinking, by distractions, noise, false assumptions, fashions, and egotistical preoccupations. She cautions that the things that we come to focus on the most, or that we are exposed to the most, are likely to become the very things that we will end up the most valuing. Murdoch and Weil are both interested in the development of our capacity to move our thinking away from a first person subjective point of view, towards a view that involves our responsibilities to others, our involvement with the wider social fabric. Spark's novel explores and plays with these notions, and ultimately, shows us just how difficult such an orientation can be.

Murdoch argues that to be truly morally aware requires that we make a conscious and deliberate pursuit of that which is good "for immediate and obvious reasons, [such as] because somebody is hungry or somebody is crying" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 233). Similarly, Weil and for Murdoch, the good education is the one that helps us to understand how to live well. They hold the conviction that one must literally mix one's labours with the world in order to truly grow in our thinking:

The world is a text with several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by a process of work. It must be work in which the body constantly bears a part, as, for example, when we learn the alphabet of a foreign language: this alphabet has to enter into our hand by dint of forming the letters. If this condition

is not fulfilled, every change in our way of thinking is illusory. (Weil, 1997, p. 185)

Murdoch's own view was that the task of the moral agent to learn, over time, to curb distraction and daydreaming, to focus, and to attend: "In the moral life, the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly...the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 52). What remains unclear in Spark's novel is the extent to which Brodie's unconscious egotistical purpose leads her to use others as means to her own ends. Over time, her influence over her girls is increasingly persuasive. They pay close attention to her not-so-veiled comments about how to make their subject choices for the senior school:

"I am not saying anything against the Modern side. Modern and Classical, they are equal...You must make your free choice. Not everyone is capable of a Classical education. You must make your choice quite freely.' So the girls were left in no doubt as to Miss Brodie's contempt for the Modern side." (Spark, 1961, p. 61)

Later in their education, Brodie's students come to see the realities of their subject choices for what they are. The narrator has a somewhat mocking tone towards the study of the sciences, a view that Murdoch might have had sympathy with:

But the Brodie set were on the whole still dazzled by their new subjects. It was never the same in later years when the languages of physics and chemistry, algebra and geometry had lost their elemental strangeness and formed each an individual department of life with its own accustomed boredom, and become hard work. Even Monica Douglas, who later developed such a good brain for mathematics, was plainly never so thrilled with herself as when she first subtracted x from y and the result from a ; she never afterwards looked so happy. (p. 82)

Weil and Murdoch each consider that humility and openness to new ways of seeing are integral to developing one's powers of attention. Humble thoughts deflect the mind away from egotistical self-interest. Weil considers humility and openness to new ways of seeing, to be integral to attention. She advises that we guard ourselves against distraction or wandering thoughts, and to do this we must invoke our powers of humility. Humble thoughts serve to focus the mind:

Every time we catch ourselves involuntarily indulging in a proud thought, we must

for a few seconds turn the full gaze of our attention upon the memory of some humiliation in our past life, choosing the most bitter, the most intolerable we can think of. (Weil, 1997, p. 178)

It is perhaps here that we find the locus of Brodie's fundamental human weakness: to the end of her life she remains immune to criticism, including self-criticism. Weil makes the link between humility in oneself, and openness and generosity towards others. She considers that humility about one's own limitations opens one's capacity for altruism and respect for others, and that if we exercise humility in our learning, we will increase the likelihood of being able to learn from our mistakes. Weil acknowledges that learning can involve considerable discomfort and struggle, but for all that, she sees nobility in conscientious and dedicated effort. On this view, the attentive learner may, even through frustration and failure, nevertheless be able to develop the capacity for humility in productive ways:

So it comes about that, paradoxical as it may seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong [sic], may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them. Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need. (Weil, 2009, p. 65)

Weil considers thinking to be an act of obedience or tractability, a kind of intense concentration, to which one has willingly consented:

Attention is bound up with desire...Or more exactly, with consent...Simply to desire it [attention] not to try to accomplish it...In such a work all that I call "I" has to be passive. Attention alone, that attention which is so full that the "I" disappears, is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call "I" of the light of my attention and turn it onto that which cannot be conceived. (Weil, 1997, pp. 171–172)

Over time, Brodie's influence is shown to be morally doubtful. By degrees, it appears that Brodie assumes responsibility not just for the girls' education, but also, in a sense, for their fortunes as well. In Sandy's eyes, Brodie appears unaware of the effects of her methods on her students, and she remains "indifferent to criticism as a crag" (Spark, 1961, p. 60), especially to any suggestions of error of judgement on her part. Perhaps Brodie comes to believe too much in her own powers of influence, to the extent that she completely fails to respect her girls' own autonomy, and instead enlists them to fulfil her own particular wants.

That would take us as far from Weil and Murdoch's understanding of attention as we could possibly be.

As readers we might wonder if Jean Brodie thinks deeply enough about the risks that her freedom presents both to herself and to her students. Does Brodie completely fail to see that her authority has to be mediated, and that there are some things that she cannot or ought not, seek to choose or control? While Brodie enlists in her girls an unflagging loyalty, she simultaneously fosters in them a potentially dangerous sense of elitism. She establishes a relationship with them that goes beyond teacher/student loyalty and that becomes a game of subterfuge. Her declared scheme, however fanciful and speculative, for her student Rose to sleep with her former teacher Teddy Lloyd definitely has, as student Sandy notes, "a whiff of sulphur" about it (p. 109). It would be very difficult to reconcile this equable and impassive view of learning with the contemporary notion of a 'self-directed' learner, because for Weil and for Murdoch, the elimination of self-awareness is the very first step towards learning readiness.

3.6. *Implications for education*

Is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* ultimately a send-up of Weil's educational philosophy, or is Spark deliberately playing with elements of Weil's biography to construct her own narrative, perhaps partly to demonstrate how very difficult it is to implement Weil's notion of attention? Spark's novel is suffused with contradictions. Yet in this respect too, we are reminded of the power of contradiction and paradox that characterises much of Weil's own educational philosophy. Weil too, was fascinated by the capacity of paradox to open the mind: "The contradictions the mind comes up against, these are the only realities... There is no contradiction in what is imaginary. Contradiction is the test of necessity" (Weil, 1997 p. 151).

For Weil, contradiction is the crux of learning. Weil acknowledges Plato's recognition that everything the human intelligence can represent to itself involves contradiction, and that it is by this very means that thought can be raised to a higher level. For Weil, then, ambiguities that are jarring to thought are the very things that demand attention. Drawing an analogy between mental and visual contradictions, Weil comments that mental contradictions are potentially just as useful to our imagination as sense perceptions are to our vision, and that both equally can lead to an altered view:

In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure of what we see, we change our position

while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered and if, as we change, we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible. This is on condition that the attention should be a looking and not an attachment. (Weil, 1997 p. 174)

Similarly, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, we learn that student Sandy feels the most warmly towards Miss Brodie precisely at those times when she sees clearly just how she is misled by Brodie. It is at the very moment that it dawns on Sandy that Brodie is potentially treacherous that she considers Brodie most favourably:

It was then that Miss Brodie looked beautiful and fragile, just as dark heavy Edinburgh itself could suddenly be changed into a floating city when the light was a special pearly white and fell upon one of the gracefully fashioned streets. (Spark, 1961, p. 111)

Perhaps Sandy's ultimate betrayal of Brodie (if that is what it is), can be seen in light of the strong and contradictory feelings that Sandy experiences towards her teacher, such that she finds it impossible not to act against her. We may wonder if Sandy's betrayal of Brodie, while she felt it necessary, remained perhaps also for her a point of genuine regret, although the precise nature of that tension is never fully explored. At a meeting with Brodie years later, Sandy declares "If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word betrayed does not apply" (p. 126.)

Perhaps Sandy's response to Brodie can be seen in light of a moral contradiction that Sandy experiences, such that she finds it impossible not to act against Brodie. In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil states that

That action is good which we are able to accomplish while keeping our attention and intention totally directed toward pure and impossible goodness, without veiling from ourselves by any falsehood either the attraction or the impossibility of pure goodness. (Weil, 1997, p. 150)

After revealing to Miss Mackay what Miss Mackay wants to hear about Brodie, Sandy admits that she herself is interested "only in putting a stop to Miss Brodie" (Spark, 1961, p. 125).

Weil argues that the ultimate purpose of teaching is "not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them, which makes them

capable of receiving the teaching” (Weil, 1997, p. 135), and that “teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. In her essay “Forms of the implicit love of God”, Weil illustrates how such a transformation might occur:

It is a transformation analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of evening on a road, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we had at first seen as a stooping man; or where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices. We see the same colours, we hear the same sounds, but not in the same way. (Weil, 2009, p. 100)

Brodie’s initial philosophical commitment is to show her students that there are many ways to view the world. She is committed to expose to her girls the fact that the very things they have grown up to believe and to accept may only be a partial version of what is true. She points out to them that some of the ways in which their school world is organised (such as the institution of dividing the girls into four competing school houses) might be seen as a subversive strategy to divide their influence (Spark, 1961, p. 111.) She points out that the determination to divide the girls into four competing teams might also be seen as a deliberate means to eliminate their sense of their own individuality.

In a number of ways *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* bears the positive influence of the ideas of both Weil and Murdoch, both of whom were also themselves teachers. Like Weil, Brodie allows her students to “become themselves.” Like Weil, she inculcates in the girls the development of memory, and their powers of attention. Like Weil, she imparts to the girls an enthusiasm for enquiry and for life and exposes them to a range of cultural experiences in order to develop her students as independent thinkers. She teaches them that truth depends on goodness and beauty. Brodie is committed to work in the interests of the girls’ higher selves. She guides her students away from what she considers to be distractions. She heightens their sense of themselves, and teaches them to extend their horizons beyond fixed or conventional ways of thinking and being in the world.

Yet over time, Brodie’s influence is shown to be morally doubtful in the way that it fails to respect the girls’ own autonomy, and instead enlists the girls to fulfil Brodie’s own particular wants. That takes us as far from Weil’s understanding of humility and respect for others as we could possibly be. Weil’s *The Need for Roots* (2002, p. 3) opens with the declaration that “the notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to obligation to which it

corresponds.” Ultimately, it appears that Brodie fails to consider her girls as autonomous ends, seeing them only as means to her own particular ends. This failure is one that would be completely at odds with Weil’s conviction that love for another necessarily recognises the relationship between “self” and the “other”. In discussing the attention that one person can give to another, Weil identifies the essential link that is established between otherness and truth, by way of attention:

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason, it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive” (Weil, 2009, p. 63)

Brodie instigates in her girls their powers of attention, but appears to lose sight completely of her own responsibility to her girls in this regard. While she genuinely seeks to rectify what she sees as the traditional power imbalance in the relationship between teacher and student, in so doing Brodie appears to invite a reciprocal and highly problematic relationship with her own students.

3.7. *Summary*

It is possible that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is intended as a send-up of Weil’s education philosophy. At the very least, Spark seems intent on taking ideas from Weil in order to play with them in a seemingly frivolous fashion, and in relation to a central character whose judgement seems not infrequently to be quite askew. Overall, the message from Spark seems to be that the notion of attention can lead to zealotry, to dangerous compliance, even to the point of fascism (or simply to sufficient moral confusion not to recognise that fascism is a very bad thing). One could possibly argue that Spark is trying to demonstrate in her novel the supreme difficulty of implementing Weil’s notion of attention, and that efforts to achieve Weil’s pure motive are likely to be imperilled by gossip and suspicion.

Spark’s main character, while very good at producing opportunity for her students to stop and be attentive, appears in many ways completely reckless as an educator, with effects (or seeming effects) on her students that in many ways appear morally doubtful. Jean Brodie arguably manipulates her students and fails to give them many basics of a good education (for

example, arithmetic ability) while indulging in other priorities for their learning. Yet through attention, one of Brodie's students critically reflects on her experiences, begins to understand what led to those experiences, and takes a radical stand against her teacher. Then when that student is asked, twenty-five years later, about the key influences in her life, it is precisely her teacher Jean Brodie that she recalls. There remains an enduring bond in the girls' lifelong relationship with their teacher and although the teacher's students invariably move beyond their teacher, and although their memories of her contain some troubling contradictions, the full impact of their teacher's influence on their lives remains strongly connected with their sense of engagement with the world and of "the hidden possibilities in all things" (Spark, 1961, p. 81).

Part of the educative power of Spark's novel is that it shows us many things that could not be achieved by telling, and although the characters may judge each other, they are not themselves judged. Spark's work shows us, through a detached and highly edited account, the profound impact that one teacher has on her students. For both the author and for the reader, this involves the "delicate question how to present Miss Brodie in both a favourable and an unfavourable light" (p. 72). The novel opens up opportunities for alternative readings, different interpretations, and it presents decidedly unexpected outcomes. In all of these ways the novel instigates a kind of controversy, a debate among readers or between potential readings. The attention needed to prosecute this very debate shows us something fundamental about education.

The following chapter turns back to the nineteenth century, to Charlotte Brontë's final novel *Villette*, which chronicles the growth and maturation of a novice teacher from youth to experience. The novel's narrator, Lucy Snowe, looks back on her early adult life, and describe how she grows, in part through the guidance of others, in both intellect, and in the development of her own moral sense. Brontë's unreliable narrator requires of her reader the commitment to read attentively, and not to accept everything that Lucy says at face value. This chapter examines Brontë's *Villette* in light of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, whereby the main protagonist both changes, and is changed by, her students and her teachers.

Chapter 4: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

4.0. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) chronicles the experiences of a novice teacher, who must change a great deal before, in her chosen professional capacity, she truly acquires virtue. Platonic themes of attention, recollection and reasoned reflection are amply represented in the process, a process that, for Lucy Snowe, is beset by struggle and many challenges. Lucy is a solitary figure, unstable, and, where she travels to, entirely bereft of family, friends and community. After she arrives in a new country where she will become a novice teacher, Lucy suffers despair and dispossession and a great sense of rage. She rages significantly against an older man who is in fact an ultimately effective mentor to her. Her story is a stark and sometimes troubling one. While teaching in this novel is ultimately depicted as a good, Lucy Snowe's trajectory towards this profession is by no means simple or painless.

What elevates Lucy's struggles above the plane of the merely personal is not only that they are psychologically rich and compelling and apt for occasioning readers to reflect. Lucy's struggles are also concerned with appreciation of beauty: in their regard for what is best and most beautiful, her struggles concern fundamentally what it is to grow and develop morally. In time, and with mentor support, Lucy acquires ways to channel her anger and dismiss her ego. She oversteps herself and so can give due attention to the world around her, acknowledging its complexities. Before Lucy can herself become an effective teacher, she has to learn that attention is an ever on-going task, ever relational and ego-less.

Villette is Brontë's fourth and final novel.³⁰ Published just two years prior to Brontë's death at age 38, it is considered to be the most autobiographical of her novels, and it is considered by many to be superior to her earlier and arguably better-known work *Jane Eyre*. Both Mary Anne Evans [George Eliot] and Virginia Woolf appreciate *Villette*'s originality and power. In a personal correspondence, Mary Anne Evans wrote of the novel "I am only just returning to a sense of real wonder about me, for I have been reading *Villette*, a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*. There is something almost preternatural about its power" (as cited in Allott, 1974, p. 192). Virginia Woolf considered *Villette* to be Charlotte Brontë's "finest novel" and admired the work for its blend of secrecy and emotional disclosure. She

³⁰ Brontë's other three published novels are *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *The Professor* (the latter published posthumously in 1857, although completed in 1846).

also admired the way that Brontë “calls in nature to describe a state of mind which could not otherwise be expressed” (Woolf, 1962, p. 201).

Villette has been interpreted quite variously by literary scholars since the time of its publication. They have identified such themes as those of social deprivation, female isolation, repressed opportunities for self-expression, and the poverty of educational opportunities for nineteenth century women. (Among such interpreters are Allott, 1974; Eagleton, 1975; Gaskell, 1996; Gérin, 1967; Gilbert and Gubar, 1979; Heilbrun, 1989.) These commentators point also to the novel’s theme of the limited employment opportunities available to Victorian women. Unquestionably the book is a powerful cause for reflection surrounding these themes. Yet *Villette* may also legitimately be discussed as a text about pedagogy—about education in its own right. The present chapter undertakes this uncommon and overdue course of interpretation. Building in particular on the work of Menon (2003, Chapter 4), it aims to explore further frontiers of reading *Villette*. It seeks to reconsider the novel *Villette* as fundamentally a text about education.

This chapter reconceives *Villette* as a study in the growth of pedagogical attention, and so marries it intellectually with the mid-twentieth century philosophical works of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. It argues that when *Villette* explores the tumultuous experiences of a young and inexperienced person’s foray first into a foreign country and then into the utter foreignness of the school classroom, it at the same time critiques the average or everyday concept of pedagogy. In place of the average or everyday concept of pedagogy, it studies pedagogical attention almost exactly as it is understood by Weil and Murdoch. *Villette* exemplifies education as a “leading out” from the self by way of reasoned, carefully recollective and reflective self-examination. The examination in question is initially more introspective than Weil at least will countenance, but reaches ultimately out to conclusions concerning the world and concerning beauty. *Villette* shows us a feisty, petulant and self-absorbed young woman who is ultimately transformed, partly by mentor support, but most chiefly through her own introspection and deeply considered reflection. Ultimately Lucy embraces humility and respect and rises to the difficult challenge of pedagogical attention, learning what learning is, and drawing herself into a condition that is at last beautiful, and so choice-worthy.

By the light of the philosophical writings of Weil and Murdoch that have been discussed in preceding chapters, the present considers that it is through *attention* that Lucy Snowe finally finds a way to balance her emotion and her reason, and finds a way to see

herself as one among a community, rather than standing any longer aloof, insular and ostensibly self-reliant. The first section connects the novel to the theme of pedagogical attention. It then provides some contextual information about the novel. The next section examines the novel's narration and the way that Brontë's narrative design demands the reader's attention. The next section analyses examples from *Villette* in the light of Weil's and Murdoch's ideas about attention, respect and humility, and the final section explores the notion of pedagogical attention in relation to Lucy's mentor, the older teacher. A brief conclusion proposes some ways in which Brontë's novel holds relevance for today.

4.1. *Pedagogical attention*

Villette is a useful text to consider in an analysis of pedagogical attention since it depicts not only teachers and students, but (and possibly more importantly), a teacher *as* a student. This piquant novel concerns a passionate novice teacher who, not without being herself sharply and continually challenged by another, older teacher, learns, through attention, to develop herself and her craft. Because the novel is told through the eyes of the protagonist/narrator Lucy Snowe, it conveys signal and clarion insights and reflections into her mental and emotional experiences. The novel is at times a frank and unflattering portrait of an anguished soul. We see Lucy's inner struggles and angry protests against some of the injustices and constraints of her time. We note Lucy's fears, anxieties, struggles, failures and frailties, and her slow progress in pursuit of independent, professional standing as a teacher. Lucy's coming into her own in the end provides opportunity for us to grow.

Villette is a carefully plotted and crafted work, one that places considerable demands upon the reader. The text of the novel is dense, poetic, and at times dry and difficult. While largely written in English, various passages of the work are expressed in French. (Footnotes are provided that translate these various passages into English for us.) The novel is set largely in a French-speaking land, a land that thereby poses challenges of linguistic and cultural interpretation for both the English-speaking characters and the English-speaking reader. We are made to participate in Lucy's own feelings of foreignness and alienation. The novel is explicitly scholarly: there are frequent historical and literary allusions including to Greek sources, Shakespearian sources, as well as Biblical sources (also fully footnoted). Lucy's narrative, like Plato's Socratic dialogues, is delivered retrospectively as a memoir structured around her sometime unreliable memories. Also like Plato's Socratic dialogues, the events of *Villette* take place in various places around the city and thus the wider precinct of the school –

the civic theatre, the municipal garden, the public park. The wiser, older man who acts as a mentor teacher to Lucy sometimes epitomises stand-out educational thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, allusion to whose writings further mark this work as one that is fundamentally a novel of education.

Villette is an educative work in other ways as well. The work is structured in a way that presents the reader with discontinuities and ambiguities, features that demand careful attention. Like an aporetic Socratic dialogue this novel perplexes us and ends leaving us with doubts still to be mulled over. We are thereby required to think matters through for ourselves, rather than to receive definitive clarity from the text. The novel appears to have been consciously designed to pose questions rather than to provide answers, and it is a work that requires several re-readings. (Mary-Anne Evans judged that to read *Villette* three times would be more profitable than to read many other novels just once.)³¹ The text contains many doublings, echoes, parallels, pairings, echoes and oppositions, all of which invite layers of interpretation. The reader, who operates within the limits of Lucy's remembered and reconstructed account, has sometimes to query the relationship between the details that Lucy provides, and other possible readings of events. To be called upon to read in this way, as it were *against* Lucy's narration, is a feature of the novel that goes to the very essence of pedagogical attention.

The inner growth and progress of novice teacher Lucy Snowe occurs as she confronts the complicated and at times confusing process of how to be herself and at the same time how to connect with and earn, in her world, the respect of the students and of her fellow teachers. The novel, which gives voice to Lucy's internal battles and frustrations, is something of a Bildungsroman in that it charts the progress of a solitary young woman making her way in the world. Through an exploration of her memory and recollected experiences, Lucy improves her powers of attention and awareness. This is the cause of her spiritual growth. The novel illustrates Lucy's difficult journey of de-creation (unselfing) and detachment from her need to be possessive in her attachments to other people. Lucy also learns to read her context more carefully.

Lucy starts out not fully engaged with the world—her unfortunate life circumstances require her to attend to her basic needs for shelter and work ahead of other priorities, but these basic needs render her self-preoccupied, mistrustful and disconnected. Lucy is

³¹ As cited in Allott, 1974, p. 192.

depressive, emotionally insecure and, it becomes clear, pathologically evasive. As Menon (2003, p. xx) notes, Lucy is presented as an individual of great contrasts. Lucy herself declares “I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality” (Brontë, 2004, p. 85). Lucy’s surname emphasises her cold and frosty manner, which contrasts with her inner fury and deeply-felt fervour. She is subject to states of extreme emotional turmoil. She experiences tumultuous thoughts, passions, anxieties, and is unable to see (as her mentor teacher is able to do), the ways that these tendencies impede her growth as a person.

Villette is also a work that poses important questions regarding the task of the teacher. It calls us to consider Parker J. Palmer’s question “Who is the self that teaches?” (Palmer (1998, p. 7). Palmer argues that “*Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*” (p. 10). *Villette* addresses Palmer’s question in relation to the two central characters in this work, both of whom are teachers. (Lucy is the novice. The name of the pedagogue, Lucy’s colleague and eventual mentor, is Professor M. Paul.) It is largely Monsieur Paul who shows Lucy what it is to be attentive to something other than her own self. M. Paul invokes *Phaedrus*, 230e in the way that he implicitly responds to Lucy’s restlessness and emotional overdrive by guiding and challenging her to “know herself” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 510). Over time, these two, not unlike Socrates and Phaedrus, find a way to be more attuned to one another, better able to listen, respect, and to be mutually attentive. (These themes are discussed and further explored in Canfara, 2013.)

4.2. *Historical context*

As does *Villette*’s protagonist Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) fictionalizes aspects of her own life experience and draws on her memories for her fictional material. Brontë’s first written (although only posthumously published) novel *The Professor*, was also set in a school in Brussels. *The Professor* is in some ways the progenitor for *Villette*, and anticipates some of its themes. Both of Brontë’s two later novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* provide detailed period depictions of life in Victorian schools—the former from the vantage point of the school student, the latter from the perspective of the apprentice teacher. We know from Brontë’s biographer Elizabeth Gaskell (1996, p. 85) that Brontë believed in the value of education for its own sake, although, as Menon (2003, p. 126) suggests, her aspirations were probably more towards being a writer than towards being a teacher. Brontë worked as a schoolteacher or governess in England from 1835 to 1838, and later as a governess in Brussels. Gaskell (1996, Chapter XI, pp. 171–180), documents biographical details of Brontë’s time in Brussels.

As Gaskell notes, on February 1842, Charlotte and her sister Emily (then aged 26 and 24 respectively) sailed together to Brussels in order to study French together at a private girls' boarding school. According to Gaskell this was part of their long-term intention to start a small school in or near the family home in Haworth. Some eight months later, however, their studies were interrupted by the death of their Aunt Bramwell (housekeeper to their widowed father) back in Haworth. The two young women promptly returned to Yorkshire, and subsequently only Charlotte opted to return to Brussels to complete her studies. Biographical evidence provided by Gaskell (1996, Chapter XII), and by Guérin (1967, Chapters XIII–XIV, pp. 181–255), suggests that Charlotte's decision to return was influenced in no small part by her deep and ultimately misplaced feelings for M. Heger, the married French teacher. The ensuing period abroad proved to be a time of great personal loneliness and affliction for Brontë. Various aspects of this period in her life are woven into the fictional texture of *Villette*.

The importance of attention is established early in the novel. Lucy Snowe, a single twenty-three-year-old English woman who, upon finding herself with neither employment nor any immediate prospects of work in England, resolves to travel to the continent to start a new life. Lucy, who has little experience of the world, finds the ensuing sea voyage bewildering and arduous. Her luggage is lost when she arrives in Brussels and, although she is given directions to her intended destination (*Villette*, a fictional town in Brussels), it is night time and she loses her way. Fortuitously, Lucy finds herself outside her intended destination, a *pensionnat* (a private school for girls). Despite the late hour, Madame Beck, the school's director, proves not unsympathetic to Lucy's plight, and agrees to speak with her. Before making any decisions, however, she calls upon her cousin and teaching colleague, M. Paul, and instructs him to give Lucy his undivided attention. She asks him to make a phrenological reading of Lucy's character: "I want your opinion. We know your skill in physiognomy; use it now. Read that countenance" (Brontë, 2004, p. 73). Although it is hinted that his reading is complex, he nevertheless recommends that Madame Beck take Lucy in: "Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward; if evil—eh bien, ma cousine, çe sera toujours une bonne oeuvre" (p. 73). [Translated as "Well, cousin, it will always be a good deed" (p. 557)]. By the nature of this response, M. Paul demonstrates his capacity for benevolence towards Lucy as a person in need.

In this way, Brontë establishes M. Paul's pedagogical function in *Villette*. It is precisely because of his positive reading of Lucy's physiognomy that Lucy is admitted to Madame Beck's establishment in the first place. It is he who helps realize the possibility of Lucy's

future. Without being granted entry to the school that evening, Lucy risked being lost to destitution. From their initial encounter, M. Paul demonstrates his ability to “read” Lucy generously and lovingly. (That his reading is by the supposed art of phrenology is an incorporation into the story of vogue presumed science at the time. Brontë lived during the heyday decades for phrenology: for example, a leading German-language work on phrenology, by the Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater, was translated into English in 1832, when Brontë was 16, as *The Pocket Lavater, or, The Science of Physiognomy*; and, that the art of phrenology still had currency thirty years after Brontë had died is evidenced by the 1885 publication of Samuel Robert Wells’ *How to Read Character: A New Illustrated Hand-Book of Phrenology and Physiognomy, for Students and Examiners; with A Descriptive Chart.*)

As was discussed in an earlier chapter that addresses Plato, there may well have been artistic reasons why Brontë chose to have M. Paul “read” Lucy in this way by means of phrenology. In any case, M. Paul’s generous and loving reading of Lucy connects importantly with the notion of attention as understood by both Weil and Murdoch, as really looking, “making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 42). From their initial meeting, M. Paul continues to pay close attention to Lucy. He determines her potential as well as ascertains her weaknesses. He concludes from his reading of her that she needs to be encouraged to extend herself. As Lucy’s mentor, M. Paul will later draw Lucy to discover herself what she is truly capable of. M. Paul has a positive impact on her life—he guides her to improve herself and thereby to improve her happiness and her prospects. He awakens her to further her education because he judges that she is ready. He exemplifies the power of a teacher to open a mind.

Villette contains a number of characters whose presence is significant to Lucy’s growth and progress in attention. Teaching staff include Madame Beck (the astute school director and teacher of Geography), M. Paul (the French literature teacher and subsequent mentor to Lucy), and Josef Emmanuel (M. Paul’s talented musician brother). Other teachers on the staff include senior Mistress Madame Zélie St. Pierre (with an eye for M. Paul), and the German Mistress, Fräulein Anna Brun. Other major characters include Doctor John (formerly Graham Bretton, a childhood acquaintance from England who reappears as an adult in the town of Villette), Ginevra Fanshaw (a coquettish school student and eventual friend of Lucy, who is initially both pursued by and in pursuit of, Doctor John), Père Silas (an elderly Jesuit priest and earlier mentor to M. Paul), Paulina (first known to Lucy as Polly, now seventeen and Ginevra’s rival for Doctor John, and ultimately the Countesse de Bassompierre). In

addition to these characters, there is a group of minor characters including Madame Bretton (mother to Dr John, also originally from England, godmother to Lucy), Marie Broc (a handicapped student at Madame Beck's *pensionnat* who is entirely dependent on the attentions of others). Other characters include Rosine and Goton, household staff at the *pensionnat*, M. Minon (bookseller, and eventually Lucy's landlord), Mrs Sweeny (the alcoholic governess whose governess job is given to Lucy when she first arrives), and a spectral apparition in the form of a ghostly nun.

The majority of the novel recounts, through Lucy's eyes, her struggles to find her way at Madame Beck's *pensionnat*, not just as a novice teacher, but as one whose larger challenge is to become a balanced and integrated person. Events include an account of Lucy's experience as an actor in the school vaudeville, her torrid first experiences as a classroom teacher, several occasions in which she is emotionally overcome by a spectral apparition, as well as a period of serious and complete mental collapse. A significant portion of the book focuses on Lucy's social circumstances and her emergent, awkward, turbulent, and at times repressed, feelings for two male professionals who figure predominantly in her life, first Dr John, and subsequently her French literature teacher and eventual mentor, M. Paul. Of these two men, it is the literature teacher who emerges as the truer mentor for Lucy, the one who proves worthier of being (platonically) loved.

Perhaps like Brontë herself, *Villette's* protagonist sets out to become a teacher more out of necessity than out of any particular sense of calling. Teaching is a profession for which Lucy appears rather ill-suited, both by temperament and by mental disposition. She is depressive, emotionally insecure, evasive and unreliable. She is subject to flights of fancy, and is not yet awakened to the power of reasoned thought. Lucy must come to a better understanding of her own self, through attention, before she can lay claim to the role of a teacher able to attend to the needs of her own students. To achieve this level of self-understanding, Lucy's reason and emotion must be brought into better balance. Initially, Lucy is all emotion, too vulnerable and needy of being nurtured herself to be able to see her own deficiencies, including her own lack of respect and self-respect. Until Lucy has developed her capacity for true attention, she frequently appears to use her own energy to sabotage herself.

4.3. *Themes of recollection and introspection*

Villette is a novel of recollection and introspection. Narrated by a much older Lucy Snowe, whose hair “which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow” (Brontë, 2004, p. 51), the novel is her reflection on her past and its effects in shaping her life. The novel is a reconstruction of Lucy’s memories, extending back as far as her early teens, although largely concentrated on her eighteen-month tenure as a novice teacher at Madame Beck’s *pensionnat*.

As an account of a much earlier time in her life, there are times when Lucy’s memory draws a blank, and she is unable to recollect the relevant details. Sometimes she simply declares “I remember no more” (p. 181). It is entirely plausible that a person would find it difficult to reconstruct with complete accuracy an account of their distant past, particularly someone in Lucy’s situation. As the novel proceeds, various inconsistencies in Lucy’s account start to emerge and it becomes apparent that, for whatever reason, Lucy is not an altogether reliable narrator. Increasingly we realize that there is every reason to pay attention to detail, and to be on the lookout not only for possible slanted readings on Lucy’s part, but also, for potentially telling omissions by Lucy of what would have been, had they been included, important narrative details. Just as M. Paul cuts away some pages of the volumes he loans to Lucy, by these “retrenchments interrupting the narrative” (Brontë, 2004, p. 385), so does Lucy Snowe impose (whether haplessly or deliberately) certain retrenchments on her narration.³²

Concerning a matter that she does chose to convey, Lucy reports “I stored up this piece of casual information, as careful housewives store seemingly worthless shreds and fragments for which their prescient minds anticipate a possible use some day” (p. 50). Brontë’s reader must likewise attend with care, that is to say, read with attention, and sift and store information so as to create intelligent comprehension of the narrative. This is a novel that repeatedly calls on the reader to reflect on the reliability of the narrator who is telling the story. Indeed, to accept Lucy’s “guiding” narrative voice uncritically and without thinking would be to fail entirely to notice what pedagogical attention is all about.

³² For example, Lucy fails to reveal that the person who assists her on her first night in *Villette* is both Graham Bretton and Dr John, she conceals her interest in M. Paul until well into the novel, and she withholds from the reader for a time, her realisation that the “ghost” is in fact a prank by young de Hamal.

In his 1910 work *How we think*, American educationist John Dewey makes the point that “the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt” (Dewey, 2012, p. 12). He notes further that:

Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful. (p. 13)

Brontë’s text entices in the reader an equivalent sense of suspense, of questioning, of disquiet—a sense of mystery—by the many diversions, misunderstandings, confusions over identity, and apprehensions in the story, as well as the various breaks in the narrative. The text draws us into a somewhat forensic approach to the very reading of it as we navigate its puzzles and challenges. We as readers are called upon to adopt an inquiring attitude to the text, a role not dissimilar to the scrutinising attitude to which Madame Beck herself subjects Lucy. As readers, we are like the spy who has to become what he sees. Further, we must acknowledge how unlikely it is that anyone retelling their own story, particularly one that includes such misery and affliction as the younger Lucy suffers, would, or ever could, be a completely reliable source of information.

Menon also observes that Lucy’s tendency to neurotic or fearful fantasies not only impedes her progress and understanding of others, but also gets in the way of our understanding of her. That Lucy is not a forthcoming narrator becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses. She neither delivers a straightforward story, nor works to establish an open and trusting connection with her reader. On the contrary, she admits she can be mischievous, teasing and ironic. Not only does Lucy misdirect the reader, she also admits to a spirit of mischievous play: “I liked, for instance, to see M. Emanuel jealous; it lit up his nature and woke his spirit” (Brontë, 2004, p. 171). While Lucy’s voice is human, it sometimes has a slightly sarcastic edge.

For much of the novel Lucy describes M. Paul in negative or forbidding terms – as when she reports that “[his cloak] hung dark and menacing; the tassel of his bonnet grec sternly shadowed his left temple; his black whiskers curled like those of a wrathful cat; his blue eye had a cloud in its glitter” (p. 170), or as when Lucy notes that M. Paul’s complexion betokens his fiery mood. Thereby Lucy, or Brontë, brings ideas to the reader’s mind, by implication and by association, and only slowly does the reader become aware that these

details may be at odds with other aspects, in this case of M. Paul's behaviour. Consequently Lucy, or Brontë, both perplexes and challenges the reader. Lucy is as cautious and ungenerous with important details of her story as she is ungenerous with her handmade gift for M. Paul, which she withholds for no clear reason, despite his obvious mystification and disappointment (p. 377).

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) identify Lucy Snowe as a persistently "self-effacing narrator" who evades revealing herself to the reader and who "often seems to be telling any story but her own" (p. 416). Lucy readily admits that she has a tendency towards secrecy and non-disclosure: "it suited me to be alone—quite alone" (Brontë, 2004, p. 502). She expresses a preference to withdraw "to a quiet nook, whence unobserved I could observe" (p. 156). Lucy conceals details, deflects our attention, masks meaning, and sometimes withholds from the reader critical information, only to reveal it some chapters further on. She never tells anything until she herself is ready, and it falls to the reader to detect these matters and to seek to clarify or revisit details previously obscured in the text. These features all serve to reinforce the importance of attention as a signal concept in the text.

Lucy's unreliable narration sets up a tension between her narrative "remembering" alongside the novel's "showing". Evidence of Lucy's unreliability as narrator includes her failure to report certain material details until much later in the story—such as withholding the identity of Dr John at a critical juncture in the story, or failing to document particular acts of attentiveness or generosity on the part of M. Paul. "I forgot to enumerate many a paper of chocolate confits" (p. 384), precisely in order to portray him in a poor light. When Lucy explains how M. Paul came to be more her mentor than her colleague, she recalls vaguely the area of study that he offered to help her with: "I think it was arithmetic" (p. 389). Lucy excuses herself to the reader for these acts of narrative omission or erasure, but without apology: "To *say* anything of the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself" (p. 196).

Brontë further sustains a sense of Lucy's non-disclosure and changeability by the use of multiple names to refer to the key characters in the work. Ginevra calls Lucy by a number of different names including "cynic", "old Crusty", "old Diogenes" p. 98 (this refers to a Greek philosopher 320 BCE who was opposed to the corrupt society he lived in), "Mother Wisdom" p. 98, and "Timon" (footnoted as "misanthrope"). On the occasion of the school vaudeville, where Lucy acts the part of a man, M. Paul refers to her as "M. Lucien". Dr

John's name is given many variations: "Graeme Bretton", "Dr Bretton", and "Dr John". The diminutive Polly is also known as "Paulina Home". Monsieur Paul's name is given the greatest number of variations, including "M. Emanuel", "Professor Monsieur Paul", "Professor Paul Emmanuel", "Professor M. Paul", "M. Paul", "P. Emmanuel", "Paul Carl Emmanuel", and "Paul Carlos David Emmanuel", sometimes reduced to the initials "P D C E". He is also referred to as "the Priest's Pupil" (p. 449), a name that possibly anticipates the title of Murdoch's 1983 novel, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, also a novel that explores the complex relationship between master and student.

Because Lucy alternates character names within a chapter—or sometimes even within a paragraph—the reader is potentially distracted, their attention momentarily diverted from the character's true identity. In another of her tricks, Lucy deliberately withholds a version of the name that would reveal more to the reader than she wishes to disclose. For example, she withholds from the reader for many chapters the fact that she first reconnects with Dr John at the coach station on her arrival in *Villette*, as well as failing to mention that the two education appraisers who come to examine Lucy's writing skills are the same two people who had harassed her on her arrival into *Villette*. Lucy is consternated by the reappearance of these two as her examiners, and this motivates her to write an impassioned and pointed improvisation on the theme of 'Human Justice' (p. 445). Yet whereas Plato's *The Republic* concerns Justice in the abstract, considered as a Form, Brontë, and Lucy, are drawn to consider Justice rather more concretely. They do not differ from Plato in holding that the subject of Justice is to be considered reflectively, by a rational consideration, but they are perhaps not on all fours with Plato regarding the abstractness of his thinking.

As has already been mentioned, Lucy is selective in the narrative details that she provides. She only reveals to us as much as she wishes to share. Yet in doing this she sometimes reveals more about herself than she realizes. For instance, Lucy overtly portrays herself as shy, insular, and at times non-communicative—someone who finds it difficult to communicate with others. Yet, when given the opportunity to take part in the school vaudeville, we find Lucy showing herself able to perform very well in front of an audience. She even insists on limiting her actor costume to a few token pieces rather than taking on a full disguise. Sometimes it is Lucy who is herself surprised by a revelation. For instance, towards the end of the novel she discovers that the identity of the Catholic priest to whom she had made her confession, is none other than M. Paul's mentor, Père Silas. By these means,

Brontë creates a series of revelations and potential confusions for the reader—events that are pivotal to the novel's themes of discovery, revelation, and attention.

Although Lucy is very keen to observe others, she reveals that she dislikes it intensely when she has to submit to being observed herself. She does not like to find herself under someone else's gaze. It is not clear whether Lucy breaks M. Paul's eyeglasses accidentally or deliberately, but there is a suggestion that if she can't stop his gaze upon her, she can nevertheless use other means to impede his ability to see her clearly (p. 362). She prefers to observe others from the side-line, in secret, and she does not herself wish for Madame Beck, M. Paul, or anyone else, to be able to read her countenance. She consistently avoids direct encounters—she hides in shadows, uses clothing, poor lighting, or means of disguise to conceal herself: "I kept rather in the shade and out of sight, not wishing to be immediately recognised" (p. 240). Brontë's novel is so designed that despite Lucy's efforts at concealment of herself, she simultaneously reveals the harmful effects of holding in these "pent up" emotions on her mental and physical health, and ultimately, on her human functioning. Lucy's efforts to be aloof, private and separate, and her inclination to keep herself at a distance from others are, ultimately, catastrophic.

During the course of the novel we learn a great deal about Lucy's spirit and strength of will, and also about her physical and emotional susceptibilities. Lucy has an uncompromising personality. While she is a bright spark intellectually, ambitious for intellectual development, she is also censorious, intolerant, and quick to judge. She is depicted as neurotic, mentally fragile and emotionally volatile. Lucy uses isolation as a strategy to cope with her anxieties, but in her failure to make connection with others, she appears to lose entirely her sense of who she is herself. Lucy strains to withhold convulsive feelings and emotions and she suffers from an implied sexual agitation and frustration that threatens to destabilize her (see further Menon, 2003). She is subject to emotional swings of mood that impede her capacity to interact with others or to make the most of her intellectual potential. She is constitutionally uneasy and irritable and admits that she inflicts unpleasant and difficult behaviour on others: "I continued silent and icy" (Brontë, 2004, p. 540).

In Lucy, Brontë presents human characteristics that are real and unpleasant and ultimately self-limiting: Lucy displays various familiar yet unpleasant aspects of human personality. Because Lucy has been in the beginning self-preoccupied and not always entirely pleasant, her capacity to connect with others, or to see the good in others, has been limited. Lucy has been someone who has yet to learn to give attention to a reality beyond her own

self. Lucy has been subject to swings of mood, has been frequently melancholy and low spirits, and she has been one to tend to dwell on egotistical concerns. She has been unstable emotionally and, for most of the novel, appears to be on the verge of deep depression. She has suffered great terrors of the mind and her state at one time or another in her past is repeatedly described as “morbid”.

That Lucy repeatedly apprehends a ghost further reflects her mental susceptibility and vulnerability. She tells us that she has literally days of being entirely ill at ease: “Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe” (p. 132). It is likely that today there would be medical treatment for such depressive ailments as the younger Lucy suffered from. It is possible too, that part of Lucy’s struggle (as was possibly also the case for philosopher Simone Weil) is an unspoken fear of her own aspiring potential.

It must be acknowledged that Lucy’s life contains many setbacks. She has no family and no ties. Possibly due to some previous tragedy in her life, she has no parents or siblings. A shipwreck in her early life is mentioned but beyond the brief details that “I must somehow have fallen overboard...In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished” no further facts are provided (p. 39). Lucy has been mentally fragile and emotionally volatile. She has been uprooted and she has been very alone—not only geographically, but also culturally, socially, linguistically, even existentially. Lucy’s suffering in the absence of human companionship or contact is reminiscent of Weil’s own suffering. Lucy observes that “the world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement” (p. 303). Weil summarises the experience of extreme suffering or affliction thus: “Suffering, teaching and transformation. What is necessary is not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them which makes them capable of receiving the teaching” (Weil, 1997, p. 83).

During the long school summer break, Lucy is left virtually alone at the school. During this period she suffers from a lack of intellectual stimulation or a sense of human connection. It is likely that the lack of contact either with other people or with the intellectual connections to the arts and literature that school life had provided for her, precipitates her as a lonely young woman into a state of deep affliction: “I wanted companionship, I wanted friendship, I wanted counsel. I could find none of these in closet, or chamber, so I went and sought them in church and confessional” (Brontë, 2004, pp. 206–207).

During this period, Lucy is called upon to provide complete care and assistance for a “poor deformed and imbecile pupil, a sort of crétin” for several weeks (p. 172). It seems that this additional demand on Lucy, on top of her isolation and loneliness, is what precipitates her major breakdown. She later describes the time she spends caring for Marie Broc as nothing short of “terrible”. She reports that when during the extended holiday period she was alone with Marie Broc, the “strange deformed companion”, a state of “sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me—a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly” (p. 173). Lucy experiences fear, resentment and resistance towards her charge who “rarely spoke, and would sit for hours together mopping and mowing and distorting her features with indescribable grimaces, it was more like being prisoned with some strange tameless animal, than associating with a human being” (p. 174). When she later tells M. Paul that it was “terrible” to be alone with Marie Broc (p. 227), he admonishes her sternly and calls her an “egotist” (p. 227). While he admits to Lucy that Marie Broc is a difficult and demanding person, he tells Lucy that while Marie Broc’s unfortunate situation may stir negative sentiments, by the light of any thoroughgoing consideration, it calls for leniency and compassion:

Her personal appearance, her repulsive manners, her often unmanageable disposition, irritated his temper, and inspired him with strong apathy....On the other hand, her misfortunes constituted a strong claim on his forbearance and compassion—such a claim as was not in his nature to deny. (p. 227)

In this instance, M. Paul again demonstrates his capacity to give attention to another in just the meaning intended by Weil. Weil reminds us that true attention helps us to see what we are otherwise disposed to overlook completely. Attention means to consider of another person “What are you going through?” (Weil, 2009, p. 64). However, in this situation it is Lucy who is herself also a suffering person. In the condition she is in, she is utterly unable to show fellow-feeling to Marie Broc as another suffering person. Lucy says that “a want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine...I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf” (Brontë, 2014, p. 175), and “I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight” (p. 178). Weil reminds us that: “as for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of ever wishing to do so. Thus compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility” (Weil, 2009, p. 69.) In her own affliction, Lucy loses all sense of dignity and purpose, and she is totally devoid of goodness:

Indescribably was I torn, racked and oppressed in mind...galled was my inmost spirit with an unutterable sense of despair about the future. Motive there was none why I should try to recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors. (Brontë, 2004, pp. 176–177)

Rorty (1989), cited in Menon, 2003, p. xvi) also comments upon the importance of “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers...Solidarity is created by increasing our sensitivity to particular details of the pain and humiliation of the other, unfamiliar sorts of people.” To understand Lucy, we have to see her as herself a suffering person—someone who, given her own turmoil, is as yet unable to show care for others. Because of her own desperate situation, Lucy is largely insensitive to the difficulties of other people. It is only following her recovery from this dark time that we see her start to make some small progress in respect of her ability to give attention to others and to master her own inner turmoil.

In this regard we see further links to the writing of Weil who describes such affliction as a devastating experience, “an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain” (Weil, 2009, p. 68). Only once Lucy realizes that there really is no answer to her distress does she begin to demonstrate a subtle change in perspective, and a slight change in her readings of the world. The occasion of Lucy’s crisis comes at the end of Volume One of *Villette*, indicating that it is indeed intended to be a turning point in the novel. It is following this major crisis that Lucy quite literally finds herself in a situation that is both familiar and yet entirely unfamiliar (the relocated household of the Bretton family). It is following this crisis that she resolves to bury her ultimately uninteresting letters from Dr John, and it is also following this crisis that she is able to countenance a different reading of the spectral nun, although it will appear to her several further times.

4.4. *Attention, respect and humility*

To some extent *Villette* is a Victorian gothic tale for thoughtful readers. The narrative action is propelled largely by a series of chance coincidences that bring fortuitous outcomes—such as when Lucy finds herself immediately outside her intended destination on her first night in Villette, or when a young man recognises her and brings her to safety following her nervous collapse outside the church. Lucy’s subsequent recuperation and recovery at the

home of her godmother Mrs Bretton, is another such example. Yet while these coincidental events propel the action of the story, they are not themselves pivotal turning points in terms of Lucy's on-going growth in moral agency and understanding.

To signal Lucy's capacity for moral progress and improvement, Brontë employs a metaphor of forward movement to imply her "improving" or ascending trajectory. For example, when Lucy goes to visit a friend to find out about possibly heading to London, she is moved by the natural phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis, whose energy literally inspires her to "go out hence" (Brontë, 2004, p. 49). A further occasion takes place the following evening. From her London hotel bed, Lucy hears the chimes of St Paul's Cathedral (whose name and cultural associations anticipate the presence of her future teaching mentor). Lucy reports that she experiences a "strong, vague persuasion, that it was better to go forward than backward, and that I *could* go forward (p. 52). A subsequent example occurs when Lucy responds to Madame Beck's question to Lucy when given the opportunity to enter the classroom as a teacher, whether Lucy will go forward, or backwards. On this occasion, despite her misgivings, Lucy declares her resolve to proceed 'En avant' (p. 86).

The metaphor of Lucy's forward momentum connects with Murdoch's notion of moral progress as incremental, on-going, evolving (Murdoch 2014, p. 76). Attention, as detailed by Murdoch, is a process that is "progressive...endless" (p. 23). Murdoch calls us to recognise the importance of attention as central to our moral vision of the world. "More than simply looking", Murdoch says, attention is "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (p. 33). Murdoch argues that *attention* is what enables us to see and behave in the light of moral considerations. Attention develops our sensitivity to those around us. Attention is the means by which we are able to factor in wider considerations than just our own.

Lucy's task of learning to see things 'as they really are', calls for on-going attention to detail. Her repeated apprehension of a ghostly nun offers further links to Murdoch's notion of attention. The spectral nun appears at various times in the novel, including in the attic, when Lucy is preparing her lines for the theatrical performance, in the garden, and in the dormitory. These apparitions cause Lucy considerable emotional distress, but are subsequently explained away as a coincidence that involves a childish prank by a young man, De Hamel, who is pursuing Ginevra. In hindsight, Lucy reveals to us that her earlier apprehensions of the ghostly nun, while very real to her at the time, are explicable in terms of coincidence and a silly prank. The repeated appearance of Lucy's ghost connects to Lucy's

susceptibility to thoughts of fantasy (as opposed to imaginative explorations), and her subsequent understanding of her previous susceptibility to fantasy and superstition.

For Murdoch, fantasy is the opposite of imagination. Murdoch warns that humans are too readily distracted by thoughts that are fanciful, inward-looking, self-limiting: “Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes patterns upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete” (p. 85). Murdoch reminds us of the need to keep the attention “fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair” (p. 89). Murdoch notes further that:

It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is...we act rightly ‘when the time comes’ not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available. (p. 89)

Lucy’s lesson from her ghostly ‘apparitions’ is that she needs to learn to attend better to contexts, and to widen the way that she reads situations.

In order to grow in understanding both of herself and of the world, Lucy’s task is to expand her reading of the world. Lucy has to be prepared to rise above her own individual perspective. To do this, she has to accept that there may be other readings, other ways of seeing. This realization does not come easily to Lucy, for she has a habit of viewing the world very much in terms of her own strategies for concealment. Lucy imputes that spying is Madame Beck’s *modus operandi*, although it is equally, if not more the case, that spying and espionage epitomise Lucy’s way of conducting herself. Lucy’s criticism of Madame Beck: “Yet, woe be to that man or woman who relied on her one inch beyond the point where it was her interest to be trustworthy” (Brontë, 2004, p. 81) could equally well apply to Lucy herself. (For a richer discussion of the trustworthiness of the narrative voice in *Villette*, see Menon, 2003, pp. 116–121.)

Following Murdoch, we see that Lucy needs to learn to attend better to contexts—to consider things as if they might be otherwise, and not to jump to hasty conclusions. Lucy does experience momentary glimpses of selfless attention. For example, on the evening of her arrival in *Villette*, when she “fixedly looked at the street-stones, where the lamp shone, and counted them, and noted their shapes, and the glitter of wet on their angles” (Brontë, 2004, p. 71), we are reminded of Murdoch’s comment that “We take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees: ‘Not how the

world is, but that it is, is the mystical” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 83). Other, similar occasions, such as when Lucy admires the genius of several still-life paintings in the art gallery, are brief and disconnected. In contexts such as during her early experiences as a classroom teacher, Lucy’s capacity for attention to others is, perhaps understandably, shown to be poor.

Following Lucy’s installation into Madame Beck’s *pensionnat*, her immediate needs for shelter and sustenance are satisfied. Although she does not yet have a home, she at least has both a residence and she has employment—as governess to the director’s three children. Lucy has time to settle in and learn about her new setting. Through Lucy we learn that the quality of education offered at M. Beck’s *pensionnat* is variable at best, and that poorly performing staff are constantly being dismissed and replaced. Lucy reports that there are teachers who are drunk, irresponsible, cruel, unreliable, and ill prepared for their tasks. Some are miserly, others avaricious. Classes are very large, with up to sixty pupils for some lessons.

A short time after Lucy’s admission into Madame Beck’s *pensionnat*, M. Paul asks her to stand in for someone who is unable to perform in the school play. He calls upon her to memorise the part immediately, correctly intuiting that she is ready for such a challenge. His judgement proves correct: Lucy learns the script and executes the role convincingly that very evening. Following Lucy’s successful performance, M. Paul commends her to Madame Beck and, again drawing on his observations of Lucy, tells Lucy that he can see in Lucy’s facial expression “a passionate ardour for triumph” (Brontë, 2004, p. 171). He tells Lucy that, despite her efforts to conceal her feelings, they are evident to him both in her expression and in her bearing. Monsieur Paul essentially tells Lucy that he reads her very well, and that he intends to pay close attention to her. Lucy’s subsequent self-congratulatory comments are less positive, and reveal more than a hint of hubris: “Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself” (p. 156). (For an alternative analysis of how this passage may be interpreted, see Eagleton, 1989, p. 70.) The text continues to reveal this thread of hubris in Lucy, and in ways that are never to her credit. Lucy continues to find it hard to give positive readings of her interactions with others. She finds all acts of attention complex and difficult. Her reading of situations is repeatedly clouded by her apparent negativity and lack of regard for the agency of others.

Details of Madame Beck’s school reveal that the *pensionnat* has around one hundred day pupils, as well as many borders, and there are four teachers on the staff, as well as eight masters and six servants. Lucy reports that the school setting is rather pleasant, with gardens

and smaller teaching rooms as well as the main classrooms. Lucy observes that the teachers are “the more stringently tasked, as all the real head-labour was to be done by them, in order to save the pupils” (Brontë, 2004, p. 82). One day, the school’s English teacher fails to arrive and Madame Beck approaches Lucy to ask her to step in. Lucy has absolutely no preparation for this role, and while she had previous employment as a lady’s maid and a governess, she has never before been a classroom teacher. Moreover, her mastery of French, the language of instruction, is very weak. Nevertheless, when Madame Beck demands of Lucy “Will you go backward or forward?” (p. 86), Lucy calls upon her commitment to forward progress and, almost to her own surprise, assents to the challenge, despite her palpable fear and anxiety.

Lucy is literally thrust into the school classroom. Here she confronts an unruly group of more than sixty students: “I shall never forget that first lesson, nor all the under-current of life and character it opened up to me” (p. 88). Lucy’s first classroom lesson is, by her own accounts, nothing more than an exercise in crowd control: “I knew I looked a poor creature, and in many respects actually was so, yet nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion” (p. 88). Desperate to gain control by force, Lucy singles out several particularly unruly students and scorns them in front of their peers. She ridicules and then tears up the work of the first student, and then treats the second student equally, if not more cruelly, than the first. She uses stealth to take this student by surprise. She pushes the second girl into a cupboard and locks her in. Lucy then protects herself behind the estrade as if a barricade, as if to further withhold her own self. At the close of the lesson, Lucy discovers somewhat to her surprise that Madame Beck has been outside the classroom spying on Lucy’s performance the whole time. Madame Beck indicates her satisfaction with the way that Lucy has managed the situation, and so it comes about that Lucy is appointed to her first teaching post.

After a first few difficult lessons delivered “amidst peril and on the edge of a moral volcano” (p. 91), Lucy appears to make some progress as a novice teacher. As with all teachers, Lucy has bad and good days. By her own accounts she eventually manages to gain some measure of control over the class, although she reveals that she employs sarcasm as well as other dubious techniques to gain this control. Lucy is highly critical of the girls she teaches. She is supercilious towards them and finds in them no redeeming features at all. She considers them dull-witted, indolent, work-shy and plodding. She has no respect or regard for them, but perhaps this is an indication that she also has very little regard or respect for herself. She dismisses these students as “foreign girls, who hardly ever will think and study for

themselves—who have no idea of grappling with a difficulty” (p. 336). She continues to be ungenerous and unflattering towards her students whom she considers a “stiff-necked tribe”, a “swinish multitude” (p. 91), dull and mediocre in relation to their English counterparts. She ridicules what she considers to be their hissing attempts to speak the English language and overall, her tone towards them is one of cultural condescension:

They were to be humoured, borne with very patiently: a courteous though sedate manner impressed them; a very rare flash of raillery did good. Severe or continuous mental application they could not, or would not, bear: heavy demand on the memory, the reason, the attention, they rejected point-blank. (p. 91)

Lucy is initially a poor reader of others—not only of M. Paul, but also of her students as well. She views them in terms of her own cultural and national prejudices and makes no effort to understand them as individuals. She describes her students in derisory terms—as creatures in need of being trained and subdued: “I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of firm heel, than otherwise” (p. 92). For Lucy at this point in her development as a teacher, classroom teaching is a battle, a form of combat to eliminate the voices of her students, rather than an opportunity for her to develop her art or craft. Lucy finds teaching frightening and tiring, at least until she finds her way. Initially she is constricted, controlling, and overbearing. She withholds herself from her students, is fearful and anxious. Lucy cannot give her attention to her students until she is herself fully well.

Lucy’s disrespect for her students extends to the wider community of Villette as well. She is as uncomplimentary and patronising towards the European culture of Labassecour as she is to her own pupils. Perhaps in part due to her own sense of physical displacement and her own insecurity, Lucy sets herself pridefully apart from the local people. She considers herself culturally superior in all respects. When she observes M. Paul deliver a patriotic public speech to the local people she observes coolly, and with some conceit: “Who would have thought the flat and fat soil of Labassecour could yield political convictions and national feelings, such as were now strongly expressed?” (p. 344). Lucy has such misplaced sense of her English superiority over the culture she has entered that she carries a powerful sense of herself as “above” the people she is now living among. In this regard, Lucy appears to perpetrate the arrogance of English colonists brought into contact with people of a different and unfamiliar culture.

Lucy's lack of cultural sensitivity resonates with Spivak's observation that nineteenth century English literature embodies an English imperialist view, thereby perpetrating "the production of cultural representation" and "axioms of imperialism" (Spivak, 1985, p. 243, p. 244, as cited in Cooper's Introduction to *Villette*, p. xl.) This is not to say that Brontë herself held imperialist views, and on the contrary, while it is possible to read Lucy's account as English imperialist, the clear invitation to the reader is to think again. Lucy's cultural attitudes underscore her lack of respect for others, a lack of respect that, while it lasts within her, will impede her as a teacher. In this way, Lucy's foibles and her eventual surpassing of them bring to mind Murdoch's account of attention as the ability to relate to others. Murdoch tells us that "we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot)" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 31). Seen in this light, Lucy's need for attention is of key importance to her own ongoing education.

During her weeks of recuperation following her total physical and mental collapse, Lucy occasionally frequents the local art museum. Although she finds the majority of the paintings eminently forgettable, she detects in just a very few paintings the genius of artistic achievement: "An expression in this portrait proved clear insight into character; a face in that historical painting, by its vivid filial likeness, startlingly reminded you that genius gave it birth" (Brontë, 2004, p. 223). In particular, she admires a series of still-life paintings:

I betook myself for refreshment to the contemplation of some exquisite little pictures of still life: wildflowers, wild fruit, mossy wood-nests, casketing eggs that looked like pearls seen through clear green sea-water; all hung modestly beneath that coarse and preposterous canvas. (p. 224)

By contrast, Lucy is very unimpressed by a nude painting entitled 'Cleopatra' as well as a set of a set of four paintings which depict four stages of a woman's life trajectory—young girl, married woman, mother, and finally widow. Neither these four paintings, nor the previous painting of the nude Cleopatra holds any interest for Lucy. None of them offers her a model of a thinking female person:

All these four 'Anses' were grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers. (p. 226)

Lucy speaks to M. Paul of her frustration that she can't find a workable representation of a thinking female person in any of these images. He makes it abundantly clear to Lucy that he disapproves of her regard of the painting of the Cleopatra—perhaps because he considers it potentially corrupting for her to view such a sexually suggestive image, or maybe because he considers that it will excite too vividly her already overactive imagination. Perhaps M. Paul (for the moment) imagines, in his own way over-actively, and also wishfully, that Lucy might one day warm to him sexually and warm to his warming sexually to her, and he wishes to dispel the prejudice that that would in Lucy be an unthinking state. Or, perhaps not. The reader is not given M. Paul's interpretation of the situation. In any case, Lucy does ultimately manage to forge an identity for herself as a thinking person, although perhaps not quite in the way that she expects. Lucy achieves this in no small measure due to the pedagogical attention bestowed on her by the French literature teacher, M. Paul himself.

Brontë invokes, through both her major and minor characters, a variety of interpretations of the notion of attention. These different interpretations have important pedagogical implications in the novel. They reflect the partial understanding of attention of the majority of the major characters—Lucy, Ginevra Fanshawe, Madame Beck, Dr John, as well as several of the novel's minor characters. None of these interpretations of attention come close to that understood by Weil and Murdoch, and their very partial interpretations throw into relief the depth and quality of pedagogical attention that is bestowed by Lucy's mentor teacher, M. Paul.

Lucy's interpretation of attention when working as Miss Marchmont's maid rests upon the notion of service or servitude. Her attention in this context implies a kind of involuntary submission that relates to her contractual obligation as an employee. Later, when she is promoted to classroom teacher, but is as yet naïve in this role, Lucy makes use in her teaching strategy of a militaristic interpretation of attention. She considers the classroom a potential battleground, and calls upon physical force and cruelty to establish her authority. She uses a raised voice to maintain control, and shows no regard for the agency of her students. Yet these are months during which, as Lucy reveals, she finds it very difficult to focus her own attention or to concentrate her mind. Her attention readily wanders and she is all too easily distracted.

Supporting characters in the novel also display partial or limited interpretations of attention. Ginevra Fanshawe understands attention solely in terms of self-regard. Her attentional compass is entirely driven by vanity. She is forever preoccupied with ways to draw

attention to her charms, her appearance, her costume. Dr John's understanding of attention-giving is partial in a different way. He is entirely selective in the way he bestows his attention. While his medical attention to his patients is diligent and complete, his attention to both Polly and to Lucy in the domestic sphere, is shown to be partial at best. Madame Beck, whose very slippers are described as "souliers de silence" (Brontë, 2004, p. 81), is described as if forever scanning Lucy, suspiciously of Lucy's deeds, and suspiciously even of Lucy's thoughts.

On Lucy's first night at the *pensionnat*, she wakes up with the awareness that Madame Beck is at her bedside. Madame Beck furtively sorts through and examines Lucy's possessions (p. 76) and boldly takes a wax impression of Lucy's keys for her own purposes. Lucy later declares of Madame Beck that surveillance and espionage were her "watchwords" (p. 80). In short, Madame Beck reduces attention to suspicion. The attention of several of the minor teaching characters is altogether to objects of pleasure. In them, attention expresses itself but in an all-consuming addiction, whether to whiskey or to money. Several other teachers are described in terms of deficiencies in their attention to the needs of their students (p. 387).

Of all the characters in *Villette*, it is Lucy's colleague and eventual mentor teacher, M. Paul, who best embodies attention in the sense understood by both Weil and Murdoch. M. Paul's attention to the world combines aesthetic, moral and epistemological dimensions. M. Paul epitomises the kind of attention and regard for others described by Murdoch as a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality...the proper mark of the active moral agent" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 33). The theme of M. Paul's generous reading of Lucy, counterpointed with Lucy's difficulty in reading others, provides important links to the philosophy of Simone Weil.

Weil's epistemology is founded on the concept of reading, and her account of reading informs an understanding of Lucy Snowe. Weil uses the metaphor of "reading" to describe the way that we make sense of what we apprehend in the world. She argues that all our experiences of the world (whether actual or through interpreting text), involve "reading", since to experience is to interpret, which is to "read" the world. Weil acknowledges that to read carefully calls for considerable effort, and that, if done thoughtfully, is the means by which we shape thought to develop our conceptual understanding and moral awareness. Weil cautions that we may we read a situation, or a person, incorrectly. So too, may we ourselves be misread (Weil, 1997, p. 135). In another context, Weil observes that:

[W]hen dealing with documents it is necessary to read between the lines, allow

oneself to be transported entirely, with a complete forgetfulness of self, into the atmosphere of the events recalled, keep the attention fixed for a very long time on any little significant details and discover exactly what their full meaning is. (Weil, 2002, p. 222)

Lucy's reading of her world is, by definition, partial. Lucy is very keen to read others, but she is very reluctant to be herself read by others. Yet, as Weil reminds us, without proper attention, we are all disposed to read from an egotistical perspective. Weil reminds us that "what we expect from others depends upon the effect of gravity upon ourselves; what we receive from them depends on the effects of gravity upon them" (Weil, 1997, p. 45). This puts into context Lucy's need for attention, and her need to develop in herself the capacity to attend to others in a benevolent way. Lucy is initially only able to read her context in terms of her own survival, and to read others in terms of their potential risks to herself. She finds it impossible to detangle love from secrecy or possessiveness. She mistrusts people and tends to impute negative readings on her encounters with others—Madame Beck, M. Paul, the other teachers on the staff, the students she is to teach, Père Silas, even Dr John.

Whereas M. Paul is readily disposed to give a positive reading of Lucy's character, it does not come naturally to Lucy to read others with equal generosity. This is made evident in the many conscious omissions in Lucy's narration. She later admits that she omits small and repeated acts of kindness by M. Paul precisely in order to depict him as an extreme, even tyrannical personality. M. Paul, by contrast, reads others from a centre of generosity, and thus open-mindedly, in a way that admits fallibility and allows for other possible readings. Over time, the quality of Lucy's reading of her situation becomes more positive and more flexible.

Whereas she initially considers Monsieur Paul a "dark little man...pungent and austere...a harsh apparition, with his close-shorn, black head, his broad, sallow brow, his thin cheek, his wide and quivering nostril" (Brontë, 2004, p. 142), later she sees him in a considerably more favourable light: "I know not that I have ever seen in any other human face an equal metamorphosis from a similar cause" (p. 355). To the reader, however, it appears that it is only Lucy's perception of him that has been transformed. With time, she comes to interpret and to better comprehend the sources of her own mysteries. Gradually Lucy shows herself capable of more reflective thought, and more readily able to see that it is meaningful to take an interest in the welfare of others. "Such transformations as these", says

Murdoch, “are cases of seeing the true order of the world in the light of the Good and revisiting the true, or more true, conception of that which we formerly misconceived” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 93).

Brontë makes it clear that Lucy’s learning through attention is slow going. Lucy is far less attentive in her reading of Monsieur Paul, and far slower to deliver a positive assessment of her colleague, than he is of her. Lucy continues to be a harsh critic of M. Paul for the majority of the novel. She accuses him of delivering histrionic lessons, and of being a teacher who “apostrophised with vehemence the awkward squad under his orders” (Brontë, 2004, pp. 142–143). On one occasion, Lucy discovers him at her desk, and immediately assumes he is rifling through her things, and only later acknowledges that he was simply leaving her some more material to read, as he had done on previous occasions.

Lucy also misconstrues M. Paul’s requirements for attention in his class, and mocks his objections to people sewing, alleging that his demands for attention merely reveal vanity on his part: “He...considered sewing a source of distraction from the attention due to himself” (p. 269). Later, she repeats her complaint that “M. Paul owned an acute sensitiveness to the annoyance of interruption, from whatsoever cause, occurring during his lessons” (p. 359). It falls to *Villette’s* reader to consider whether M. Paul’s strictures for attention in his classes are unreasonable or actually reasonable, and whether, or why, Lucy deliberately casts him in a poor light. Lucy’s repeated fault-finding in Monsieur Paul sometimes unwittingly throws light on flaws or dispositions that appear to be very much more her own: “He quelled, he kept down when he could, and when he could not, he fumed like a bottled storm” (p. 170).

A feature of Lucy’s misreading of M. Paul is her judgement of him as proud. She draws this conclusion, failing to recognise that what she takes to be his pride (which he manifests as self-respect) as an important element of his humility. Her repeated mis-readings of M. Paul are almost humorous: When she sees him at a charity concert she mutters: “[W]hat business had he there? What had he to do with music or the conservatoire—he who could hardly distinguish one note from another? I knew that it was his love of display and authority which had brought him there” (p. 237), little realizing his stature within the Villette arts community. M. Paul’s is not a self-effacing type of humility, but humility in the form of a clear sense of purpose, a sense of self-respect, with its automatically accompanying respect for others, and an understanding of both his capabilities and his limitations. M. Paul’s humility concerns in short a “selfless respect for reality” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 93).

M. Paul's humility is a feature of his curiosity about the world and his openness to education. He is constantly open to learn new things, and he shows Lucy that humility—the capacity to admit that we don't know—is really the only way that we can open ourselves to see new things. He admits to Lucy that he is capable of himself being mis-read, for he can admit to himself mis-reading others. If, on occasion, Paul's demands of his students seem to them unreasonable, he at the same time conveys motivations that are entirely heartfelt. His sincerity is clear. He shows by his life and his life choices his genuine commitments to others.

Humility is a key element in Weil and Murdoch's understanding of attention. On their view, humility involves being other-regarding, and is, they acknowledge, the most difficult of virtues. M. Paul's conduct towards Lucy draws together themes of attention, duty and humility. His admonishments to Lucy regarding her academic pursuits align with Simone Weil's belief in the need for humility. When he cautions Lucy not to become too keen on her own success, Lucy mimics his admonishments with sarcasm: "What did it matter whether I failed or not? Who was I that I should not fail like my betters? It would do me good to fail" (Brontë, 2004, p. 396). Lucy frequently asserts that her mentor finds fault with her simply in order to put her down, whereas seen in a different light, M. Paul registers as someone concerned that Lucy not get too caught up in her own success. As Weil comments, "[w]e do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them" (Weil, 2009, p. 62). Very late in the novel, M. Paul appeals to Lucy in terms that reveal him to be candid, humble, and truthful about his own situation: "Will Miss Lucy be the sister of a very poor, fettered, burdened, encumbered man?" (Brontë, 2004, p. 450).

M. Paul recognises in Lucy her potential and her spirit, and he wishes to respect Lucy's autonomy. M. Paul's patient attentiveness towards Lucy is reminiscent of Weil and Murdoch's account of attention as a commitment to watch, not to look for anything, but simply to wait and watch. M. Paul tells Lucy that in his view, she needs "keeping down", "watching" and "watching over" (pp. 402–403). He reminds her "I watch you and others pretty closely, pretty constantly, nearer and oftener than you or they think" (p. 403). M. Paul's attentive regard over his all students (and Lucy in particular), comes closest to Murdoch's description of attention as a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (see Murdoch, 2014, p. 33). Yet when M. Paul explains to Lucy that he watches over all the students through his window (Brontë, 2004, p. 403), she is quite outraged, and accuses him of spying: "The knowledge it brings you is bought too dear, monsieur; this coming and going by stealth degrades your own dignity" (p. 405). M. Paul's response to Lucy's outrage is

to laugh heartily at what he calls her own “high insular presence” and the “hauteur” of her judgments against him (p. 405). Against his humility, we are reminded of Lucy’s urge to humiliate.

The contrast between M. Paul’s humility and Lucy’s attempted humiliation calls for further comment. Whereas the concept of ‘humility’ has a profoundly positive meaning, the concept of ‘humiliation’ has a profoundly negative connotation. How can this be possible? The answer may relate to the two opposing conceptions of respect that are implied. According to the former concept, self-respect requires equal respect for others, and according to the latter concept, self-respect does not require equal respect for others. Humiliation is an act that a person with self-respect of the former kind is incapable of perpetrating, and it is an act that is effective only against a person whose self-respect is of the latter kind. While Lucy attempts to humiliate M. Paul, his self-respect comes from an ineluctable equal respect for others, and so he is immune, and she is not at all liable to succeed in her attempts. This is partly because M. Paul already possesses humility. It is mostly because the variety of humility that would result from any “successful” act of humiliation (a variety that we in fact never use the word ‘humility’ to name) is irrelevant to anyone of M. Paul’s character.

M. Paul plays a pivotal role in the novel. What kind of Professor is he? Is he a cruel pedagogue, as Lucy would have us believe? Is he a person who exploits and dominates Lucy, or does he engender in her a reciprocal respect and help instil in her the basis of a true friendship? To what extent is M. Paul, as her mentor teacher, the initiator of Lucy’s growth and emergence, and to what extent does Lucy learn for herself how to make better sense of things and how to look at things otherwise? Through careful narrative design, Brontë leaves these questions open as puzzles for the reader at least until the closing pages of the novel. Again, we can turn to Simone Weil for her ideas on this matter. Weil considers reading carefully as a means to see seemingly insoluble puzzles in wider or different contexts. This calls for us to broaden our perspective, to be open to further readings, and not to be limited by one reading only. Weil’s view is that reading in this way broadens understanding and elicits further possible readings.

While Lucy finds many faults with her teacher in the early and middle parts of the novel, and while she conveys these in no uncertain terms, her view of M. Paul changes completely once it is revealed that M. Paul has, like Lucy, endured considerable personal tragedy and loss in his life. When Lucy learns from Père Silas the tale of ‘the priest’s pupil’, she learns that M. Paul has had a dark past (p. 450). She also learns that M. Paul continues to

provide financial support to the family of his dead fiancée from twenty years earlier, as well as to his own former mentor, the Jesuit priest Père Silas—at considerable financial sacrifice to himself.

Against Lucy’s earlier mis-readings of M. Paul as despotic and overbearing, there is ample alternative evidence in the text to show him in quite different light, as someone who pursues good actions without seeking anything in return. It is only very late in the novel that Lucy herself comes to countenance the possibility of a positive reading of M. Paul.

M. Paul detects in Lucy her spirit and potential, and, because he has the capacity to truly feel for others, he walks alongside Lucy first as her colleague, and then as her mentor teacher. Gradually, through many small acts of attention, he draws her out of herself. He is a serious scholar, perhaps along the lines of Murdoch’s observation that a “serious scholar is also a good man who knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of his life” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 94). This leads us to a consideration of the relationship between Lucy as trainee teacher, and M. Paul as her pedagogue, in her growth towards pedagogical attention.

4.5. *The authority of M. Paul*

M. Paul is an authority figure in the novel in the double sense that he is highly knowledgeable about French literature, and also that he is a presence who commands often critical attention in the classroom. M. Paul is also an authority in the sense meant by R. S. Peters in Chapter IX of his *Ethics and education*—he is a change agent:

Paradoxically enough, a teacher must both be an authority and teach in such a way that pupils become capable of showing him where he is wrong. The teacher is an agent of change and challenge as well as of cultural conservation. (Peters, 1966, p. 261)

Against Lucy’s largely negative accounts of his manner, we can see that M. Paul is able to deal with and diffuse rivalries and tensions in the classroom. He is both shrewd and respectful, and he teaches in such a way that his pupils are often able to show him his own faults and errors. As Lucy’s mentor teacher, M. Paul both challenges and encourages Lucy. Whereas she starts out believing that her task as teacher is to dominate her pupils, to coerce and subdue them even if by physical force and restraint, she eventually learns from M. Paul’s example a better understanding of the dialectical relationship between teacher and student.

Yet Lucy's and M. Paul's verbal interchanges with one another, even to their final conversation together, are often barbed. In their interactions, Lucy vacillates between the persona of meek governess and that of angry warrior, between modes of surrender and modes of rebellion. She appears caught between an understanding of herself as weak and submissive on the one hand, and as furious and ungovernable on the other. M. Paul finds her frustrating, sympathetic and even at times amusing. He describes her as both "mournful and mutinous" (Brontë, 2004, p. 258), but Lucy feels this is unwarranted: "I am ignorant, monsieur, in the knowledge you ascribe to me, but I *sometimes*, not *always*, feel a knowledge of my own" (p. 394).

Unlike Lucy, M. Paul is an extrovert—he is charismatic, loyal and passionate. He provides Lucy with mentoring support, and intellectual challenge. He guides her to improve herself intellectually and thereby improve her prospects, such as by preparation for examinations, and improvement of her knowledge of mathematics. M. Paul demonstrates the ability to relate to others, students and staff alike. He attends to his students, arranges plays, concerts, outdoor picnics for them. He is an idiosyncratic teacher, one who uses both drama and histrionics, although he is never cruel or hypocritical. He thereby enables Lucy to become more of the kind of person she would wish herself to be. Monsieur Paul shows in his conduct that respect is an element of attention. M. Paul exemplifies this kind of humaneness in his behaviour towards Lucy, and others. He demonstrates his capacity for benevolence towards her as a person in need. From their initial encounter, he demonstrates his ability to "read" Lucy both generously and lovingly. This connects importantly with the notion of attention as understood by both Weil and Murdoch. Attention involves looking at another person with the "patient eye of love" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 39).

M. Paul's capacity for generous readings of others set alongside Lucy's tendency to be both ungenerous and partial in the way she reads others, provides important further links to the philosophy of both Weil and Murdoch. They see attention as the true foundation for relations between people—friends, teachers, students, fellow travellers, people in need. To pay attention means to really look and listen without pre-judgment or prior assumptions. Weil reminds us that our capacity for attention is what helps us to discriminate illusion from reality: "In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure what we see, we change our position while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space" (Weil, 1997, p.174). She reminds us that virtue is the disposition to do the right thing for its own sake. This, Weil argues, requires compassion, humility, and a subdued ego: "The

desire to discover something new prevents people from allowing their thoughts to dwell on the transcendent, undemonstrable meaning of what has already been discovered” (Weil, 1997, p. 184).

Both Weil and Murdoch talk of attention in terms of the ability to look with respect at another person. They also talk of the value of intellectual study, attention to the works of literary or artistic genius, as routes to attention. Weil reminds us that “the love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled ‘unfortunate’, but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction” (Weil, 1997, pp. 64–65.) M. Paul shows a genuine concern for the realities of Lucy’s predicament, as well as for her general well-being. He is mindful of her situation and encourages her to improve her lot through further education: “After all, you are solitary and a stranger, and have your way to make and your bread to earn; it may be well that you should become known. We will be friends: do you agree?” (Brontë, 2004, p. 172). Nevertheless, he is not afraid to admonish Lucy for her excesses of emotion and her lack of humility. He tells her in no uncertain terms that she is a “young, she wild creature, new caught, untamed” and he admonishes her to “take your bitter dose duly and daily” (p. 259). Weil also talks of ‘taming’ the beast in us all, and recommends that we seek to subdue our basic instincts in order to find an orientation towards goodness. (Little, 1988, pp. 120–122, provides a fuller discussion of this point.) Lucy is infuriated by his admonitions, and receives his advice in silence, but hers is the silence of sullen resistance and anger, not of acceptance. Lucy uses silence to placate him when he is angry or demanding: “Silence and attention was the best balm to apply: I listened” (Brontë, 2004, p. 147). Ultimately, however, when Lucy arrives at a considerably changed view, harmonious silence with M. Paul is something that she cherishes: “Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings; no words could inspire a pleasanter content than M. Paul’s wordless presence” (p. 385).

In his analysis of the figure of the pedagogue, Steiner (2003, p. 2), proposes three scenarios to capture the nature relations between master and disciple: (1) conflict in which the master destroys the disciple “both psychologically and, in rarer cases, physically”, (2) conflict in which the disciple betrays and ruins the master, and (3) a state of harmony and reciprocal trust between master and disciple. Lucy’s account implies that the relationship between herself and M. Paul hovers between the first and second of these scenarios, but once her tale

is told, it is evident that the relationship finds its resolution in the third. Ultimately Lucy reveals that she is changed by her teacher, and there is a reciprocal change in M. Paul as well, in terms of his ability to establish a genuine lifetime friendship between them. Lucy does not ultimately outgrow her master, but she does come to a place where she can flourish on her own terms. Lucy absorbs from M. Paul through a kind of attainment of her own the *authority* to be a teacher.

Steiner (2003) underlines the powerful sense of connection that can occur between teacher and student. He says further that “eroticism...is inwoven in teaching, in the phenomenology of mastery and discipleship” and that “the pulse of teaching is persuasion” (p. 26). He provides an account of the intensity of the pedagogue’s influence in the following terms:

Every “break-in” into the other, via persuasion or menace (fear is a great teacher) borders on, releases the erotic. Trust, offer and acceptance, have roots which are also sexual. Teaching and learning are informed by an otherwise inexpressible sexuality of the human soul ...Add to this the key point that in the arts and humanities the material being taught, the music being analysed and practised, are *per se* charged with emotions. These emotions will, in considerable part, have affinities, immediate or indirect, with the domain of love. (Steiner, 2003, pp. 26–27)

Certainly the relationship between M. Paul and Lucy from time to time suggests affinities with this domain. Brontë paints a picture of an intense and sometimes implicitly sexual tension between M. Paul and Lucy, and subdued actual sexual closeness is implied in Lucy’s comment that “the hand of M. Emmanuel was on intimate terms with my desk” (Brontë, 2004, p. 380). However, while sometimes implicitly sexual, the tension between the two is portrayed as predominantly intellectual in character. In the case of M. Paul, like Socrates, the physical attraction of the teacher to the student is interpreted in the best possible light, as an unexplored erotic desire that is kept in check, and where the energy of the relationship is largely intellectual.

Like Socrates, M. Paul does not so much convey or pass on knowledge to his disciple Lucy, as enable her to better understand herself. Like Socrates, M. Paul enjoys oral exchange and dialogue: “M. Emanuel was not a man to write books; but I have heard him lavish with careless, unconscious prodigality, such mental wealth as books seldom boast; his mind was

indeed my library; and whenever it was opened to me, I entered bliss” (p. 422). In physical terms too, M. Paul, like Socrates, is outwardly unremarkable. Both are teachers who demand attention from their students, and in both cases, there is a hint that there is an erotic dimension to this relationship.

Monsieur Paul’s mentorship of Lucy (perhaps following the example of Rousseau’s *Emile*), includes both academic and moral guidance. M. Paul embodies the Platonic notion that to give academic instruction and to support the formation of another person’s moral character is the truest and best basis for love. He reminds her that she needs to develop herself and make something of her abilities. He sees the good in her at the same time as he poses challenges, the latter frequently balanced by small acts of kindness or confidence in her, details which are often omitted until later in the story. His friendship towards Lucy is not motivated by charity, nor self-gain, but is a response that is linked to the discipline of attention. He insists that he sees their friendship in terms of reciprocity, which, in Weil’s terms, is “a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food” (Weil, 2009, p. 157). Weil elevates friendship to the highest level. She reminds us of the active quality of friendship: “Friendship is not to be sought, not to be dreamed, not to be desired; it is to be exercised (it is a virtue)” (Weil, 1997, p. 116).

M. Paul’s professional convictions about teaching are deeply held. He is shown to have high expectations for the design and delivery of classroom instruction. He abhors complacency and laziness in teachers and it is he who becomes instrumental in the removal of Madame Panache (in French, the name ‘Panache’ translates as a plume or feather hair ornament, indicating a flamboyant person) whose teaching methods he judges to be poor, and whose attitude towards teaching is in his view “self-complacent” (Brontë, 2004, p. 387). Lucy, who has up to now been his sternest critic, on this occasion approves his actions in getting this teacher “fairly rooted out of the establishment” (p. 387), and declares him to be an exacting judge of character. We may conclude that Lucy comes to understand the importance of pedagogical attention in the classroom, and now agrees with M. Paul’s assessment of Madame Panache’s teaching deficiencies. M. Paul is not, however, a vindictive person, and when, three months later, he hears that the former teacher is now in financial difficulty, he supports her to secure other work (p. 388).

Twice Lucy’s age, M. Paul is an older, wiser teacher who is instrumental in Lucy’s development. M. Paul can be fiery, impatient, he reproves Lucy, admonishes her, and

ultimately he draws out Lucy's innate talents. Through attention he helps Lucy to reconnect with her true self. Lucy learns from M. Paul's pedagogical attentions to her, how to be attentive to others. M. Paul detects in Lucy not only great potential, but also a tendency towards self-denial in the name of virtue, a tendency which he strongly discourages. He is curious about her. He genuinely learns from Lucy and sees in their connection the possibility of a true friendship. As a result of M. Paul's interest in her educational progress, Lucy comes to a place of better balance, where she has room for both reason and emotion. This reflects Steiner's suggestion that there can be a reciprocal relationship between pedagogue and student: "By a process of interaction, of osmosis, the Master learns from his disciple as he teaches him. The intensity of the dialogue generates friendship in the highest sense" (Steiner, 2003, p. 2).

M. Paul demonstrates simple taste and aesthetic discernment in the way he furnishes Lucy's new school rooms. M. Paul discourages Lucy's use of ornamentation, and discourages her any ostentatiousness in dress. In his view, humble clothing and humble origins do not have to signal deficiencies in cultural refinement. His taste correlates with respectability, virtue, and morality, as well as the careful and responsible use of resources. By Lucy's tentative exploration with her appearance and presentation, Brontë seems to suggest that her aesthetic sensibility needs to be guided and inculcated.

M. Paul is unsentimental in his dealings with Lucy. He admonishes Lucy, reminding her of the importance of good judgment: "I think your judgement is warped—that you are indifferent where you ought to be grateful—and perhaps devoted and infatuated, where you ought to be cool as your name" (p. 383). He advises Lucy to avoid self-promotion as well as egotistical pursuits, including vanity about her dress and appearance—he suggests to her critically that she sometimes tries to be too clever. M. Paul tells Lucy that passing exams is not so important since study is a worthy goal in itself. He encourages Lucy to think for herself. He teaches her by imparting knowledge, modelling, and developing in Lucy her capacity to look at things in new ways, so that her powers of rational thought are developed. He upholds the importance of critique, debate and argument, and shows Lucy how to modulate her mind away from a reliance on emotion and towards more measured and reflective responses. M. Paul understands Weil's maxim that the most important part of being a teacher is "to teach what it is to know" (Weil, 1956, p. 364). However, Lucy demonstrates considerable resentment towards his methods, and several times expresses the wish to give up entirely: "[T]each me no more. I never asked to be made learned, and you compel me to feel very

profoundly that learning is not happiness” (Brontë, 2004, p. 390). When M. Paul queries what he considers to be her remarkable ability in her studies, she comments sarcastically “to me was ascribed a fund of knowledge which I was supposed criminally and craftily to conceal” (p. 392).

Although M. Paul is shown to be volatile at times, he is never cruel, flippant, or exploitative. Like the fictional Jean Brodie, Monsieur Paul sees education as opportunity. He inculcates in his students their curiosity and interests and he encourages them to broaden their experiences. He develops Lucy’s intellectual interests, widens her reading experience, and urges her to develop her mind. He encourages her to improve her knowledge of mathematics, and arranges for her to take examinations. He gives Lucy’s written work detailed attention, and leaves in her desk material that he judges she will enjoy reading:

I saw the Brownie’s work, in exercises left over-night full of faults, and found next morning carefully corrected: I profited by his capricious good-will in loans full welcome and refreshing. Between a sallow dictionary and worn-out grammar would magically grow a fresh, interesting new work, or a classic, mellow and sweet in its ripe age. (pp. 380–381)

Against Lucy’s partial and constantly critical view of her mentor teacher, M. Paul can be seen to be a dedicated teacher, organised in both manner and classroom delivery. Against Lucy’s reportage, we can discern that he is a learned and gifted teacher. He promotes reading literature and the arts in general. He is a great storyteller, and enjoys both oral exchange and being read to. He tailors class material to the needs and interests of his students. Over time Lucy realizes that he is a person consistent in his principles, and that if he is at times overly sensitive to his own needs for attention, this relates more to his lively personality than to unreasonable or tyrannical demands. He admits to Lucy his tendency to be volatile: “I have my malevolent moods: I always had, from childhood” (p. 172). Moreover, while he loves to receive simple presents from his students, and is mildly offended if his birthday is forgotten, Lucy insists that he is never hypocritical and that his moral values are sound (p.171). We see that he seeks to connect with his students and colleagues, and that he has moral convictions, principles, and human feelings. He is honest about himself and he teaches as he means to live.

4.6. Attention and goodness

Weil and Murdoch align attention with the concept of goodness. They argue that good actions come about when people direct their attention towards finding the good in

situations, people, aesthetic achievements. M Paul embodies themes of goodness in *Villette*. His evident belief in moral goodness and his willingness to create good outcomes for other people is not limited to his reading of Lucy. Monsieur Paul is generous in ways that Lucy seeks entirely to mask in her narration. Against Lucy's account of him as a cruel and despotic man, he is revealed to be a genuinely fine and other-regarding person. M. Paul is shown as a teacher who tries to see the good in people and situations and who looks for good outcomes for others, in even the most minor of ways. (He regularly shares his lunchtime brioche with less well-off students of the third division.)

M. Paul is someone who works for the greater good, and who gets pleasure from doing that. He does not see himself as a martyr, nor does he ever strive to gain sympathy. Rather he is someone genuinely committed to the work of improving things for his society and for his students. He values honesty and hard work. While his excitable temperament is a flaw and he has the capacity to reduce his students to tears if their attention is less than it should be, this is not a moral weakness so much as an idiosyncrasy of temperament, and when this happens, his remorse is genuine and immediate. When his ultimate departure from the school is announced, the students are all completely devastated.

M. Paul's evident belief in moral goodness, and his willingness to create good outcomes for other people is not limited to his reading of Lucy. It is revealed that he also helps Père Silas, his former teacher and mentor, as well as others from his past, including Madame Walravens. He makes it a personal mission to promote and champion Lucy's talent for teaching even to the point of setting her up in her own school at the Faubourg Clotilde. He does this at his own expense, so that Lucy can enjoy independence of employment. He has a singular way of enabling Lucy to find her way as a person, even when she is not herself quite aware of what that way might prove to be.

Through M. Paul, Brontë appears to advance the conviction that genuine pedagogical attention is possible, that it is an orientation that overlooks superficialities, and that attention of this kind strives always to look for the good in people and situations. M. Paul's attentiveness to Lucy is characterised by acceptance coupled with guidance. He sees the good in her at the same time as he poses her with considerable challenge and provocation, the latter frequently balanced by small acts of kindness or confidence. Monsieur Paul arouses in Lucy what she is capable of. He has an impact on her life. He awakens in her because she is ready. Roberts (2017, p. 119) reminds us that "teaching is a necessarily interventionist process; it is not a question of whether to intervene or not, but of how to do so and with what justification."

Nothing is made completely easy for Lucy, however. Even the school that M. Paul makes possible for Lucy to manage will call for much hard work and on-going commitment. Gradually, under M. Paul's tutelage, Lucy emerges as a dedicated scholar, having discovered the joy of study for its own sake. She appears to develop the capacity for attention, even if by the briefest of flashes. "What I loved, it joyed me by any effort to content; but the noble hunger for science [knowledge] in the abstract—the godlike thirst after discovery—those feelings were known to me but by briefest flashes" (Brontë, 2004, p. 390). Still her relationship with her mentor teacher remains testy. She accuses him of wanting to find fault with her: "[h]e liked me to commit faults: a knot of blunders was sweet to him as a cluster of nuts" (p. 386). Subsequently, however, she describes her writing pleasure in terms that imply full attention: "But I got books, read up the facts, laboriously constructed a skeleton out of the dry bones of the real, and then clothed them, and tried to breathe into them life, and in this pastime I had pleasure" (p. 444).

In time, Lucy learns to accept other readings of her world, particularly although not exclusively, in relation to M. Paul. The conflict that appears to present the greatest obstacle to their continued friendship is the tension between his Catholicism and her Protestantism. Even here, M. Paul is instrumental in showing Lucy that this difference can be ultimately a point of respect between them both. Monsieur Paul is not afraid of difference, and wants Lucy to maintain her Protestant faith despite the fact that her beliefs are not in keeping with his Catholic views. He tells Lucy that such differences in their religious convictions are differences to be cherished, not to be stifled, and he reassures her that he welcomes her ideas and convictions. He shows Lucy that to be open to different ideas and opinions is the way to develop and progress. Once again, his attention to Lucy links to the educative theme of the novel.

Finally, Lucy literally finds her own voice: "I spoke. All leapt from my lips. I lacked not words now" (p. 540). She now acknowledges her own faults and demonstrates a degree of humility towards M. Paul that is genuinely felt: "Warm, jealous and haughty, I knew not till now that my nature had such a mood; he gathered me near his heart. I was full of faults; he took them and me all home" (p. 541). Now Lucy is able to see M. Paul as a man of generosity: "He was a man whom it made happy to see others happy... only to the very stupid, perverse, or unsympathising was he in the slightest degree dangerous" (p. 423). Lucy's ability to picture, through attention, the reality and existence and needs and wants of other people, develops only slowly. It takes considerable time for Lucy to come to a better understanding of herself.

She resists M. Paul's repeated acts of attention towards her—although bit by bit, slowly and progressively over time, his “little peering efforts” of attention towards her do gradually amount to something (Murdoch, 2014, p. 42).

4.7. *Summary*

Villette explores the suffering of an apprentice teacher in her struggles to become worthy to teach. Lucy's educative progress involves not only her cognitive engagement in academic study, but also her development of sensitivity towards others, and growth in her ability to see herself as a member of a community. Initially, Lucy resists the attentions of her mentor teacher and she rebuffs him at every turn. M. Paul's persistent interest in Lucy's progress goes to the heart of his function as pedagogue. M Paul sees in Lucy a complex and genuinely good person, capable even of teaching M. Paul, through her passionate ways—and he persists in efforts to set up a purposeful dialogue between them. Gradually Lucy becomes more social, less neurotic. Lucy eventually comes to an understanding that educative power and attention does not have to be coercive or cruel.

As Lucy grows in attention, so too does her capacity to build up “structures of value” around her (Murdoch, 2014, p. 36). M. Paul's part in her progress is not something that can be fully explained (p. 37). Lucy's final state of self-awareness is far removed from her earlier self-preoccupation, uncertainty and insecurity. She finally indicates that she finds purpose, value and meaning in her role as a teacher who lives in relatively mundane and humble circumstances. If Lucy recalls the influence of her former mentor teacher on herself, she is likely also to call to mind her own slow progress. Given her newfound understanding of humility, this should enable her to better attend to the needs of her own students.

Lucy's progress in this regard resonates with Weil, who supports the Platonic view that the teacher's role is to bring out what is already latent in the student, and that the student literally unfurls under the guidance of the teacher. Weil tells us that education, “whether its object be children or adults, individuals or an entire people, or even oneself—consists in creating motives. To show what is beneficial, what is obligatory, what is good—that is the task of education” (Weil, 2002, p. 188). R. S. Peters (1969) also argues that education “involves essentially processes that introduce people to what is valuable in an intelligible and voluntary manner and that creates in the learner a desire to achieve it, this being seen to have its place along with other things in life” (p. 98). He further argues that “the job of the educator is not simply to build on existing wants but to present what is worth wanting in such a way that it

creates new wants and stimulates new interests” (p. 105). In *Villette*, Lucy’s self-education is portrayed in just this way. In no small part through M. Paul’s interventions, Lucy comes to value her own progress, and to see education as valuable in itself, and a route to improve the quality of her life and the lives of others.

Murdoch tells us that true attention involves an on-going process of mental recollection and revision. This, Murdoch reminds us, is a difficult, demanding, and essentially “endless” process (Murdoch, 2014, p. 27). Murdoch calls for us to be attentive in our thinking, not in slavish, militaristic, self-serving, or obsessive ways, but in ways that lead us out of ourselves, and that develop our regard for the other. Murdoch reminds us that good teaching requires self-knowledge, and that good teaching calls for measured and appropriate acts of attention. She reminds us too, that all our growth is educational since themes of moral progress and attention are closely intertwined.

Weil and Murdoch remind us that such headwork as attention calls for requires time, detachment and patience. They also remind us that it is through attention that our moral being is developed. Lucy Snowe’s trajectory in *Villette* is exactly of this character. At the start of *Villette*, Lucy is only in her early twenties and she has not yet experienced a great deal of the world. Her progress is essentially a moral and aesthetic quest, an education in attention. Lucy has to come to terms with her own sense of self before she can flourish. Initially Lucy feels herself to be completely hidebound and constrained. She is blindsided by the social demands that are placed on her. Lucy has to learn to understand her own nature before she can function as a teacher. Initially she resists situations that will involve herself in conversation or dialogue, preferring to hide away and be a spectator.

Lucy is not completely the author of her own change and she is not unassisted. Her progress is in part due to the challenges and provocations of M. Paul, Lucy finds her teaching voice and her teaching persona, and a base from which she will be able to see the good in her own students. Liston (2008, p. 389), cited in Roberts and Saeverot (2018, p. 42), notes that teaching is “frequently a struggle and a sacrifice. It is a struggle and a sacrifice to see beyond our egotistical selves so as to see our students more clearly.” Lucy’s encounters with M. Paul help her to discover the kind of a teacher she can be. M. Paul shows Lucy what it is to care about whom, what, and how she teaches. He teaches her too, how to employ contemplation, meditation, solitude and silence for their own sakes and not simply as an escape, or a cover for her own anger.

Ultimately Lucy finds that she has a professional role that suits her. She is in a position to work not simply for an income, but more importantly, with a sense of meaning to her life. Lucy's satisfaction at the close of the work is not that of self-congratulation for her own achievements, but is a rather more subdued 'Murdochian' celebration of her discovery of the nourishment of human connection, friendship, and a newfound quiet sense of her capacity to cope, even despite the likely death of her friend and mentor M. Paul:

The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any powers of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart.... Here pause, pause at once. There is enough said" (Brontë, 2004, pp. 415–416)

Villette is a novel that is so constructed that it that calls repeatedly for reflective thinking and the reader's willingness for "judgement suspended during further inquiry, and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful"—a further reference to John Dewey's *How we think*. (Dewey, 1934, p. 13). Brontë's work reminds us of the power of the nineteenth century multi-volume novel as a forum for moral education and as an avenue for the presentation of ethical ideas. *Villette* is a novel about teachers and teaching that sensitises readers to the experiences of others. It demonstrates the limits of insularity, and shows the value of human connection. *Villette* explores ideas of humility, compassion, and understanding another's plight. It shows that the ability to respond to and integrate the needs and interests of others is fundamental to education in the broadest sense. *Villette* also acknowledges that education involves debate and challenge. For our minds to be open to ideas, we need to accept that we may need to have even our most deeply held convictions changed or challenged.

As a study in educative attention *Villette* shows how a young teacher may, with support and guidance, develop her standing. Beginner teachers need time to find their way, and failures will occur. As Lucy observes "nothing happens as we expect" (Brontë, 1853/2004, p. 354). Lucy's education as a beginner teacher involves learning to look at things in new ways. To learn how to be in the classroom is demanding, and involves self-understanding, as well as decisions about how to establish order and structure, how to connect with the students, and how to 'be' in the classroom. We are reminded of the importance of the teacher's attention, as well as of her respect and curiosity towards her students and of her orientation to the students' "betterment". We are reminded of the ways that a teacher may use creative tensions to instigate discussion and inspire thought. Lucy's mentor teacher provides her with a steady

flow of challenging literature and political pamphlets. He engages her in debate and critical thinking as well as coaching her on her mathematical ability. He guides her to further her own education and chides her for not rising to challenges. He encourages her to give attention to her own career trajectory—not just to the immediate moment, but to consider how she might build on her innate gifts in order to develop herself for a meaningful future. He encourages her to be a person of good character.

Villette exemplifies, through Lucy's mentor teacher, M. Paul, the long-term beneficent effects of small acts of attention that involve generosity and regard for others, for both the giver and the recipient. The novel also reminds us that schools can and ought to be places that inculcate self-belief, places that widen students' perspectives and provide an environment that invites and enables discussion and the confrontation of difference. Finally, the novel recognises that the best teachers may prove to be influential, even positively life-changing, in ways that are not immediately apparent.

The following chapter considers pedagogical attention in quite a different light. Here, Hermann Hesse's 1943 novel *The Glass Bead Game* is considered as a literary work that explores the notion of pedagogical attention through the lens of myth. This work represents a monumental effort on Hesse's part to capture a sense of the depth of courage and uncertainty that teaching calls for, while at the same time expressing a sense of positivity for the future and hope for the young, and a willingness to consider again the importance of the relationship between teacher and student.

The Glass Bead Game can be read as something of a "revisioning" of Plato's ancient philosophy in that it charts Joseph Knecht's educative growth along the lines of Plato's philosophy of '*paideia*'—a process of character formation that involves educating the entire person (body, mind and spirit). This analogy of emergence reflects Knecht's own pedagogical progress as he develops his capacity to see more, and further, just as Plato tells us that the fundamentals of a happy life, a life of '*eudaimonia*', involve not only efforts to develop mastery, whereby the individual strives towards their best efforts, but also concerns individuals being of service to others.

Chapter 5: Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*

5.0. Introduction

If Hermann Hesse's final novel, *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) were fashioned a fable, then its moral would be that *there is no hope without courage, just as there is no courage without hope*. Yet the work is not a fable, but rather is mythological; and mythological significances do not reduce to a single moral. Nevertheless, to have produced a literary work that depends so much for its significance on the quality of attention of its readers reflects for Hesse both monumental courage and a monumental quality of hope.

Hesse hands to his reader the task of interpreting an especially sophisticated fiction. Confidence seems conveyed that one day, much by working together in critical discussion of the book, some readers will prove match to this almost preternatural, interpretative undertaking. The novel, outwardly predicated on courageous hope, is also inwardly so predicated. The novel's action is ethically demanding to the extent that it has the reader gather into an uncomfortable whole, a kind of tension—a dilemma of parts and wholes, in a dialectical development down through ages. The sense of unbridled urgency with regard to this tension must be met with patience. To progress with it calls not only for patient attention of one's own, but also willingness to depend upon others: any reader is likely to develop the need to discuss with other readers the significances of this work.

Hesse's novel integrates forms of real and fictional history, fictional biography, documentary, legend, and anecdote, and intimates a world that, like Plato's *Republic*, is part utopian, part dystopian. Not only in the fictional world of Castalia, but also among readers of the novel, there is a problem for intellectual understanding that is hidden, but that becomes urgent once it is recognised. The problem for understanding is almost beyond what any one reader can think through. Hope in the novel is made out to be something absolutely courageous and intellectual, dependent on a kind of faith in others to carry things forward. Hesse's novel demands of its reader mental work that requires patience and obedience, each of an intensity that approaches that which is demanded of Joseph Knecht, the novel's chief protagonist. But the reader's task is also to understand Knecht's step beyond either patience or obedience, to the actualisation in himself of a kind of authenticity not less singular than it is evanescent, not less grand than it is difficult to pin down, and furthermore, nothing if not humble.

Hesse's depicted world of Castalia represents a far advance not of science or technology, but of art, towards some kind of defining cultural attainment. As in several of Hesse's earlier novels,³³ this work also pursues themes that derive from philosophy—under a rich, unusually eclectic understanding of this word. Hesse draws our attention to “eastern” as well as “western” philosophical interpretations that help bring coherence to our experience of the world. The work encompasses various philosophical themes—the value of aesthetic experience, the quest for authenticity, the limits of spoken and written language, the making sense of oneself and of life itself. Hesse's novel explores the idea of pedagogy as the ‘leading out’ of human potential. The work ponders the very idea of education and questions how to make best sense of it.

As Craft (1984, p. 9) notes, there are two quite different Latin derivations that make up our understanding of the English word “education”—the one as an undertaking to *educare* (to mould, to fashion), and the other as an undertaking to *educere* (to enable, to elicit). Hesse's novel considers the idea of education in both these senses, and suggests how, as a rare occurrence that is yet of singular importance, a balance between them might eventually be achieved through the agency of one who is open to being educated. One quality of good educators that is revealed in the book is how they help create for others the richest possibility for such an eventual achievement. Yet Hesse leaves his readers with some sense that there might be instability in that mix. In order to be true to itself, an especially finely educated agency will come to reflect an originality that is so vaulting as to make ambiguous whether it involves creativity or spite.

As a work of fiction, *The Glass Bead Game* mobilises extraordinary insights of sociology, psychology, history and the study of art and religion, while at the same time it is constructed within an aesthetic at the heart of which is a timeless, dialectical kind of challenge to timelessness or stability. Perhaps better read as intellectual critique, a novel of ideas that straddles both fiction and philosophy, the novel is representative of no particular literary genre. The work may be termed ‘mythological’ in that the novel's abstraction from a recognisable ‘actuality’ at the same time enables Hesse to explore some deeper themes and truths concerning education. Within the plane of the fiction, this novel is an account of the life and moral growth of Joseph Knecht. On a higher plane that relates to its mythological

³³ Hesse's earlier novels include *Beneath the Wheel* (1906) [later retitled as *The Prodigy*], *Demian* (1919), *Siddhartha* (1922), and *Journey to the East* (1932).

significance, the novel considers Knecht as a prototype and the true meaning of the prototype; the novel considers Joseph Knecht's relationship with reality, a point that is made early in the novel.

Despite its epic length, Hesse's work bears some characteristics of allegory or fable in the sense that the novel is an 'apologue' (derived from the Greek *apologus*)—a form of storytelling that has an educative or moral function. Taken as a whole, Hesse's novel is not so much a detailed exploration of the growth of Joseph Knecht, as it is an illustrative idealised treatment of how inchoate selfhood may be brought along by social conditions towards that selfhood's bringing itself truly into being. The work concerns not only what is involved if one is to achieve individuation in an authentic and meaningful way, but in addition, it concerns why, within this accomplishment, an individual must realize the utmost humility and reference to others. Also, any individual achievement itself remains open to further transformative reinterpretation by others.

The Glass Bead Game offers an account of education that resonates profoundly with that of Plato, the more so when Plato's ideas are interpreted as consonant with ideas of the East. Various commentators have identified an Eastern influence on Plato in *The Republic* and elsewhere, through Plato's play with the Eastern idea of reincarnation, an Eastern idea with which Hesse also plays in *The Glass Bead Game*. Also, as others have noted, there are important similarities between Knecht's educational trajectory and the Platonic ideal for education as outlined in Book VII of Plato's *Republic*. Building on the research of Götz (1978), Milek (1970), Taylor (1982) and others, the present chapter pursues this connection further, and identifies themes in *The Glass Bead Game* that connect the novel in important ways to the Platonist inclinations of philosophers Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch.

The current chapter, which is necessarily a tentative interpretation of Hesse's vast and challenging work, considers the novel as a statement of the ways that education gives meaning not just to an individual life, but to life overall. It seeks to consider the open-endedness of Hesse's work and to demonstrate that an understanding of Plato can enrich (and be enriched by) that understanding, and that Weil and Murdoch can similarly, and for related reasons, be appreciated more richly by reference to Hesse, and vice versa. The chapter also addresses a relationship to Plato's dialogues in what Hesse's novel says about teachers and teaching. This reading of the novel considers that the educator is tasked with a kind of faith that among the young some may make good in carrying things forward in a way that offers not merely continuity, but also, the possibility of improvement. The chapter is organized into three main

parts. The first offers an explanation of the structure and conception of Hesse's novel, and considers the resonance of the novel's Platonic themes including the influence of Knecht's three main mentors. The second considers Knecht's "awakening", and the final section connects the novel to the educative lessons of Plato's dialogues.

5.1. *Structure and strategy*

The Glass Bead Game embodies themes that were important to Hesse across his lifetime—the nature and worth of education, the difficulty of truly realizing one's self, and the relationship between aesthetics and morality—themes that also interest Weil and Murdoch.³⁴ A central idea in Hesse's novel is the nature of a person's lifetime journey of educational growth.³⁵ Composed during the turbulent political period in Europe that culminated in the horrors of World War II, Hesse's novel can nevertheless be read as a subtly optimistic work, one that offers an idealized sense of pedagogical emergence and renewal.

The majority of the novel takes place within the so-called "pedagogical province" of Castalia (Hesse, 2000, p. 54). Hesse depicts his Castalia (the name is derived from Greek legend) as a 'pinnacle' society, a privileged community restricted to élite male scholars who are endowed with extraordinary intellectual gifts. We learn that the province of Castalia (and with it the invention of the Glass Bead Game), has emerged following some catastrophic event of such magnitude that it has caused an entire cultural collapse. The narrator refers derisively to the time prior to this collapse as an age of "untrammelled individualism" (p. 10), and "the Age of the Feuilleton" (p. 9). (The French word 'feuilleton' means a leaf of a book, and its diminutive 'feuilleton' could mean either a thin, flaky pastry, or, figuratively, a light 'gossip column'—the analogy here being *matter without substance*.) We are given to understand that in this time people had lost any telling sense of what is of value. They had become shallow, individualistic, and entirely disconnected from a sense of history or from markedly moral sense.

Hesse's fictional world depicts a cultural system whose entire purpose is to recover and re-enact, through play, the highest attainment of aesthetic sensibility. In Castalia, the glass bead game players are involved in endlessly compounding new permutations and combinations of their established knowledge forms. Castalia is a perfect-seeming and yet

³⁴ Hesse's biographers—in particular Field (1968), Milek (1970) and Remys (1983), note that Hesse worked on the novel's manuscript for over a decade.

³⁵ See further, Anderson (1996); Johnson (1956); Roberts (2007, 2009, 2013, 2018); Sears, (1992).

substantially self-enclosed world, whose openness to new modes of recovery and re-enactment of highest historical aesthetic attainments masks at the same time a condition that is closed and even insular. By virtue of an effort of creativity that is almost inexplicable, the novel's main protagonist, Joseph Knecht, ultimately challenges Castalia. His enlightened view looks both beyond, to Castalia's dependency on a larger society, as well as ahead, to changes that are not wont to be foreseen by Castalian minds.

The limitation that Joseph's awakening surpasses and that his conduct challenges, is not only from Castalians being too self-absorbed, but also from their being insufficiently 'original'. His awakening leads him to surpass, to challenge, and ultimately leave the entire order. Hesse leaves the meaning of this exit open to wonder and interpretation, the more because Knecht does not himself personally long survive the making of his great change. To the extent that Hesse's narrative leaves room for an optimistic reading, it is that change that constitutes a challenge to an entire way of life may be looked upon with hope—albeit as a test of the agency of those in future generations.

Hesse's narrative is centrally concerned with the intellectual and educative growth and progress of the main figure, Joseph Knecht, rather than with the trajectory of his career, or an account of his social or emotional growth to maturity. (The narrator explicitly expresses disapproval for “the rebel who is driven by his desires and passions to infringements upon law and order” (p. 5)). The narrator, who expresses a “distaste for the cult of personality” (Hesse, 2000, p. 243), is explicitly “not interested in a hero's pathology, or family history, nor in his drives, his digestion, and how he sleeps” (p. 5). His central concern lies with Knecht's intellectual and educative path. The narrator's explicit aim is to discuss the figure of Joseph Knecht only insofar as he is of interest for what he shows, and so “only if his nature and his education have rendered him able to let his individuality be almost perfectly absorbed” in a way that does not annihilate “the savor and worth of the individual” (p. 5).

Thus although the narration focuses on the chronology of Joseph Knecht, the work simultaneously provides for the reader an outline of something more schematic—an exploration of what a truly meaningful life might amount to. Rather than a psychological exploration, Hesse's novel charts his chief protagonist's ongoing pedagogical progress, “toward ‘awakening’, toward advancing, toward apprehending reality” (p. 258). The novel is in an important sense a creative exploration of selfhood, exemplified in the figure of Joseph Knecht.

The Glass Bead Game is a complex and multi-layered text.³⁶ It is structured into three main parts: a short, formal introduction to the nature and existence of Castalia; a lengthy account of the life and education of the central figure, Joseph Knecht; and a subsequent compendium of some of the younger Knecht's posthumously published writings. Across these three parts, the novel's chronology spans vastly different historical time periods, establishing themes of fraternity and kinship across sweeps of human history, geography, and culture. It remains unclear to the reader whether Hesse's novel chiefly looks ahead towards Castalia's implied future—that is to say, towards the 25th century, or chiefly looks back to the time of Knecht's growing up, some two centuries prior or much further back, to the time of Knecht's three fictional biographies. These temporal dislocations serve to distance the novel from Hesse's own historical period and they underline the essential timelessness of the novel's pedagogical themes. The novel's expansive structure also promotes a sense of open-endedness and its elusive chronology opens the door to consider an eastern mode of contemplation of the meaning of life. For example, the three fictional biographies of Part 3 (Knecht as Rainmaker, as Hermit, and as Buddhist) celebrate the meaningfulness of reincarnation just as they amplify the possibility that the central figure, Knecht, is himself a timeless prototype.

The novel's narrator tells us that the glass bead game connects in its origins back to Greek and Pythagorean intellection, as well as to ancient Chinese and Arabic culture (p. 7). It is based on forms of contemplation and meditative thought that amalgamate Eastern and Western thought-ways (Zen and Plato) such that the individual player may sense that “he has extracted from the universe of accident and confusion a totally symmetrical and harmonious cosmos” (p. 185). We are told that “to play the game, which is aligned to the nature and spirit of classical music, requires “great attentiveness, keenness, and concentration” (p. 24).

Hesse's emphasis on attention invites connection to the moral philosophy of Weil and Murdoch, both of whom see attention as fundamental to the development of intellectual and moral growth. Murdoch reminds us that when we are involved in moral investigations, if we explore the right questions in the right way, we may, through attention, come to a better understanding: “The process of discovery is to be thought of as accompanied or motivated by a passion or desire which is increased and purified in the process (Murdoch, 1992, p. 400).

³⁶ Scholars who have provided detailed analyses of the novel's complexity include Johnson (1956), Boulby, (1966), Ziolkowski (1967), White & White (1986), and Roberts & Freeman-Moir (2013).

Hesse's novel involves a particular kind of moral investigation, and his call for attention, keenness and concentration applies equally to his readers and to Joseph Knecht.

Consistent with the novel's overall ambition as an exploration of ideas rather than of character, its central figure is never described physically—although aspects of his bearing, including his exemplary courtesy and his significant intellectual and musical gifts, are repeatedly emphasized. Joseph is depicted as a sapiosexual, one who is keen to consider with others his most deeply-held beliefs. He is ever willing to engage in protracted intellectual debates with his peers, but he holds himself physically and emotionally to himself. Further, the most intense intellectual sharing proceeds for Joseph most naturally to periods of deep and reflective solitude.

Identified as musically gifted from a young age, Knecht's family of origin is never mentioned. He is raised as a ward of the state, within the confines of select, intellectually elite male communities—first Escholz and then Wadzell, a former Cistercian monastery. Then, in his early twenties, he is admitted to the training school for Castalia. The majority of the novel chronicles his steady educational progress that leads, in time, to the opportunity to join the prestigious Castilian Order.

We follow Knecht's exemplary progress through the hierarchy of the Castalian Order until, still only in his late forties, he is nominated to the prestigious role of Magister Ludi. This role involves oversight of the entire operation of the Glass Bead Game, a role that he fulfils masterfully. Over a further, extended period of time, hints are given that Knecht doubts that the aesthetic idealism of Castalia is sufficient for a meaningful life. He comes to see that Castalia is an end in itself rather than a site for further creativity (Hesse, 2000, p. 222). He arrives at a point where he forswears his role in Castalia and all that it represents. He determines that he will leave Castalia to pursue a different, humbler, and far less certain path as a school tutor. Tragically, a few days after leaving Castalia in pursuit of his new, humble role, Knecht's life ends in his accidental drowning in a mountain tarn.

On one level, Knecht's death serves as a useful *memento mori*—a reminder that death inevitably comes to us all. On another level, this dramatic parting scene 'mythologises' Knecht's actions in a way that brings to mind a theme of Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, that to teach is to prepare for death. (Significantly, for Plato, death means to give up the ego.) While we might be startled by Joseph's untimely death, particularly since his new path has barely commenced, this dramatic event gives emphasis to matters that are of greater importance

than this one individual's life. Knecht's death is an acknowledgement of the reality of another, younger person, Tito. It is implied that Tito, who witnesses Knecht's drowning, may, as a consequence of this event, himself become Joseph's pedagogical "offspring" and thus commence his own new, more focussed, educative chapter:

Only later would he [Tito] realize that his dance and his transported state in general were only partly caused by the mountain air, the sun, the dawn, his sense of freedom. They were also a response to the change awaiting him, the new chapter in his young life that had come in the friendly and awe-inspiring form of the Magister. (p. 401)

Knecht's capacity to overcome the limits of Castalia and to direct his attention towards Tito as another worthy individual, supports a reading of the novel as an account of the older man's growth in pedagogical attention, as understood by Weil and Murdoch.

Knecht's final act of diving into the mountain lake emblemizes his step away from the 'intellectualized' Castalia. In this action he achieves the realization identified by Murdoch, that virtue "is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist...Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 284). Murdoch also tells us that "morality, as the ability or attempt to be good, rests upon deep areas of sensibility and creative imagination, upon removal from one state of mind to another, upon shifts of attachments, upon love and respect for the contingent details of the world" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 337). Cohn (1959, p. 353) discusses Knecht's death as "at the same time a beginning, not only for Tito, but for himself as well". Cohn further argues that "in his last transformation, Knecht enters new, unknown, and mysterious bonds, not as one who flees, but as one who is called" (p. 355). However, another way to view Hesse's story is to see it as a mythological account, whereby Knecht's death ennoble his life because it represents the culmination of his determination to follow his true path and chart his own purpose. Following Weil's account of the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of genuine attention, we can also read Knecht's death as in some sense a truly creative act. Weil writes:

The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is a renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist

independently of him. (Weil, 2009, p. 90)

The Glass Bead Game has a semi-documentary tone, and employs a literary technique sometimes called “montage” (see further Ziolkowski, 1965, p. 284), whereby references to actual historical figures, quotations, literary allusions and subtexts inform the narrative. The novel’s stylised characters then become vehicles for arguments and theoretical debates about philosophical matters. Literary commentators (for instance Fickert, 1986; Ziolkowski 1965), have explored the novel’s implied references to leading literary, philosophical, poetic and historical figures of Hesse’s own time—Goethe, Nietzsche, Mann, and Burkhardt. It seems likely that Schiller (1759–1805) was another influence. Hesse appears to draw on Schiller’s notion of aesthetic education in his novel’s overall conception.

Schiller’s 1794 *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is comprised of a series of letters that emphasize the value of aesthetic education to support an individual’s self-realization, the fulfilment of their individual potential. A central concept of Schiller’s treatise is that ‘play’ (not to be confused with frivolity) is the foundation not only of art, but also of a well-lived life. Schiller identifies respect and attention (which he identifies as ingredients of love), as foundational to the capacity for such ‘play’. Schiller outlines three stages of development whereby the individual develops from an initial state of ‘unselfconsciousness’ to one of intellectual clarity, and, from there, to possible new realizations about self and place in the world. This three-stage process could be said to mirror Knecht’s progress from his initial state of unreflective consciousness (boyhood) to a second stage of intense intellectual focus (Castalia), from which he emerges to enter a third stage (stepping out) that represents further progress beyond the first two stages. (Field, 1968, pp. 673–688, offers an especially thorough discussion of Knecht’s educative progress.)

A further influence on Hesse’s work beyond Schiller, and one of particular relevance to the present chapter, is that of Plato. Hesse’s resonance with Plato in this novel is far-reaching, so that the themes of emergence and self-realization that are central to *The Glass Bead Game* align not only with such themes in Plato but accordingly remark challenges for education of precisely the kinds identified by Weil and Murdoch, that they in turn remark as recognized by Plato.

5.2. *Recollecting Plato*

Resonances with Platonic thought are evident from the novels’ opening pages. Götz (1978) interprets Hesse’s “*Universitas Litterarum*” (Hesse, 2000, p. 28) as a symbol for

“unchangeable reality” and one that connects the novel to the realm of Plato’s Forms (Hesse, 1943/2000, p. 9). The disclaimer on the part of the narrator that there is no way to teach the glass bead game except by playing it, constitutes refraining from any attempt to articulate what cannot be said. Similarly Plato, in *Letters* VII 341d, has Socrates comment as follows on the ideal nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil:

There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straight away nourishes itself. (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1659)

Members of Hesse’s Castalia, like those of Plato’s *Republic*, are exclusively male. While the narrator tells us that there other, similar communities beyond Castalia, we are never told if these other communities are led by, or even admit, women scholars. We are also never told if Castalia is ethnically diverse. What we are told is that Castalia is a prestigious, gated community, open only to the brightest of minds and dedicated to the preservation of aesthetic intellectual achievement. Castalian scholars live a life of fraternal seclusion not unlike monks or priests within a closed seminary. Although sexual relations are not absolutely prohibited, Castalians view sexual encounters with the utmost caution and mistrust (Hesse, 2000, p. 101). The select few who are admitted to the Order are guaranteed a lifetime of uninterrupted contemplation, research and scholarship, entirely sheltered from the distractions of everyday life.

As in Plato’s Academy (described in *Republic*, VII, 519 b–d), Castalian scholars are explicitly protected from the mundane aspects of practical life. They participate in a rigorous education system, and only after many years of preparation may they even be considered for admission as members of the Order. Once admitted, their primary task is to participate fully in maintaining the glass bead game, although they are also charged with the further education of the so-called “mandarins” (Hesse, 2000, p. 55)—those pedagogues who are not destined to remain permanently in Castalia but who will eventually become teachers in the province’s specialist schools and universities. Within the hierarchy of Castalia, the pinnacle role is that of *Das Glasperlenspiel*, the Magister Ludi. He who is assigned this illustrious position is supported by twelve music masters, one of whose roles it is to select further candidates for the Order.

In many respects Knecht's education reflects the education system that Plato outlines in *Republic*. Friedländer (1958, p. 86) speaks of the "conscious selection of qualified students" in Plato's time, wherein one of the responsibilities of a teacher is specifically to identify such talent. Götz (1978) identifies a series of parallels between Plato's *Republic* and Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* and, more specifically, between Plato's Guardians as described in *Republic* VII, 519–521, and the Castalian bead game players. Just as the primary role of Plato's academy is to develop the Guardians, so the Castalian game masters are charged with maintaining the perfection of their game, as well as with ensuring that all players are suitably equipped for the role.

Götz recalls Plato's parable of the Cave (*Republic*, VII, 514–518), where Plato talks of the need for a mentor or a guide to "turn the mind" of the student, and of the mentor's role to provide ongoing support and direction. (Plato, 1997, pp. 1132–1136). Further, just as Plato's trained Guardians do not remain forever in their exclusive role, but eventually return to take up local leadership or educative roles, similarly Knecht follows a cycle of 'ascent' followed by a return to the 'unenlightened' world in order to guide selected others toward greater understanding.

Plato's notion of emergence is captured most famously in his analogy of the Cave. Here, the untutored individual emerges from a limited reality into another stage of understanding that is new, difficult, and ultimately transformative. Plato's analogy offers a theory of education in terms of a progression from a state of dull repetition towards greater understanding, or illumination. By way of education, the individual who is released from the confinement of the Cave draws on his own agency to move ahead. By contrast, those who remain in the Cave because they are not yet oriented towards the light, are not able, perhaps because not motivated, to reach even that which is technically within their grasp. They are destined to remain effectively prisoners of their own situation until they too turn appropriately towards the light. Socrates says in *Republic* VII, 514 that he offers this parable in order to "compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature" (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1132). For Plato, education involves the fulfilment of one's human potential, a process that is supported both by the influence and oversight of the Guardians of the Forms, and as well as through the efforts of the individual soul. These same ideas that Hesse engages with in his novel resonate equally with the moral philosophies of Weil and Murdoch.

For Weil, and also for Murdoch after her, the fundamental priority for education is to turn the soul towards the good. Essentially, for both of these philosophers, education is a way

to give meaning to life. They identify the primary purpose of education to be to foster in students their capacity for attention—by which they refer to the capacity to think well, to face mystery and contradiction, and to wait. They recognise the usefulness of analogies and mythological explanations for pedagogical clarification. When Murdoch comments on the way that Plato employs myths as a pedagogical tool, we can see also that Joseph Knecht's desire for what we might call "just and true understanding" relates also to his desire for moral goodness:

The Platonic myths are an explicit resort to metaphor as a mode of explanation. Plato continually pictures education as moral progress and indicates the kind of relation which exists between moral goodness and a desire for just and true understanding. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 177)

In her philosophical writing, Murdoch predominantly employs metaphors of "energy and vision" in relation to moral growth (Murdoch, 2014, p. 42). Hesse also draws on these same metaphors. Of particular relevance to the novel's pedagogical themes are the occasions in Joseph Knecht's life when he reports an experience of illumination which he describes as a sudden 'leap' of awareness that comes to him forcefully, as if out of nowhere. Not only does he experience such intuitive leaps on several occasions in the course of his life, but he is also able to recognise the significance of such leaps in others, and the sheer courage that such leaps require. For example, when several fellow trainee Castalians opt to leave their 'pedagogical province' in order to return to their families and the wider community, Knecht intuitively understands that in Castalia such choices are frowned upon and passed off as a sign of weakness, rather than being viewed as opportunities for individuals to explore new directions.

Knecht, by contrast, considers that these choices represent interesting and meaningful initiatives. He observes that "possibly the apparent relapse they had suffered was not a fall and a cause for suffering, but a leap forward and a positive act" (Hesse, 2000, p. 63). When as a young student, Knecht is chatting with an unnamed fellow classmate, he observes "we haven't taken any leaps" (p. 67), implying that they haven't yet been truly challenged, and thus they have not yet shown any true intellectual courage:

I do wish that if ever the time comes and it proves to be necessary, that I too will be able to free myself and leap, only not backward into something inferior, but forward and into something higher. (p. 67)

Knecht's ultimate, literal leap into the icy mountain tarn, an action which precipitates his own death, but which simultaneously creates new opportunities for the growth of his student, Tito, might itself be interpreted as Knecht's own mighty "leap forward and a positive act" (p. 63). (A detailed interpretation of Knecht's courageous venture into new and unknown waters is provided by Milek, 1978, p. 304.)

Murdoch (1992) also employs the metaphor of the 'leap' to illustrate an advance in moral understanding. She comments that certain points in the process of creative imagining "we may be inspired or overcome by a sense of certainty at a particular point", and that we may experience this sense of conviction in the form of an 'intuitive leap'" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 400). Murdoch observes further that "to decide when to attempt such leaps is one of the most difficult of moral problems" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 42). Joseph Knecht's own "intuitive leaps" are connected to his courage and his willingness to test himself in as yet untried ways. His capacity to take risks and to face doubts has a bearing on his own understanding of the open-endedness of pedagogical growth.

Roberts (2008b) identifies Knecht's commitment to a pedagogical function beyond Castalia as a decision that holds deep moral significance, since by making this commitment, Knecht demonstrates "the ability to take risks—to make oneself uncomfortable, to go beyond one's prior experiences and existing understanding of the world", and as well, to recognise that "one's contribution as a human being need not be tied to the achievement of great status, wealth, or recognition" (p. 7). Roberts' observations connect to Knecht's capacity to see not only what is "there", but also, to be able to make out what is not quite so obvious, and his capacity, in Murdoch's words, to be "open to continual reinterpretation" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 91).

There are further, relevant affinities between Plato's view on education in *Republic* and the educational themes in Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*. The period of Joseph Knecht's early adult education corresponds closely to Plato's *ephebia*—a period of concentrated intellectual study. (See further Götz 1978, p. 514.) According to the educational vision described in Plato's *Republic*, prospective rulers of the state are, at around age twenty, challenged to bring everything they have learned into a "unified vision" (*Republic* VII, 537c–d). Later in their education, they are introduced to the power of dialectic, a process that we are told, requires "great care". Plato does not overlook the importance of play in his educational programme, however. Throughout their education, prospective leaders are charged with engaging in what are essentially playful (unifying) activities.

Socrates explains in *Republic VIII*, 558b that “unless someone had transcendent natural gifts, he’d never become good unless he played the right games and followed a fine way of life from early childhood” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1169). Of particular relevance to the current discussion is the emphasis Hesse places in the novel on a kind of fundamental dialectic whereby seriousness (rationality) works against the ability to play. By emphasising this as a kind of fundamental dialectic, Hesse shows a playful *instability* that comes about when rational demands on an individual person become altogether too excessive. Joseph Knecht seeks to be true to himself, while at the same time to align himself with the order and conformity that Castalia requires. Ultimately this proves to be for him an impossibility.

In Plato’s *Republic*, VII, 519, as in Hesse’s Castalia, the theoretical and practical spheres of life are entirely separate (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1136). Hesse’s narrator warns the reader that the glass bead game, is, by virtue of its separation from the world of action, in danger of corruption, and that life in Castalia, by its very isolation, “can lead to empty virtuosity, to artistic vanity, to self-advancement, to the seeking of power over others and then to the abuse of that power” (Hesse, 2000, p. 223). Socrates expresses a similar concern in *Republic VIII*, 564, where he expresses the view that theory and practice in education need to be in balance. In *Republic VII*, 519–521, Socrates warns that only those who have the greatest intellectual promise are to be selected to teach, and advises that preparation for the role of teacher requires not only the study of teaching theory, but also a willingness on the part of the teacher to work in service of others. This is to ensure that the selected candidates themselves continue to grow in understanding.

Plato’s views on methods of education are evident not only in *Republic*, but appear also in his other dialogues. For example, in his dialogue *Protagoras* Socrates asks how Protagoras can consider himself a teacher when he is simply passing on his own relativist theories to his students (Plato, trans, 1997, pp. 746–790). In *Meno* (82) Socrates talks about what knowledge amounts to, and demonstrates that (mathematical) knowledge is not so much taught as reasoned and recollected. In *Phaedrus* (247–250e), Plato reminds us of the nature of the Forms. He tells us we can see beauty in a way that we cannot see goodness. He talks of knowledge in organic terms, and likens the seeding of ideas to the planting of a seed that will flourish in time. (See Plato, trans, 1997, pp. 506–556. These are metaphors for educative growth that Hesse himself develops in *The Glass Bead Game*. Hesse’s use of the organic metaphor of a tree sapling that is staked for support until strong enough to support itself, connects to wider pedagogical themes of growth, self-sufficiency, succession, and the transmission of knowledge

from one generation to the next, beyond the life of any one individual, or even any one community.

Also relevant to the pedagogical themes in *The Glass Bead Game* is that in *Republic VII*, Plato talks of the need for a mentor or a guide to ‘turn the mind’ of the student, and he emphasises the role of the mentor to provide ongoing support and direction. In *Republic*, VII, 537a, he recommends that individual students are best supported if they have an assigned mentor who will respond to each individual student’s particular aptitudes and interests—someone equipped to “see better what each of them is naturally fitted for” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1152). The mutually respectful quality of this relationship is very much emphasised. In *Letters VII*, 344, Plato makes a similar recommendation and notes that “only when all of these things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one another and tested, pupils and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object” (p. 1161). The following section considers the role and function of Knecht’s three mentors in some detail.

5.3. *Knecht’s three mentors*

Joseph Knecht’s interactions with others, particularly those mentors to whom he is closest in his life, are instrumental in shaping his decisions and progress over the course of his lifetime. (See further, Johnson, 1956, p. 166.) The notion of the mentor as the educative guide who elicits the student’s own innate potential can be traced back not only to Plato, but to the myths of Plato’s own time, including those of Homer and Hesiod, which are mentioned in *Republic* 11, 379a. (See Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1017.) In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Mentor is a figure who serves as the teacher and guide to Odysseus’s son, Telemachus while Odysseus is away. Mentor’s role is to guide and wisely support his student’s potential.

In a similar fashion, in the absence of any family ties, the quality of Knecht’s education is largely determined by three older male mentors—the revered Music Master who identifies Knecht’s innate musical gifts; Father Jacobus, an older Benedictine historian who functions as something of a father-figure to Joseph (in Biblical terms Jacob is the father of Joseph); and so-called Elder Brother, a Buddhist monk (formerly a Castalian and now a recluse). These three mentors each provide assistance and support for Joseph, but they also remind him that he must find his own way, develop his own potential. Even when Joseph has arrived at the illustrious position as Magister Ludi, his mentors and friends continue to play a significant role in his formative education. Indeed, the depth of Knecht’s continued learning

is indicated by the quality of his interactions with similarly acute individuals—not only the aforementioned mentioned mentors, but also his colleagues Fritz Tegularius, Carlo Ferromonte, and especially, his close friend Plinio Designiori.

Joseph Knecht's first mentor, the Music Master, is a commanding, Socrates-like figure. The Music Master's distinguishing features are his eyes, and much emphasis is placed on his prescience and his ability to see things clearly. It is the Music Master who first identifies the young Knecht's musical genius, and it is he who guides Knecht to undertake the study of Buddhism and eastern mysticism under the guidance of Elder Brother. More than this, it appears that it is the Music Master who ensures that throughout his career, Knecht is able to maintain contact with the world beyond Castalia. It is the Music Master who arranges Knecht's visits to the Mariafels Monastery, purportedly on an emissary role, but, as Knecht later discovers, largely in order that he be exposed to new and challenging ideas, "less to teach than to learn" (Hesse, 2000, p. 147). It is possible that the Music Master intuitively feels that Knecht is brilliant enough to be able to bring into effect the very changes that are needed if Castalia is to regenerate, and not simply stagnate and founder. Of particular interest in their relationship is its non-verbal nature.

While the majority of Knecht's interactions with others take the form of vigorous verbal dialogues, his exchanges with the Music Master are sometimes conveyed entirely through musical dialogue (as in their initial meeting). Their capacity to communicate powerfully by way of aesthetic experience reinforces Hesse's overall imaginative statement in the novel that there are different ways to communicate, to interact and to shape a selfhood. In his waning years, the Music Master retreats entirely into silence—possibly to indicate his lessening hold on life, possibly to indicate his personal misgivings about the emerging disintegration of Castalia through his tacit awareness of the decisions that Knecht is taking, possibly to leave Knecht room to make his own decisions. The Music Master epitomizes unselfishness in just the way that Murdoch describes:

An unselfish person enlarges the space and the world, we are calmed and composed by his presence. Sages in deep meditation are said sometimes to become invisible because of the absence of that cloud of anxious selfish obsession which surrounds most of us. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 347)

When Knecht becomes momentarily concerned that he has lost his equilibrium in his relationship with his colleague Plinio Designiori (Hesse, 2000, p. 94), it is to the Music Master

that he confides. The nature of the Music Master's subsequent counsel to his young protégée is instructive:

There is truth, my boy. But the doctrine you desire, absolute, perfect dogma that provides wisdom, does not exist. Nor should you long for perfect doctrine, my friend. Rather, you should long for the perfection of yourself. The deity is within *you*, not in the ideas and books. Truth is lived, not taught. Be prepared for conflicts, Joseph Knecht—I can see that they have already begun. (p. 73)

The message that the Music Master offers Knecht is that he needs to be able to determine for himself, the truth or falsehood of Plinio's arguments. The Music Master implies that Plinio's claims are probably too simplistic, since they involve 'telling' Joseph what to believe, whereas the Music Master, like Socrates, reminds Joseph to follow a more enquiring and rigorous method of analysis to reach his own understanding. Just as, in contrast to his interlocutors, Socrates does not look merely to rebut the arguments of those he is in dialogue with, but rather uses a series of questions to demonstrate how reason works in practice, this becomes Joseph's method with Plinio.

The Music Master's oblique encouragement to Knecht to find his own answers also resonates with the statements in Plato's *Meno* (99e–100a) that virtue is "neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods, which is not accompanied by understanding" (Plato, trans, 1997, pp. 896–897). In other words, there are matters that cannot be 'taught' as such, but can be figured out. There are reverberations of Weil's philosophy in the Music Master's further counsel to Joseph that it is "precisely when we run into difficulty and stray from our path and are most in need of correction, precisely then we feel the greatest disinclination to return to the normal way" (Hesse, 2000, p. 92). In contrast to the views of Durrani (1982), who sees the Music Master as "naively optimistic about the organisation to which he belongs, and blind to its defects" (p. 660), another interpretation is that while the Music Master's comments are perhaps a thinly veiled warning to Joseph that Plinio's challenges to Castalia are potentially reckless and wrongheaded, his comments are nevertheless ambiguous, and could also be a veiled invitation to Joseph to continue to examine his own ingrained loyalty to Castalia.

The Music Master urges Joseph to be more attentive to his meditations as a way to direct his mind to more meaningful things, to think of his life as something whole and worthy, not something passively received. It is possible that the Music Master sees that his disciple's

elevation to the heights of office in the Glass Bead Game could become intertwined with his human ego. The Music Master is aware of the limiting character of the self-aggrandizing ego, worthy only of being let go of. His mild admonition to Knecht invites comparison with Murdoch's observations that the human ego (as Murdoch defines it) can be a damaging force. Murdoch (2014) identifies a way, through attention, to achieve a kind of assimilation to something larger than the self, whereby there is a 'letting go' of the distractions of the "fat, relentless ego" (p. 51). Hesse elsewhere recognises the dangers of "the sordid egoism of those who lust for money or power" (Hesse, 1981, p. 74) as undermining of the pursuit of worthy educational and ethical values.

A second mentor figure and a further significant influence on Joseph's moral education is Father Jacobus, a Catholic Benedictine Monk who lives beyond Castalia at the Mariafels Monastery. It is through his conversations with Father Jacobus that Joseph comes to see more clearly the value of education. The Benedictines' stated function "is to gather, educate, and reshape men's minds and souls, to make a nobility of them not by eugenics, not by blood, but by the spirit" (Hesse, 2000, p. 157). This view resonates with Plato's conviction that education can itself constitute a path to nobility. It is during his two years' stay at the Mariafels Monastery that Father Jacobus persuades Knecht that it is because Castalians are so self-contained that they have lost a sense of history or an historical perspective. It is unclear whether as a result of these discussions Knecht begins to consider himself to have been brainwashed, or whether he realizes that he is himself part of the problem of Castalia. In any case, he comes to see the truth in Jacobus's argument that Castalians are not inclined to learn from the past because they never ever think about it: Castalia does not invite, but works rather to eliminate, any creative or challenging criticism.

Knecht comes to see that Castalians are potentially subject to a kind of indoctrination that threatens, in Murdoch's words to "imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests, and affectations, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 322). It is in light of this realization that Joseph comes to see why it is that his friend Fritz Tegularius fails to fit in at Castalia. Fritz's mood fluctuations and his divergent ways of thinking are interpreted by other Castalians as a form of weak-mindedness rather than as singular aspects of a quirky personality that in no way detract from Fritz's worth as a person. Joseph is also an individual of extraordinary intellect, and so is able to recognise in Fritz some of the traits that he himself shares—in particular, the singularity of mind of a divergent thinker.

It is instructive that although Knecht becomes critical of the ideals of Castalia, he never loses his ability to see good in others, including those in Castalia. He continues to show respect for his colleagues and friends as people even though he experiences frustrations and recognizes their quirks and limitations. This is especially evident in the level of consideration he shows for his somewhat troubled friend and colleague, Fritz Tegularius. It is a mark of Knecht's capacity for loving attention that he is always empathic towards Fritz. Knecht works to maintain a sympathetic relationship with this fellow despite his so-called 'imbalances', for he recognises that Fritz's demeanour and poor health reflect that he is 'out of equilibrium'. (In Plato's *Republic*, good health is associated with equilibrium.) This is why, when he holds the position as Magister Ludi, Knecht consciously seeks out opportunities that he knows will best build on Tegularius's considerable strengths. This reflects Knecht's responsiveness to another person's needs.

The depth of Knecht's attentions to others is exemplified not only in his respect for Fritz's quirks, but also in the help he offers to the devastated Petrus who is momentarily grief-stricken over the death of his mentor, the Music Master (p. 267). Knecht's capacity for compassion is further evident in his reaction when he sees that the Shadow Master is being poorly treated by colleagues, who imply that Brother Bertram had brought his problems upon himself. It is in this spirit that Weil (1968, p. 173) notes:

Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush up and peck it... Our senses attach to affliction all the contempt, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime.

Unlike his fellow Castalians, Knecht has a different interpretation of the situation. He is able to view the Shadow Master as a person in distress. His capacity for compassion resonates with Weil's claim that to be able to recognise the suffering of another means "to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive" (Weil, 2009, p. 65). Knecht's solicitude and loving attention in these instances exemplifies his capacity for "psychiatric and educative work" (Hesse, 2000, p. 267) and is further evidence of his moral "soundness and balance" (p. 268).

After a somewhat poorly thought-out visit that he and Fritz undertake to the Mariafels monastery, Father Jacobus observes that he considers Knecht's friend to be "inexperienced, overbred"... "arrogant" (p.186), although he also admires Knecht for his loyalty in defending Fritz against these criticisms. It is surely a mark in Knecht's favour that he continues to

remain loyal to Fritz as a person, rather than to see Fritz's faults foremost. Humility takes Knecht beyond self-interest and into regard for others. In this, we see further links to the ethics of both Weil and Murdoch whose moral philosophy argues for generosity of spirit ahead of hasty judgment and, through appropriate humility, of striving always to be open to see the best in the other. This feature of Knecht's character also aligns with Plato's educative model. Plato advances the understanding that education is a means to develop a person's sensitivity to the needs of others. Socrates takes this to the highest extreme: in his view, a person ought to defend the rights of others even to the point of the person sacrificing that person's own life.

The insights that Joseph Knecht develops by virtue of his travel away from Castalia are resonant with Plato's observation in *Republic* that the individual needs to be able to see himself as smaller than, and separate from, the larger state or institution of which he is a part, in order to gain proper understanding of his relation to it. It is precisely when Knecht engages with folk who are not themselves wedded to Castalian thought-ways that he is able to open himself to intellectual opportunities that are simply not available within Castalia. Then, just as Joseph's elder mentors enable him to grow and develop on his own terms and enable him to find his own voice, Knecht eventually models this same fraternal respect in his interactions with his own new student, Tito, the son of his lifelong friend Plinio Designori. In this student/teacher relationship we see further affinities with the themes of Murdoch's moral philosophy. Joseph sees the talented, possibly overindulged Tito, both justly and lovingly, and he offers the younger man the kind of creative pedagogical attention that will benefit them both.

When Joseph visits Plinio's home beyond the precinct of Castalia, the rapport he establishes with Tito is immediate. Tito is enthralled by the fact that the older man gives him respect, and the fact that this friend of his father "thought him grown-up and intelligent enough to be interested in these complicated matters also gave him greater assurance" (p. 322). It is instructive that Tito is also attuned to music and becomes "rapt and attentive" (p. 321) when he hears Joseph play some Scarlatti on the piano. During this visit, Joseph ascertains with some concern that elements in Plinio's own life appear "a shade too handsome, too perfect, too well thought out" and there is, to Knecht's eye "no sense of growth, of movement, of renewal" in his friend's life (p. 310). He confides to Tito that Tito's father (Plinio) may have too hastily rejected some aspects of his own family's past, possibly out

of anger, or spite, or frustration, and that this rejection may have been to the disadvantage of Plinio himself.

It remains ultimately unclear whether Joseph steps away from his past as a Castalian scholar as an act of rebellion or of malice against Castalia, or whether his reasons can be expressed solely in terms of his own spiritual maturation and his own realization “that a hitherto idle and empty part of his self, of his heart and soul, was now demanding the right to fulfill [sic] itself” (p. 323). In any case, Knecht has grown in self-understanding to the point where he has uncovered for himself a new meaning of his life’s purpose—to work as a teacher.

5.4. *Seeking selfhood*

Knecht’s educational trajectory draws significantly on metaphors of musical forms, particularly those built around figures of movement and return—sonatas, preludes and fugues. The very word ‘fugue’, which has its origin in the Latin ‘fuga’ (flight) is highly significant here. Readers may be aware that ‘fugue’ is the name of a musical form where themes chase and intersect with each other as if in a playful dialogue of voices, but the word ‘fugue’ also carries a specific and important psychological meaning. If a person is in a ‘fugue state’ they are said to be “fleeing from their own identity often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality.”³⁷

This interpretation is consistent with Knecht’s search for self-identity in the novel. (Elsewhere, Hesse uses the term “self-will”, and notes “that self-will is highly prized under the name of originality; indeed, a certain self-will is regarded as positively desirably in artists” (Hesse, 1981, pp. 71–2). Hesse’s music metaphors, which explore the density and rich sonorities of interconnecting musical harmonies, remind us that there are a multitude of ways for the self (and for selves) to find expression, and not necessarily through the language of words. Similarly, Plato (in *Republic III*, 401e), tells us that music and harmony have a morally improving effect on the soul (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1038).

Through the image of fugal flight, Hesse captures a sense of interacting musical voices changing places, changing keys, changing position and weight. His musical metaphor also invokes the image of reciprocal relationships, such as between student and teacher, disciple and mentor, whereby as the relationship deepens, roles can be imitated and alternated, and

³⁷ “fugue state, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2019. Web. 12 April 2019.

where energy is derived from the interplay of intersecting voices. This metaphor also conveys the sense both that there are gifts and aptitudes that Knecht was born with, and as well, that he is part of some larger, inter-generational cycle of meaning and perpetual forward movement.

All his life, Knecht is drawn to the sensuous qualities of music, and he remains fascinated by his love of music to the end. It is his ability to respond to the subtleties of aesthetic nuance that alerts him to the tension and potential disharmony within Castalia, and this same sensibility leads him to explore the contradictions within himself that leads ultimately to his decision to leave Castalia for good. Knecht's decision to leave Castalia is importantly connected to his experience of pedagogical growth.

Over time, and as he becomes more aware of the world beyond, Knecht begins to realize that there is a risk that Castalia, because of its separation from the wider world, could become subject to a kind of insular thinking. Similarly, Murdoch (1992) warns of the ways that blind trust in authoritative truths can “imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests, and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 322). So it comes about that Knecht experiences limits to his tolerance of Castalia. In this connection, Lavery (2007) refers to Murdoch's account of learning in the following way: “Learning, as Murdoch defines it, occurs when an individual comes up against a limit in her conceptual understanding” (Lavery, 2007, p. 5). Similarly, Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1972, p. 154) as quoted in Roberts, 2015, p. 112, observes that one's sense of self is experienced precisely at the point when one experiences a sense of one's own breaking-point, one's own limitations:

To possess consciousness of oneself, to have personality, is to know and feel oneself distinct from other beings. And this feeling of distinctiveness is reached only through a collision, through more or less severe suffering, through a sense of one's own limits. Consciousness of oneself is simply consciousness of one's own limitation.³⁸

In Joseph Knecht's case, the limit that he reaches is the limit of his moral imagination. As Lavery tells us, “the discernment of a limit implies the creation of new, yet-to-be discovered

³⁸ For further discussion on Unamuno's writing on learning through suffering, and a further analysis of this particular passage, see Roberts, 2015, p. 112.

limits, because to demarcate a limit is, in some inchoate sense, to see beyond it to the other side, that is, to detect what conceptual understanding could be like” (Lavery, 2007, p. 5).

Weil also employs the metaphor of a limit, often as a wall, which she presents as emblematic of an impasse that only appears impenetrable, but that may also offer unexpected (metaphorical) openings. She reminds us that humans need to work very hard to garner humility in relation to intellectual puzzles or difficulties that they encounter, and neither to give up in the face of seemingly impossible obstacles, nor to rush to answers that are too easy, too ready-made: “When the attention has revealed the contradiction in something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. By persevering in this direction, we attain detachment” (Weil, 1997, p. 151).

After decades spent within Castalia, it is revealed that Knecht yearns for a more active, perhaps more morally exacting life, and so he announces that he will leave Castalia for good in order to pursue the very much more ‘ordinary’ task of being a school tutor. Knecht’s momentous decision to depart Castalia is not precipitous – we learn that he has been mulling it over for years. Nor does he turn his back entirely on education, but rather, opts for a different, far less ‘illustrious’ educational role (one that is, at least in Plato’s terms, the most important of all). He discloses in his letter of resignation his realization “that making music and playing the Glass Bead Game are not the only happy activities in life, that teaching and educating can be just as exhilarating” (Hesse, 2000, p. 377). He declares further that it is teachers who “give the young the ability to judge and distinguish, who serve them as examples of the honouring of truth, obedience to the things of the spirit, respect for language” (p. 342).

But how and why, we might wonder, does Joseph arrive at such a clear and articulate understanding of the limitations of Castalia, to the extent that he has the strength to break himself free? Is this capacity perhaps related to his implied reincarnation and to the possibility that the ideas he is working with have been honed and refined over many generations? Just what is the educational significance of Knecht’s decision to leave Castalia?

The answer seems to lie in Knecht’s own insights into what will make his life most meaningful. Knecht comes to see that for his life to be meaningful, it needs to be more properly grounded, more involved in interaction with, and service towards, others. Whereas Castalians seek to distil all human wisdom into a synthetic unity, Knecht determines that such a life in Castalia is ultimately too static. The Castalian pursuit of intellectual synthesis does

not admit the disruptive challenge of human creativity. Hesse invites his readers to see, as his protagonist comes to do, that despite its mystery and wonder, there are grave limitations to a life dedicated solely to the glass bead game, and that singular devotion to the game leads to an ambition for mastery that itself becomes a distraction to attention, and one that stifles Knecht's creativity.

Joseph comes to realize that the game has the power to become so all-encompassing that individual players may become obsessed, even addicted, and preoccupied with the game to the complete exclusion of regard for others and what they might have to offer. He concedes his own ambivalence towards the game, and admits that "he had doubts and divided feelings; the Game was a vital question for him, had become the chief problem of his life" (p. 114). Further, the game's intensely personal experience is shown to be subject to corruption—by dispositions that are entirely human, such as hubris, greed and competition. Hesse's novel suggests that the Castalian community lacks the pitch or extremity of intellectual courage that alone would allow it to be properly self-critical, so that it is not sufficiently open to challenges or to new or difficult ideas. It is not open to any consideration of its own flaws. Hesse implies that any educational institution built on an ideological system that is as insular and averse to self-criticism as Castalia is shown to be, is fraught and highly likely to founder.

In taking his departure from Castalia, Knecht achieves something that is entirely original to himself: Knecht demonstrates that he is the consummate artist, ultimately not bound by any tradition or any requirement from others, but able to determine his own course. His decision to leave Castalia is, to all those around him, unsettling, disturbing, potentially spiteful, even scandalous, and as baffling to their understanding as a Zen koan. Weil (1970) notes that in various cultures various different routes have been taken to destroy the ego and to foster lucid thought: "The Zen Buddhist technique of the koan is a method for effecting this destruction. And perhaps Plato possessed a method of this kind, in what he called dialectics?" (Weil, 1970, p. 292). Hesse depicts Knecht's departure as the act of a courageous hero who responds to a higher law rather than submit to the demands of comfort and conformity. There remains the possibility, though, that there is some spite in the mix.

By his act of departure from Castalia, Knecht "makes real" the nature of his vocation for education: he determines that he needs to live his life in a more meaningful sense, and to be of service to others in community. Although he has proved himself eminently capable to lead Castalia's elite, he realizes that his is not able, in this role, to be himself authentically and

artistically creative. In order to be truly creative, Knecht needs to be part of the real world, and to be truly human he needs to be able to acknowledge the reality of other people. Knecht wishes to find meaning in a world beyond the one that is shaped by Castalia, and to embrace life on his own terms, and through a greater sense of his own sense of “being”. We are to understand that this leave-taking is most difficult for Knecht, but that it is a move most in keeping with his emergent sense of self-understanding. Knecht’s trajectory exemplifies the view of Thomas Mann, a colleague and friend of Hesse, who writes that “vocation towards educating others does not spring from inner harmony, but from inner uncertainties, disharmony, difficulty—from the difficulty of knowing one’s own self” (Mann, as cited in Kirsch, 2016, paragraph 12).

5.5. *The importance of dialogue*

One way to interpret Knecht’s growth in self-understanding is to consider the educative model presented in the dialogues of Plato. The central method of Plato’s dialogues is to relate verbal exchanges that draw on analogies, narrative examples, and sometimes even myths (although Plato’s attitude towards myths in his *Republic* is ambiguous). In *Republic*, Socrates stresses the importance of dialectics (dialogue), of talk and debate as a means not only to clarify thought but, ultimately, to work out what it means to live one’s life the best and thereby to draw oneself onto that path. Socrates is associated with a model of education that focuses on using questioning and self-discovery. He invites his listeners to follow the same process of reflective questioning and interrogation that he himself models.

Socrates perhaps also uses questioning and reflection to expose what could be undue influence by the teacher, or a failure on the part of the student to grasp for him or herself the depth or implications of what is under discussion. Through the process of methodical (sometimes seemingly mechanical) dialogue, Socrates helps his interlocutors come closer to being able to make sense of their own understanding. From a Platonic perspective, this is an ongoing and open-ended process. Similarly, through the quality of his dialogues with others, particularly with fellow student Plinio Designori, Joseph Knecht deepens his own capacity for sense-making through questioning.

Aspects of intellectual relationship between these two men invoke Plato’s idea of *eros* and of duly measured, Platonic love. These two young men are at times depicted as tightly connected “brothers in arms”—perhaps a reminder from Hesse that we are in need of a finer definition of the concept of Platonic love if we are truly to capture the nature of love that

education brings forth. (There are other relationships in the novel that evoke Plato's pedagogical *eros*, most notably the relationship between Knecht and his beloved Music Master.)

During their time at the Wadzell school, Plinio and Joseph form a significant and enduring friendship. Plinio has a more secular approach to life than Joseph, who expects to be ensconced within the academy for life. Plinio, by contrast, will pursue his adult life beyond Castalia—a life of business interests, politics, family and social connections. These two young men feel each other out intellectually in order to spar and challenge each other in debate. Plinio is slightly older than Joseph, and a somewhat more skilful debater. Joseph is intrigued and fascinated by Plinio, “constantly endeavouring to learn from his antagonist and to promote not the rigid isolation of Castalia, but its vital collaboration and confrontation with the outside world” (p. 252). Plinio is depicted as something of a Sophist—part philosopher, part politician, “always the centre of attention...he always exerted an attraction so strong that it was akin to seduction” (p. 85).

While Joseph is impressed by Plinio's skills as a rhetorician, he resists being drawn into debate without himself gaining a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. Unlike his older comrade, Joseph does not want to use the process of dialectic and argument simply as a mechanism to outwit his opponent. His purpose is rather to engage fully with the ideas that are being proposed. The debates between these two young men bring to mind a theme in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, where Socrates debates Protagoras, a Sophist educator who claims to be able to teach human virtue. Socrates, by contrast, consistently questions whether virtue can be taught, at least in the way that Protagoras proposes. (Plato, trans, 1997, pp. 746–790).

In another of Plato's dialogues entitled *Sophists*, teachers of rhetoric and persuasion are characterized as debaters who are paid to speak falsely while nevertheless appearing to appeal to truth. Similarly in *Gorgias*, Plato critiques the pretention that a Sophist can improve a student morally simply by way of instruction. In this particular dialogue, the Sophists claim that they not only know what virtue is, but they claim to be able to pass this knowledge on directly to their students. Socrates, (in *Gorgias* 448d) asks Polus to shorten his speeches and to try to be more specific in his argument, arguing that “Polus has devoted himself more to what is called oratory than to discussion” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 794). The implication here is that Polus is more concerned with the *effects* of his own speech than with the meaning he conveys.

A clue that Socrates values the pedagogical importance of dialogue is that he enjoins those he is in dialogue with, to speak from their own understanding. He presents dialogue as a

process that involves people explaining how they make sense of things—as do Father Jacobus and Joseph—so that they can learn from each other. Socrates, like Knecht, distinguishes dialogue from Sophistry or persuasive talk. Whereas Plinio has charm and charisma and uses persuasion, he does not necessarily convey his own understanding. Hesse may be developing a critical pedagogical idea here: although dialogue *per se* cannot eliminate woolly thinking or closed-mindedness, it does nevertheless represent a model of how to approach the goal of clear thought. In particular, dialogue should be used for purposes of interaction and understanding, not as a mechanism to confuse or to argue a point for its own sake, as do Plato's Sophists. While Plato may have been too harsh in his view of the Sophists, Hesse implies sympathy for Socrates' demonstration that dialogue be used for purposes of clarification of understanding rather than for commercial gain, or for purposes of persuasion.

Knecht manifests the ability to participate in dialogue and engage in questioning with ease. He is able to track his interlocutors' arguments with enviable clarity. He is careful to track and clarify his understanding so that he can readily understand the ways that ideas connect or intersect. When, in verbal interactions, he is brought up against the limitations of his own understanding, he sustains a modest attitude towards his discussants. He never shows the least impatience or the least need to be proved correct, but models the capacity to question his own received or prevailing assumptions. He effectively participates in dialogue in ways that involve participation with his interlocutors, open and receptive.

Burbules (1993, p. 15) reminds us that the etymology of 'dialogue' has connotations that imply a transaction between, among, or across people, and that to enter into a dialogue is to enter a relationship. Burbules reminds us that it is through interactive dialogue—whether spoken or written—that we give voice to ideas, hear ourselves speak, and, crucially, connect with and give attention to the views of others. Joseph Knecht's mentors and interlocutors challenge him in dialogue that involves just this kind of respectful and challenging attention. Knecht's pedagogical dialogue with others take on a life of their own, rather like themes of musical exploration, always open for further play and exploration.

Similarly, Blacker (1997, p. 18) identifies dialogue of this quality to be at the "heart and soul" of education, the more so because at its best, such pedagogical dialogue is always incomplete, invitational, always leading further. In this way, Hesse models Knecht's ongoing education as a "leading out" of his own, and others', understanding. Another of Hesse's novels that explores, in much more dramatic fashion, the distinction between *educare* and *educere*, the tension between education as 'formative' and education as 'inspirational' is Hesse's

second, *Beneath the Wheel*. First published in 1906 (later published under the title *The Prodigy*), this work portrays an education system that is so severe and so opposed to dialogue and interaction that it ultimately crushes the spirit of several extremely gifted students, despite their promise and aspirations. As a critique of a schooling system that emphasizes academic outcomes to the complete exclusion of self-development and personal growth, *Under the Wheel* closes with just a hint of a realization among the older generation of how very much these methods have failed their youth.

Knecht acknowledges that while his dialogues with Plinio are serious, there is also a sense in which his “oratorical contest with Plinio had been partly a game” (Hesse, 2000, p. 252). In his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer (1976, pp. 66–68) draws a parallel between dialogue and game-playing. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage with the complexities of Gadamer’s philosophical arguments, there are comments that Gadamer makes in this essay about the nature of participation in dialogue that are pertinent to the current discussion. What Gadamer says about dialogue and play draws us back to Schiller’s comments about play as self-actualisation. Gadamer draws an analogy between dialogue and game playing, whereby the ‘game’ of dialogue holds significance ahead of the involvement of any single participant. The metaphor of a game carries with it the notion of the individual being swept up into something that is both larger and of greater consequence than anything bounded by the individual’s agency alone:

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject-matter is at issue in the dialogue and solicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays them into each other. Hence, when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it, as we say. The play of statement and counterstatement is played further in the inner dialogue of the soul with itself, as Plato so beautifully called thought. (p. 66)

Hesse’s novel can be seen to capture the spirit of dialogue as an open-ended play of statement and counter-statement in just this way. This he achieves in large measure through the prevailing metaphor of music. Perhaps Hesse is seeking to present Plato’s dialectic between playfulness and seriousness as inescapable elements of human life?

Knecht's educational progress is in many respects a reflection of Plato's educational ideal. He seeks to engage in dialogue with like-minded others in order to clarify his own thought. At the same time, he seeks to know things for himself, rather than accept them on trust or hearsay. From the get-go, he is portrayed as having a profound intellect and an extraordinarily even temperament. He is spirited and mentally strong, someone capable of standing up to attitudes that are questionable and keen to engage in reflection on his own life's purpose. Hesse depicts Knecht as both a journeyer—a reference to Hesse's 1932 novel *Journey to the East*, and a journeyman—one who continues to seek better self-understanding and who struggles to achieve a balance between his obligations to his own self, and his relationships to others. Throughout his time as Magister Ludi, he is shown to be consistently clear-thinking. He has a natural tact and courtesy and does not easily offend people. Because of his life of monastic seclusion, Knecht is able to benefit from uninterrupted stretches of time for his intellectual work. He establishes himself both as a scholar and as a conscientious teacher. From his students he develops a wide knowledge, and as a teacher he manifests the capacity to be tolerant, to listen and take a genuine interest in the other person. He takes ideas seriously and is willing to debate. He is thoughtful and dutiful, and typically works through questions and puzzles logically and carefully, to arrive at well-formed conclusions. He keeps conversations going and open, and he shows interested in how one person relates to another.

Yet as Knecht's adult life proceeds, he undergoes a process of quiet but profound transformation. This metamorphosis is revealed gradually, and over time we begin to see a more nuanced account of Knecht. With the benefit of hindsight, we see that Knecht was beginning to critique Castalia from a young age, although his experience of 'awakening' to the realities of Castalia's limitations is gradual and protracted. Knecht's sense of self-realization is less a discovery of how he might live a *happier* life, and a rather more profound pedagogical realization that leads him to see in a new way, and far beyond what he had previously imagined to be right and true, how he might proceed in his life. (For these ideas I am indebted to Ziolkowski, 1965, who develops these points in some detail, p. 322.) Knecht's 'awakening' involves a gradual reassessment of some fairly uncomfortable truths about himself in relation to Castalia, a community to which he has devoted the majority of his life. Joseph Knecht faces down the devastating realization that his previous understanding of Castalia and his place in it are wrong-headed.

To explain his intended departure from Castalia, he writes his fellow administrators a candid letter in which he expresses his own critical reflections: “[W]e have already been infected by the characteristic disease of nobility—*hubris*, conceit, class arrogance, self-righteousness, exploitativeness—if we conduct such a self-examination, we may be seized by a good many doubts” (Hesse, 2000, p. 328). By using the plural first-person pronoun “we”, Knecht indicates that he includes himself as part of the problem.

Joseph’s reflection on the ways in which his own new self-understanding has developed over time calls for great humility on his part, and a recognition that there are things he has been mistaken about, or has not properly understood. As a younger person he had considered his own “awakening” more in terms of “a slow, step-by-step penetration into the heart of the universe...a continuous path or progression which nevertheless had to be achieved gradually” (p. 357). “Each time he had taken a larger or smaller step on a seemingly straight road—and yet he now stood at the end of this road, by no means at the heart of the universe and in the innermost core of truth. (p. 358). Against his own earlier understanding, he declares that “his path had been a circle, or an ellipse or spiral, or whatever, but definitely not straight; straight lines evidently belonged only to geometry, not to nature and to life” (p. 358).

In this declaration of his new-found understanding, Joseph’s position aligns closely with Weil and Murdoch’s notion of attention, a concept that has epistemological, moral and educational dimensions. For these philosophers, attention and obedience are closely connected: we cannot *but* attend to the subject matter that is the centre of our attention. Their understanding of right moral action as ‘obedience’ resonates with that of Hesse’s protagonist.

In her own description of attention, Weil explains that “once it [the will] has gone, one has passed beyond will into obedience” (Weil, 1970, p. 326). This is in accord with Joseph’s own explanation that “the apparent willfulness [sic] of his present action was in reality service and obedience” and that he is “not a fugitive, but a man responding to a summons; not headstrong, but obedient’ (Hesse, 2000, p. 359). In taking his decision to depart Castalia, he does not seek to negate the ideals of Castalia, nor does he berate himself for his prior work within Castalia, but he recognizes the need to take steps to achieve a better balance contemplative work with a more active function. Perhaps his departure is also an act of humility on Knecht’s part. He respects the potential of the younger generation coming through.

This interpretation of Joseph's situation connects with Murdoch's understanding of moral attention, and her belief that the ability to see objectively ought to be the chief goal of moral philosophy. Murdoch considers "consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 171). Her notion of attention is the means to find a moral reality that exists beyond the self. As Murdoch notes, "If I attend properly, I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 38). Murdoch goes on to say that "the idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like 'obedience'" (p. 39).

Joseph Knecht's process of 'awakening', of 'emergence', while momentous in consequence, is not described in fine-grained detail, and his resolve to leave is only announced once his decision to leave Castalia has already been taken. Given this situation, his unexpected announcement is all the more staggering. In the quiet way that Hesse reveals the outcome of Knecht's moral enquiry, he reminds us, as does Murdoch, that people are involved in making moral judgements all the time, and that the quality of these moral judgements is very much connected with their capacity for attention:

Moral change and moral achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by. In a way, explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive. (p. 38)

Again we find connections to the work of Plato. To undergo moral reflection or review in search of self-improvement is a Platonic notion. Also Platonic is the notion that our capacity to learn anything new opens us up progressively to new realizations that may lead to further new discoveries or further new readings of the world.

Laverty (2007) suggests that to learn "is less like something that is the direct result of our efforts and is more like something that we become ready to receive" (p. 6). Laverty suggests further that to learn "is less a function of freedom and more a function of obedience or, more accurately, given that we are to a certain extent free, it is a function of using our freedom to become more obedient" (p. 6). In this sense we can read Joseph's decision to leave Castalia as a selfless one, a product of his attentive deliberations and motivated more by 'obedience' than by a desire for freedom. Murdoch argues that a consequence of proper

attention is that “I will have no choices, and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 38). Murdoch states in more detail:

Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes apparent, occasions action. It is what lies behind and in and between actions and prompts them that is important, and this is an area which should be purified. By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act. (p. 65)

Murdoch’s notion of attention involves a diminished sense of the individual self, an ability to deflect one’s inward-facing gaze outward, away from the self, and it encompasses the Platonic idea that there is intrinsic worth in the pursuit of goodness for its own sake. She reminds us that such moral growth and change, even if slow and difficult, is the fruit of dedicated pedagogical attention: “Truth and progress (or some truth and progress) are the reward of some exercise of virtue, courage, humility and patience” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 400). Murdoch argues that in a sense, “explicit choice seems now less important: less decisive (since much of the ‘decision’ lies elsewhere) and less obviously something to be ‘cultivated’” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 38). To act on the basis of ideals is to be guided by commitment to the kind of person one wants to be. So it is that after decades of productive and successful work within the system of Castalia, Joseph Knecht’s accomplishment is to determine for himself that he must pursue quite another direction altogether.

Although Knecht appears to question his longstanding loyalty to the order of Castalia only once he assumes the role of Magister Ludi, in fact the narrator lays some early clues about Knecht’s capacity for independent thought from the days of his youth. Even as a young student, Knecht pondered on “that one question of whether the Game really was the supreme achievement of Castalia and worth devoting one’s life to” (Hesse, 2000, p. 123). We are told that on this matter “his doubts had by no means been silenced” (p. 123), and that he was quietly alert “to all the dubiousness of the Game” (p. 123). We are given a further, early glimpse of Knecht’s independent moral spirit in the way that even as a young student, he “refused to be intimidated” by draconian headmaster Zbinden in Wadzell (p. 81). In this example and others, Knecht shows that he has a strong sense of morality, and that he, like Plato’s youngster (*Republic* III, 402), “rightly object[s] to what is shameful, hating it while he is still young and unable to grasp the reason” (Plato, trans. 1997, p. 1038).

Nevertheless it takes many years and much quiet deliberation and dialogue with others before Joseph comes to the painful realization that he could make a different, more meaningful contribution by leaving the pedagogical province altogether. By virtue of the opportunities created by his mentors and friends, in combination with much extraordinary soul-searching and reflection on his own part, he arrives at a reassessment of his own understanding of the value of his place within Castalia. Not unlike a mythical Kaspar Hauser figure he declares: “I really feel as if I had lain asleep or half asleep for a long time, but am now awake and clearheaded and receptive in a way I never am ordinarily” (Hesse, 2000, p. 374). He says that he now craves “risk, difficulty, and danger; I’m hungry for reality, for tasks and deeds, and also for deprivations and suffering” (p. 370).

On the eve of his departure, Knecht explains to Master Alexander that he experiences at odd times “a kind of spiritual experience...which I call awakening” (p. 373). He explains that these experiences involve a sense of connection to what he calls an “intensified reality”, “a sense of irresistible immediacy and tension” (p. 374). He aligns his gradual awakening in terms of “experiencing and proving oneself in the real world a Castalian but also as a man” (p. 370). This connects his sense of life as a progression or series of stages, and once again he calls up a music metaphor to explain his meaning:

My life, I resolved, ought to be a perpetual transcending, a progression from stage to stage; I wanted it to pass through one area to the next, leaving each behind, as music moves on from theme to theme, from tempo to tempo, playing each out to the end, completing each and leaving it behind, never tiring, never sleeping, forever wakeful, forever in the present. (p. 376)

This account connects in interesting ways to Weil’s account of pedagogical attention, and, as well, to the creation myth that takes up most of Plato’s *Timaeus*, a dialogue that Weil herself greatly admired.³⁹ In *Timaeus* (33a) the demiurge (artist/creator) creates a world that exists in perfect balance, “as whole and complete as is possible and made up of complete parts” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1238), and in *Timaeus* (33b) we read that the artist creator gives this world “a round shape, the form of a sphere, with its centre equidistance from its extremes in all directions” (p. 1238) since this is the most beautiful shape of all. This newly created world, presented as a system capable of intellectual thought, reflects the spherical shape of Joseph

³⁹ Whitehead (1962) notes that *Timaeus* was the only Platonic dialogue available in Latin translation for scholars of the Middle Ages, a detail that is of relevance to the ostensible history of the fictional glass bead game.

Knecht's imagined pedagogical model. This is a realm where order can be achieved out of chaos, and where it is possible to achieve a unity of experience between thought and action.

Whitehead (1962) remarks that that Plato's *Timaeus* gives an account of a dynamic, changing organism, as against his theory of the unchanging Forms in *Republic*, and that whereas Plato's *Republic* suggests that it is only the *best* who are destined for the rewards of a good life, *Timaeus* (44c) presents a scenario where a fairer balance is possible—particularly the balance of nurture (love) and education as ingredients towards human wholeness: “If such a person also gets proper nurture to supplement his education, he'll turn out perfectly whole and healthy, and will have escaped the most grievous of illnesses” (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 1238.)

In *Timaeus*, a person's moral growth is achieved not by operating in isolation (as is the case in Hesse's Castalia), but rather, by being in connection with others. (See further Allan, 1966, pp. 243–257). Plato's *Timaeus* upholds the belief in the value of working creatively alongside others in patience and service. *Timaeus* is a world that allows the synthesis of opposites in ways that the idealised Castalia cannot. Because Castalian society does not have an in-built capacity to anticipate and respond to its own weaknesses, or to generate change from within, it is unable to grow and thrive. As Roberts and Freeman-Moir (2013) note “in the closed, stagnant world of Castalia there is nothing to nourish the dream—to keep reinvigorating the myth in a manner appropriate to new times, new contexts, and new challenges” (p. 163). By contrast, Plato's created world of *Timaeus*, which is organically alive, is a world much more likely to support human creativity and flourishing. Within the mythology of Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Knecht comes to see that “the world and its life was in fact infinitely vaster and richer than the notions a Castalian has of it; it was full of change, history, struggles, and eternally new beginnings” (Hesse, 2000, p. 378).

5.6. *Knecht's Bildung*

The concept of *Bildung* is central to Hesse's novel—not simply in terms of Knecht's steady progression through the ranks of the Castalian education system, but more importantly, in relation to way that Knecht develops himself through his capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. In line with the Platonic and mystical references in the novel, Hesse suggests that Knecht's true self may already exist in its perfected form, but it remains Knecht's task to ‘uncover’ this for himself. This he does both through ongoing self-reflection, and through interactions and involvement with others. Knecht's ‘Bildung’ is protracted,

complex and lifelong. (Swales, 1978, Roberts, 2013, and Lavery, 2007, each in their own way also discusses the complexity of this process. In particular, Swales, 1978, notes that Hesse's work explores not only the nature of Knecht's formal education, but it also wider themes that relate to aspects of human 'becoming' and the search for a sense of self, an approach that Swales aligns with the literary tradition of both Goethe and Schiller.)

The concept of 'becoming' in philosophy combines the idea of forward movement with things enduring or maintaining themselves through the change. 'Becoming' is an idea that time does not dissolve into separate moments, since time is a whole, actively connecting across all those moments. Swales (1978) argues that the *Bildungsroman* form amounts to "much more than a discursive essay on the aesthetic mode" (p. 4), and that at its best, it captures the sense of "organic growth, of a maturing process that somehow eludes even conceptual terms", one that "seeks to assert the reconcilability of human wholeness on the one hand and the facts of limited and limiting social experience on the other" (p. 390). The *Bildungsroman*, according to Swales, "binds together contingencies into the weighty sequence of a human destiny" (p. 33). Swales's description of this literary form as involving "the alteration of certainty of purpose with a sense of the overriding randomness of living" and of seeing these matters as "the very stuff of human experience" (p. 34), brings to mind Murdoch's claim that to look for unity is something that is hardwired and instinctive to the human mind. To maintain one's personal identity in a diachronic sense is the epitome of connection through a process of change. Consider Shakespeare's Sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the maim of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,

Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

Just as the self in its wholeness recognises ‘becoming’, so too does ‘becoming’ emblemise unity behind the apparent diversity of moments and things. Murdoch (1992) states that “[t]he urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself. Intellect is naturally one-making” (p. 1). The unity of the self is a model for unity of the world. Murdoch goes on to point to the chancy, accidental glimpses of something mysterious, even mystical, that can take place within in everyday happenings. She argues that we all want to put faith in the conviction that there is some kind of unity that makes sense of things, quite ahead of us having any real understanding about what that unity might amount to:

There are innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify out energy, to keep on looking in the right direction: to attend upon the grace that comes through faith. (p. 25)

To realize self-hood is aspirational, just as truly to know the world as a unitary whole is aspirational. To take a leap of faith in how one hangs together, if the leap is of the right quality, enhances the self morally, much as a leap to a whole new mode of understanding can enhance human knowledge of the world. The courage or mettle called for in either kind of leap is one and the same, and Murdoch recognises it everywhere. She considers that everyday life can be the site of the greatest faith, the most noble of pursuits, even in the midst of what seems like chaos. Murdoch’s conception of a reorientation that is at once shattering and also productive, is reflected in Joseph’s rejection of, and consequent reorientation away from Castalia to a role that is both more participatory and more creative. As Hesse’s narrator notes “The idea of this image-making abyss is also the concept of a *via negativa*, which is both iconoclastic and fertile of new images” (Hesse, 2000, p. 465).

In *Dying to Teach* (1997), Blacker argues for the ideal of education as an enterprise that is essentially “out of time”, an a-temporal project of mythic proportions, and one that is built on positive relationships. Drawing on Blacker’s ideal, the *Bildung* of Joseph Knecht can be made out as transcending the temporality and temporal boundedness of the individual life. This is not so much (as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60) from the life being remembered by others as from things that gave special wholeness and meaning to the life going on and being taken further in the lives of others. In Blacker’s words, such self-realization as Knecht’s may “give

rise to something larger and beyond the individuals doing the enacting” (Blacker, 1997, p. 103).

Similarly, if Hesse’s chapter entitled ‘The Legend’ marks the end of Joseph Knecht’s life, the novel’s subsequent section explores themes of teaching and education in ways that give his life meaning within a far broader perspective. In this final section of the novel, Hesse plays with themes of reincarnation, immortality, and destiny, and he introduces further possibilities for the way that knowledge and values may be conveyed across time and culture. The purpose of this section can be seen not as a consideration of various pathways of causality, but rather as a consideration of *progressions* of meaning. One way to enrich one’s sense of a kind of timeless significance of Knecht’s life is to consider the archetype, as reincarnation stories can assist one to do.

The novel’s final section contains in addition to thirteen of Knecht’s youthful poems three lengthy fictional biographies—almost short novels in themselves. Hesse’s narrator identifies this section as “possibly the most important part of the book” (Hesse, 1943/2000, p. 105). The significance to the novel of the three fictional biographies have been analysed by many Hesse scholars including Field (1968), Milek (1970), Remys (1983), Johnson (1956), and White & White (1986). White & White point out that this section of the novel underlines the ways in which the main figure is “constantly evolving and widening his horizons” (p. 943). Each of Hesse’s three fictional biographies depicts an aspiring “Knechtian” namesake—always a younger male who looks to an older, wiser male figure, and who stands as a potential replacement for that older person. (Johnson, 1965, provides a detailed analysis of this aspect of the autobiographies.)

The content of the third section of the novel gives further meaning to the idea that individual selves may be inter-connected in mysterious ways that we do not fully understand. Knecht’s youthful writing samples provide a perspective on how he envisioned his adult life might possibly ‘have been’ in another time. Of relevance to the theme of his intellectual and moral development is that each of his three fictional biographies involves Knecht’s giving loving attention to the needs of another person. This anticipates Murdoch’s account of virtuous attention as a practice that is “concerned with really apprehending that other people exist” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 284). It is precisely Joseph’s capacity to apprehend “that other people exist” that serves as the catalyst for his momentous decision to exit Castalia altogether.

Knecht's three imaginative biographies also connect importantly with his emergent sense of selfhood. Following Bakhtin (1986) we could argue that that Knecht "emerges *along with the world* and that he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (p. 23). In his discussion of literary forms, Bakhtin discusses what he terms "novels of emergence". He proposes that in the most interesting examples, such novels explore what he calls "problems of reality, and man's potential, problems of freedom and necessity, and the problem of creative initiative" (p. 24). Joseph's *Bildung* is understood as a process of 'becoming' in just this way, of his taking increased responsibility for his own further self-development. No-one else can assist him with his challenges, and he must forge for himself his own self-understanding. This involves him in much struggle, self-criticism, and self-reflection, a process that calls for a curious mixture of audacity and humility. In taking the direction that he wants to pursue in order to be the kind of person he wants to become, Joseph Knecht embodies the spirit of *Bildung*.

Laverty (2007) connects the term *Bildungsroman* to texts that explore pedagogical questions by way of the growth and maturation of the characters. She identifies the *Bildungsroman* as a literary genre that describes the gradual deepening of the protagonist's understanding of what it means to lead a good life, thereby linking the form to Plato's underlying questions in *Republic*. Murdoch (2014) makes a similar point when she claims that "Morality is connected with change and progress" (p. 28). Hesse's novel belongs to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, both in the novel's overarching themes and in the way in which that overall theme is delivered.

Hesse depicts Knecht as a "hero who finds the courage to fulfil his destiny", one who "follows his own star" (Hesse, 1981, p. 73). Knecht's efforts to be an "egoless" self (in the sense of responding to a higher calling) can be seen to connect with Murdoch's moral philosophy and her belief that goodness exists independently, and that we can recognise what it is: "Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 91). It is by way of his quiet and unassuming process of 'un-selfing' that Knecht finds a way to countenance a different, albeit difficult, path. Knecht shows on various occasions that he is deeply responsive to natural beauty, which draws him out of himself and, in Murdoch's words, "invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness" (p. 83). Murdoch reminds us that this mental state of 'unselfing' opens the mind to think new thoughts, to countenance other perspectives or alternative readings. True

attention works to discipline the mind away from thoughts that are innately self-oriented or simply aimless. In Murdoch's ethics of attention, the ego is humbled and one's being is subject to what is subjectless, transcendent of any self, but accessible to all selves equally. She proposes that to give attention to the artistic achievement of others is an excellent example of this phenomenon, as is sensitivity to another person's plight: "We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need" (p. 58).

Murdoch understands from Plato that virtue is not something that can be explicitly taught, nor does virtue appear fully-developed in any individual. An aptitude that is innate can be woken by reflection, in Plato's view, and in Murdoch's is an aptitude to draw towards the good, even if this good is significantly "forgotten", and requires painstaking "recollection" in order to form as virtue. Only the cultivation of attention, and so of reflection, can bring about truly moral change, or can help an individual to become, in themselves, truly virtuous. Murdoch reminds us that we may encounter aspects of the good only if we are truly able to look beyond ourselves, to see beyond our own limitations. She challenges us to reflect on ways in which we might improve ourselves morally.

Joseph Knecht's aesthetic experiences through music awaken in him what Murdoch calls "a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession" (p. 83). Murdoch reminds us that music, like other aesthetic forms, gives structure and form to human experience whereas in everyday reality we are more likely to experience life as a series of formless or chaotic happenings (Murdoch, 1992, pp. 1–2). Hesse shows how artistic endeavours such as music-making meaningfully direct our attention towards that which is good—towards that which inspires love. "Love is self-mastery, the power to understand, the ability to smile in sorrow" (Hesse, 1981, p. 69). Murdoch similarly argues that morality and aesthetics are interconnected in their capacity to arouse an awareness of the reality of something other than the self – an awareness that is in Murdoch's view, quintessentially the experience of loving:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos...one...Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 215)

Knecht's gradual realization that he sees the world beyond Castalia differently from the way that most Castalians do, connects with Murdoch's claim that moral growth involves

morally active inner reflection. Murdoch explains that “as we move from generalities toward the accidental and particular we introduce muddle but also variety and space” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 349). Murdoch defends the view that moral progress comes about not by way of particular acts or deeds, but rather through the consistent and on-going application of careful and contemplative attention—that is to say, through patient and attentive waiting. Murdoch maintains that moral improvement arises from “attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily, of course other people but also other things. Such a view accords with oriental wisdom...ultimately we ought to have no will” (p. 52).

On the eve of his departure from Castalia, Knecht pens a letter to Tegularius, in which he explains the depth of his moral concerns: “Castalia without the Game is conceivable, but not a Castalia without reverence for truth, without *fidelity* to the life of the mind” (Hesse, 2000, p. 342). This declaration is followed by an eloquent defence of the role of teacher and Knecht’s statement of his determination to pursue a quite different, albeit more lowly, more open-ended path:

Teachers are more essential than anything else, men who can give the young the ability to judge and distinguish, who can serve as examples of the honoring of truth, obedience to the things of the spirit, respect for language...That is where the basis for the cultural life of the country is to be found, not in the seminars of the Glass Bead Game. (p. 342)

The momentous decision that Knecht takes, and his reasons for taking it, connect us to thoughts that Socrates raises regarding what a good and virtuous life amounts to. These are questions that Murdoch also draws us back to. Murdoch argues that art, literature and aesthetics bring us face to face with questions that religion and mysticism also explore—what it means to be a truly good person. Murdoch proposes that one way that we can make sense of our ordinary everyday experience is by aligning it with aesthetics and art. She suggests that if an individual person can re-orient himself towards the good, that achievement has within it something of a spiritual dimension. She observes that people are “continuously striving and learning, discovering and discarding images” and that “our business is with the continual activity of our own minds and souls and with our own possibilities of being truthful and good” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 250).

Murdoch observes that “...form in art, as form in philosophy, is designed to communicate and reveal. In the shock of joy in response to good art, an essential ingredient is a sense of the revelation of reality, of the really real...the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 454). Similarly, Hesse’s novel invites his readers to consider the capacity for art to bring about changes in the way we think about the world and how we interact with it. Hesse’s narrator comments that “[t]o study history means submitting to chaos and nevertheless retaining faith in order and meaning” (Hesse, 2000, p. 157). The narrator draws a link between history and literature and notes that “history’s third dimension is always fiction” (p. 39), thereby suggesting that literature, like history, provides useful knowledge about the human condition.

In a many-textured way, Hesse’s novel supports the view that creative and artistic investigation, not unlike historical investigation, can lead to revised interpretations and ways of seeing things anew, or in ways not before considered. The connections that Hesse draws between pedagogical and aesthetic explorations are clear—both enterprises are open-ended and imaginative, and both are open to new ways of interpretation. Artistic authenticity and originality involves thinking for oneself, or as Hesse puts it elsewhere, “having a will of one’s own” (Hesse, 1981, p. 72). This also connects his novel thematically to the moral philosophy of Murdoch, who recognises the importance of art and aesthetics as fundamentally educative because, as she argues, this is the site of moral growth and change.

In some respects, an analogy can be drawn between Knecht’s encounter with the bead game and our own experience as readers of Hesse’s text. In both cases there a sense of anticipation coupled with confusion, and the somewhat bemused but also deeply-held desire that we will come to some fresh understanding or illumination, some clear and new insight. Like Joseph, we are called upon to review our own beliefs and assumptions and to consider how they might need to be modified in light of further illumination or clarification. We are likely to empathise with Knecht’s recognition that his earlier understanding of life’s journey as a steady march towards clarity was wrongheaded, or at least wrongly ‘formulaic’, and we gradually learn that the actual trajectory of Knecht’s intellectual and moral progress is very much more textured and elusive than he, or we, might initially have guessed: “The pattern grew confused and he lost it; he had to begin over again; for a moment his concentration left him and he was in a void” (Hesse, 2000, p. 69).

5.7. Summary

The Glass Bead Game presents education as an open-ended, inherently perplexing undertaking. The novel promotes the idea that intellectual growth is analogous to moral growth, one that resonates with Murdoch's comment that "consciousness or self-being is the fundamental mode or form of moral being" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 171). Through the figure of Joseph Knecht, Hesse offers an interpretation of teaching pedagogy as artistic exploration, where new ways of interpretation are constantly possible, and where dialogue, contemplation and storytelling all play a part. More than the description of a utopian dream for education, Hesse's novel shows that an individual's education represents a lifetime of endeavour, commitment, and ongoing self-realization. While the novel ultimately portrays a harmonious balance between the two aspects of life, *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, Hesse's novel also reminds us that such a state is rarely, if ever, achieved.

Through his not-so-veiled critique of Castalia, Hesse reminds us that intellectual (moral) harmony is difficult to achieve, and that a pretence at intellectual (moral) harmony may be illusory, or worse, could facilitate a kind of inhumane indifference (consider the hierarchy's cruel treatment of Shadow Master Bertram). But Hesse does not conclude from this that the educative project is ultimately hopeless. On the contrary, he defines education as the chief way that we might hold out hope for the future. For Hesse, the test of the worth of the pedagogical achievement, and one which Joseph Knecht ultimately masters, is his capacity to hold to truth. By the time Knecht leaves Castalia he has developed the courage to commit himself to a pedagogically uncertain but optimistic relationship with Tito, a choice that (unexpectedly) creates an early opportunity for the younger boy to assume the pedagogical challenges modelled by his elder.

But Hesse's achievement in *The Glass Bead Game* is even more than this. Through his artistic vision, he draws his readers into the working of his own imaginative literary game. His readers are then tasked with synthesising imaginatively the complex world of Hesse's vast inter-textual references, displaced chronologies, blended literary genres and dialectical tensions. The readers are invited to *play* in a way that is itself like a glass bead game. More, then, than the fictionalised historical biography of a single individual protagonist figure, Hesse's novel is a work of art that calls on its readers to undertake their own imaginative, moral, and educative struggles in the effort to understand and interpret what it is to be engaged in a transformative journey of education.

Hesse points to the way that aesthetic (as opposed to didactic) education can inform our intellectual insights and our moral dispositions. He underlines the importance of the imagination and aesthetic experiences in education, and he reminds us that while the faculty of reason is critical, this must not be pursued to the exclusion of creative development. Hesse's novel also advances an education that actively critiques implied assumptions or hidden beliefs, and that encourages students to avoid replicating the thinking of their teachers. His novel suggests that, in balance with dialogue and study of the works of others, there should be space and time in education for individual contemplation and reflection. In accordance with the views of both Weil and Murdoch, Hesse's novel demonstrates that the basis for teaching pedagogy is love.

Hesse's novel also serves as a reminder that we must always to look to youth with respect, kindness, and invitation. This novel exemplifies that the first and most difficult task of the teacher or pedagogue is truly to 'know oneself', that a high level of self-understanding can be achieved only through sustained and searching reflection, and that this is the best background for anyone in an educative role. Hesse grants that within the educative experience, the teacher must realize, as Knecht ultimately does, that both student and teacher need time and space to grow and develop themselves. Hesse acknowledges that his novel intersects with timelessly important aesthetic and moral themes: "All the things we call a product of the mind or a work of art or objectified spirit—are the outcomes of a struggle for purification and liberation. They are escapes from time into timelessness" (Hesse, 2000, p. 263).

The following chapter considers a very much shorter, but no less complex text. Henry James's enigmatic novella *The Turn of the Screw*, has been endlessly interpreted since its first publication. Consistent with the metaphor of a ship's propeller, or screw, this story gains its momentum in unseen ways, as if just below the textual surface. The reader's inevitable sense of a loss of direction, even of their own moral compass, links to the story's themes of intellectual and moral confusion. James's reader is put into a state of constant doubt, repeatedly tasked with figuring out just who and what to believe. This story absolutely requires its reader to take pause, slow down, and open him or herself up to a fully attentive reading.

Chapter 6: Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

6.0. Introduction

That it is impossible truly to *grow* without being improved *morally* by the accomplishment, is a thesis of Simone Weil's and Iris Murdoch's, upon which their entire account of pedagogical attention vitally depends. Yet their thesis that all learning is partly moral learning, will strike many people as implausibly strong. The present chapter subjects to a *test* their claim that pedagogical attention possesses an inevitable connection with moral growth. The work of literary fiction that has been selected for use as this test antedates both Weil and Murdoch—by fewer decades, but no less surely, than Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (of Chapter 5) also antedates them.

The fictional work that is chosen so as to test whether it is impossible truly to learn without being improved morally by the accomplishment reflects the following circumstance. Society may sometimes be mightily blinkered against entertaining at all, certain forms of moral reflection. Late Victorian society illustrates this strikingly. Among the various forms of moral reflection against which late Victorian society was tightly blinkered, one form concerned (or would have concerned if such reflection had been even possible), sexual predation upon the young. So tightly blinkered was Victorian society against consideration of this matter that even if there were the words to form a description (and those that there were, were relatively few), the possibility of using them in speech or in literary writing was immediately stifled.

If a work of literature were in this circumstance able to educate its contemporary readers, that is to say, if the fiction were to create inducements for attention that are far-reaching because especially challenging, then very emphatically, that work of literary fiction would need to help its readers to adjust the boundaries of what was psychologically possible for them. For a reader to engage his or her own reflective agency in this circumstance would appear to be both virtually impossible, but, at the same time, entirely necessary.

Obviously, if the work of fiction were to seek to *force* its readers' blinkers to come down, this would constitute a violence that would defeat the idea that the work could be morally improving in the way understood by Weil and Murdoch. Indeed, *were* the work to attempt to force the needed psychological change upon the reader, it would both infantilize the reader, and would at the same time violate his or her own dignity as an independent

thinker. A work of fiction that contrived to be violent in this way would be itself deeply troubled. A fictional work that was of this character would be oppressive, uninviting, and destined not to be widely read.

For a literary work to concern engagingly such a situation depends on the author's own subtlety concerning how new reader insight might be accomplished, and by what means. For the literary artist to enable a society to be more open and honest with itself requires, ironically, that the literary work itself employs some degree of subterfuge—some refusal, as art, explicitly to state its very own point. This is because the success of the literary artist in this situation depends on the reader's own accomplishment—not so much to arrive at new insight that will lead to a new form of moral understanding, but to experience a growth (*Bildung*) in reader understanding from which might develop a greater capacity to describe how things are and might be otherwise. To be effective, the literary work must be eminently ingenious in what reflective effort it requires of its readers, and in how that reflective effort is elicited.

The challenge for the literary artist in this circumstance is especially weighty. Not simply to flaunt the codes of decorum of polite society has to be high among the requirements, in order for such a fiction to “work”. The task of the writer is not himself or herself to peer behind the blinkers of society, but rather to help to create cognitive urgings for his or her readers so that they begin to imagine for themselves that those blinkers are down. The powers of articulation that are stifled before the bare capacity to exercise them even begins, must, on that account, not be exercised by the writer—even if the moral point of the writing is to alter those possibilities, and thereby to oppose the stifling. The test of the argument that all education is partly moral education will be passed if a writer who accepts such a challenge rises to it in some way that wholly depends upon his possessing and exercising the pedagogical powers that Weil and Murdoch associate with attention.

Our test case here concerns Henry James (1843–1916) and his acclaimed novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Written in 1898, the story's inner narrative tells the first-person experiences of an unnamed governess who takes up the care of two orphans in a remote country house. Her story ends with one of the two children dead in her arms in highly ambiguous circumstances. James's novella has been analysed multiple times by researchers fascinated by the power of the tale to persuade, to convince, and even (it is said) to manipulate its readers. Yet whatever any person's interpretation of the story, it is a common experience for James's reader to find that this tale retains a lingering hold on the reader's mind and plays on the memory long after the story has been read to the end. The theme of the story's indeterminacy

are developed further by others (Felman, 1985, Felski, 2015, Leithauser, 2012, and Seltzer, 2014). In short, James's reader is led by the text to take significant steps of reflection that reach beyond it. If *The Turn of the Screw* is beautiful as art (and certainly this work is much acclaimed), then its beauty has everything to do with this power.

The purpose of the present chapter is to reveal how this power is every inch moral in its character. It explores reasons why the story's pervading disquiet is vital to the initiation of difficult moral advancement in the reader. The chapter is written in three main parts. The first considers the connection between moral attention and aesthetic appreciation, and seeks to explain the overall structure and design of the novella. The second (which draws on ideas from Weil and Murdoch) explores the work's educational themes in relation to attention. The third and final section (in reference beyond Weil and Murdoch back to Plato) explores James's use of language, dialogue, and silence in the text. The chapter concludes with some broader comments on the connections between attention, imagination, and moral sense.

6.1. *Calls for reader attention*

Critics across many decades have sought to "explain" James's *Turn of the Screw* story, almost as a way to soothe the disquiet that any attentive reader experiences in reading the tale. The disquiet of the story is very painful, so it is no wonder that critics have sought a salve or a means to resolve it. However, the mode of scrutiny of the story in the present chapter is different: this chapter directly considers what the story's disquiet is *for*. The work's refusal as art ever explicitly to state its very own point is not in order to soften the story, for that would diminish James's artistic achievement. The work's refusal, as art, to state explicitly its own point is not to be seen as a kind of perverse blank on James's part. The uneasiness that the text arouses in its readers is essential to the beauty as art of James's art work.

James explicitly uses the term 'attention' both within this novella and repeatedly within his acclaimed literary prefaces (many of which post-dated the works themselves, and were published between 1907 and 1909). While James's use of the term "attention" is not altogether on all fours with Weil's and Murdoch's, the following agreement with those later philosophers is beyond question: James makes it clear that just as *failure* of attention will quite prevent any character in the story from achieving worthy insight, so also no reader of the story will without attention achieve worthy insight. *Failure* of attention fates all who suffer it to become cognitively mired by the troubling elements of the tale, so that bewilderment seems inevitable.

Only the adequate exercise of attention can pull beyond the confusion, to warrant, no doubt painfully, but nevertheless convincingly, an explanation for them all, according to which not only is the psychology explicable but the seemingly supernatural aspects made psychologically telling and natural. Those critics who have overtly filled in the blanks (perhaps as though to do so would save readers some work), may not so much have understood James's purpose as they have trampled upon it. They have not thereby "explained" the story, and instead may have mangled its point.

Critical interpretations of the story's meaning have been the source of ongoing heated debate and scrutiny virtually since the time of the story's first publication. Among these critical interpretations have been those developed by Beidler (1989), Bewley (1952), Bromwich (2011), Felman (1977), Hadley (2002), Leithauser (2012), Lustig (1994), Wilson (1948) and Yeazell (1976). Against these prevailing readings of the story, I here argue that there *is* a "preferred" moral reading of James's novella, albeit one that is altogether not explicitly presented to our minds by the story's telling. (By calling the moral reading "preferred" I do not preclude there being other, different readings that have partial worth.) I argue that James has silently fashioned precisely those matters that cannot be broached, contained, captured, or politely summed up, precisely so as to draw the reader's imagination in most intensely, and so to engage the reader morally and ethically.

The implications of horrific child sexual abuse by adults in the story are surely magnified by the silence that James has kept concerning them. Against the typical critique of the artistry of the story, the present reading of *The Turn of the Screw* leaves, as the novella itself does, all truly reflective required effort to each individual reader. Neither simply a ghost story, nor a tale of madness and hysteria, I argue that James's story epitomises instead the writer's demand for moral attention from his reader. Even a reader who has possessed no power to discuss a hidden evil must remake the power of their own imagination and consider that evil for the first time.

In his portrayal of Miles and Flora, the two children at the centre of the story, James presents us with two equally ruinous dimensions of sexual predation: on the one hand we see evidence of the irreparable harm that is done to the children by the adults entrusted to care for them; while on the other, James shows how these two children have themselves learned to behave in highly manipulative ways. The ruinous behaviour of the adults towards the children exposes them to things that are entirely corrupting, and that they cannot subsequently "unlearn." As a consequence, as James's story shows, the children become

themselves equally incapable of “unlearning” the complex manipulative behaviour towards others.

Our moral reflection on this question has to be uneasy and disturbing. While there exists a moral imperative never to blame a victim of sexual abuse—since that person is an innocent victim, it is less clear, when considering the pathology of child sexual abuse, just how we ought to think about the fact that the victim is likely to become, in time, a violator of innocence, since this is precisely how the pathology of sexual abuse is perpetrated through the generations. This is not at all to suggest that we should give up on the ideal of never blaming the victim, but it does raise the question just how much any individual person can hope to influence the change of another other individual in such a dire situation. In this, as in so many other respects, James’ story catches his readers off-guard. While it is eminently helpful to reflect on these matters through a work of literature, it appears impossible to get to the bottom of the complexities of this particular aspect of James’s tale—and maybe we can never entirely get to the bottom of this particular moral dilemma—just as those who are subject to the ruinous effects of sexual abuse may have learned, through the lived example of their own damaging experience, the power to manipulate and outsmart others.

James’s reader must take their own step in moral imagination, a step in moral imagination that their whole society systematically shies away from taking. And if they truly do take that step, then that evil (an evil that they previously had not possessed any power to discuss), they will surely wish to be confronted and ameliorated, and thus thought about explicitly after all, and abhorred. In *The Turn of the Screw*, it seems that none of the characters have any ways to discuss taboo subjects or to broach vexatious issues. Theirs is a world of constraint, anxiety, of “strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected” (James, 2014, p. 41). James’s story seems to emphasize the difficulty and the perils of failing to navigate such areas in a measured and compassionate way. The text invites *us* to consider not only the impoverished quality of the governess’s attention towards her two young charges, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the authority of the text itself over us as James’s readers.

It is precisely what remains *implicit* in *The Turn of the Screw* that deserves our undivided attention. Herein, moreover, lies the moral significance, as well as the artistic beauty, of James’s work. *The Turn of the Screw* invites us to consider the social and societal repercussions that can occur when people fail to give attention to—or chose to ignore completely—issues that are morally vexatious. James’ text shows us how, as readers, we must take responsibility

for the implications of our own reading. His story, which is written tersely and tightly, offers no sympathetic characters. It exploits themes of uncertainty, fear and avoidance, and helps us consider what can go awry when people conduct their lives with no sense of their moral and ethical responsibility to others.

Repeatedly, James challenges his readers' understanding, and repeatedly the coherence of the governess's story is undermined and eroded by unfolding details that ought to serve to make things clearer, but that only serve to increase the obscurity. James's text calls for intense and detailed attention. At every turn, readers' attention is tasked with questioning and further interrogating the text—to the extent that it comes to be that the more that readers commit to making sense of the tale, the greater are their unsatisfied demands of attention. James's text shows its readers how the characters themselves, insofar as they lack attention, can remark no further meaning in the puzzling details that they encounter. Similarly, any reader who lacks attention will be left puzzling mightily and so is powerfully invited back to being attentive after all. Yet there is no doubt that James makes his readers' task as difficult as possible. The demands of reading *The Turn of the Screw* point perhaps to what is entailed when the human mind is tasked with handling something of significant intellectual complexity. The text reminds us how very difficult sustained attentive thinking actually is. Yet the allure and essence of this work—as well as its horror—lies in the fact that although the story refuses to be explicit regarding what it is centrally about, it is in fact what remains *implicit* in this story that deserves our utmost attention.

James's story helps us consider what can go awry when people's sense of their moral and ethical responsibility to others is completely ignored. James thereby leads us to consider the ethical implications of freedom of the attention. He reminds us, obliquely, what it means to bestow attention, and he shows how, not only on an individual scale, this capacity can be limited by failure to reinterpret, qualify, or imaginatively explore, hastily drawn moral judgments. The text reminds us that we must be not merely careful, not merely observant and not merely reflective in our reading—rather we need to be, as well, truly attentive and morally engaged. This is entirely attuned to the thinking of Weil and Murdoch.

6.2. *Moral attention and aesthetic design*

Across James's famous literary prefaces (in which he analyses some of the demands of fiction writing), he repeatedly explores the connection between attention and moral discernment. James considers that, just as the artist “creates” a literary work, the reader then

“re-creates” it, which calls not merely for an intellectual response from the reader to the story as given, but for a quality of attention that, in reaching beyond the given elements of the story, creates anew the whole. James construes readerly attention as involving not just an intellectual grasp of the details, but something further—a quality that is more critical, more considered, and more richly and deeply imaginative. James identifies the writer’s challenge in this regard in his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, where he notes that “the effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement” (James, 1962, p. 149).

In his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, (written some years after the novel’s publication), James makes some further, crucial points that link this work directly to attention. He describes the work as a tale of “exquisite mystification” (James, 1962, pp. 172–173), one that contains “intense anomalies and obscurities” (p. 173) and he describes the story as “an excursion into chaos while remaining...but an anecdote, though an anecdote amplified and highly emphasised and returning upon itself” (p. 172). James’s characterisation of this novella as a work that “returns upon itself” informs the current reading of the novella as a work that invites a sceptical, almost resistant reading. James grants that this work is complex and demanding—“a piece of ingenuity pure and simple, of cold artistic calculation, an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught (the ‘fun’ of the capture of the merely witless being ever so small)” (p. 172).

Perhaps somewhat ironically, James refers to “a slight reproach made me by a reader capable evidently, for the time, of some attention, but not quite capable of enough” (p. 173). Evidently this reader judged that James “hadn’t sufficiently ‘characterised’ my young woman engaged in her labyrinth, hadn’t endowed her with signs and marks, features and humours” (p. 173). In reply, James defends his “general proposition of our young woman’s keeping crystalline her record of so many intense anomalies and obscurities” (p. 173). He reiterates his artistic purpose of the story: “To knead the subject of my young friend’s, the supposititious narrator’s, mystification thick, and yet strain the expression of it so clear and fine that beauty would result” (p. 173). James’s description of his narrator as “supposititious” (meaning “not genuine”) is a reminder to us that it is James who is ultimately the “true” narrator of the story. Also relevant to the current discussion is that the word “supposititious” is easily confused with the word “suppositious” (meaning “one who is subject to suppositions”), since James’s main narrator, the Bly governess, is very much inclined to base her decisions on assumption and supposition, rather than on sound evidence.

6.3. “Attention of perusal”

A primary ambition for James as literary artist is to get his readers to give careful attention to the details of the story (both those given and those implied) and then to think for themselves by engaging imaginatively. He aligns the faculty of attention to the faculty of aesthetic appreciation, which is for him a sign of cultivation of the mind, and a sign of a truly moral sensibility. On James’s view, it is moral attention that forms the foundation for our understanding, thinking, responding, and acting ethically. He says that as a literary artist he puts “for the beautiful always, in a work of art, the close, the curious, the deep” (p. 174). The connection that James draws between imagination, moral attention, and mystification, provides a useful conceptual frame in which to consider *The Turn of the Screw*.

James demands a great deal of his readers. In his preface to *The Wings of the Dove* James notes that: “Attention of perusal, I thus confess by the way, is what I at every point, as well as here, absolutely invoke and take for granted” (James, 1962, p. 304). In his preface to *The Lesson of the Master* he notes: “Suggestive and illuminating incident is indeed scarce frequent enough to be referred to as administering the shake that starts up fresh the stopped watch of attention” (p. 225).

From these comments, it is evident that James considers the fully committed reader to be one who bestows “attention of perusal” and who, by “the shake that starts up fresh the stopped watch of attention” has the capacity to think creatively, reflectively, and independently. James’s metaphor of the “stopped watch of attention” to capture the state of complete mental absorption resonates with Simone Weil’s well-known account that “attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready” (Weil, 2009, p. 62). Weil states further that in the state of attention, “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil, 2009, p. 65), and although James’s understanding of moral attention is not fundamentally spiritual in the sense understood by Weil, James does consider that attention and truth-seeking are fundamentally connected.

James acknowledges that there will be various levels of reader attention on a continuum from “the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient” to “the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible” (James, 1962, p. 62). He defines his ideal reader as one who reads in an open-ended, perceptive and imaginative way, ever ready to consider and to integrate creatively, any new thoughts that come to light, a reader

who approaches his reading by way of what James terms a “fond attention” (p. 62). James draws an analogy between reader attention and aesthetic appreciation, “his quiet attention, his faculty of appreciation” (p. 71). He wants to provide in his fiction “an agreeable unity, of the roundness, in which beauty and lucidity largely reside” (p. 171). He recognises that both the artist and the reader share in a need to impose shape, to give order and meaning to the inevitable sense of commotion and disarray of human experience:

Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs around the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some unburied bone...the artist finds in *his* tiny nugget...the very stuff for a clear affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructible...life persistently blunders and deviates, loses herself in the sand. (p. 120)

James’s views of the nature of moral attention aligns in some respects with those of Murdoch (2014, p. 63), who also maintains that both the creative literary artist and the reader partake in the shared responsibility of bestowing moral attention. Nussbaum (1986) observes that for James, “the literary work is a moral achievement, just as the well-lived life is a work of literary art” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 516). She notes further that for James, human “obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars” (p. 516). James’s achievement in this novella is, through his own invitation for an intense “scrutiny of particulars”, to leave it to his reader to reflect on the story’s projected morality.

James considers that the role of the literary artist is of high importance to the functioning of society, to the extent that the artist’s task is one of “enlarging” the moral imagination. In another preface he observes that “the value I wished most to render...our not knowing, of society’s not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting, trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface?” (James, 1962, pp. 77–78). He believes that both writer and reader must work to keep open the possibilities and potentialities of interpretation, and that both must respect the need to explore rather than to close down on, a final interpretation. He considers that literary works have the capacity to stir us intellectually and to render us less complacent about what we claim to know about ourselves and the world around us.

James's demand for reader attention is embedded in the very design and structure of *The Turn of the Screw*. From the story's overarching structure down to the smallest syntactical feature, the work is meticulously constructed. While the story's outer narrative is an homage to oral storytelling traditions that span generations and that carry myths and meanings across time, the inner narrative of the governess suggests that beneath the grand veneer of the "beautiful lost form" of literary and cultural traditions and the old forms of the romance, may lie something far less beautiful, far worthier of thinking beyond than of deserving obsequious respect. Through the novella, James invites us to consider what he calls "a view of the back of the tapestry" (James, 2011, p. 66).

The work opens with an (unintroduced) framing section which serves as a "prologue" (see p. 8) to the "inner story" (Chapters 1–24) of the governess. This enclosed structure where one story is embedded inside another, effectively positions the story of the Bly governess (who is author and narrator of the inner tale), at several removes not only from James the author, but also from the first narrator (Griffin), and the subsequent narrator (Douglas). This structure also sets the governess's subsequent documented narrative (which is read aloud by Douglas), at several removes from us, James's reading audience.

The opening context is an extended Christmas gathering at a country estate. A group of friends have assembled, and during the evenings they provide entertainment by sharing recollected ghost stories. Griffin (the outermost narrator) is a member of this party. One evening he notices that Douglas, another member of the assembled group, seems inattentive, and concludes that this inattention is because Douglas has called to mind a ghost story that is superior to those he is being told. Douglas agrees that he has a compelling story to share, but he insists that his particular story must be told precisely as written, so if he is to share it, he will need to have the original manuscript to read from. The manuscript is duly sent for and when it is delivered several days later, Douglas takes up the role of narrator from Griffin and prepares to read to his assembled audience.

The purpose behind Douglas's stipulation that his narrative be told with absolute precision rather than being related "off the cuff" becomes clearer as the governess's tale unfolds, for we discover that every tiny detail of the story is carefully placed.

James's prologue serves several textural purposes. It sets up the expectation that Douglas's assembled fictional audience will need to be attentive, and thereby reminds us, James's reading audience, that we will also be required to pay close attention. By the time

Douglas' manuscript has arrived from London, the interest of his assembled audience is high, such that Douglas reports "in the light of it we lost all attention for everything else" (p. 6). In the interim, however, the size of his assembled audience has dwindled, and has become more "compact and select" (p. 7) and his final assembled group of listeners has become a smaller, more discerning and attentive group. In response to a question from a member of this assembled audience regarding the character of the governess, Douglas declares "you'll easily judge" (p. 5), thereby implying (incorrectly) that the ensuing story will be one that is entirely accessible and straightforward.

With three changes of narrator within the first eight pages of the text, James's reader must work hard to determine who is talking, and where the "authorial" voice of the story lies. Narrator Douglas promises that his forthcoming story will reveal "horror", "dreadfulness" and "general uncanny ugliness and pain" (p. 4). At the same time, and despite his earlier reassurances, Douglas also introduces a hint of equivocation. He warns his audience that the forthcoming story will not necessarily be one that will answer all their questions, declaring "[t]he story won't tell...not in any literal, vulgar way" (p. 6). In this sentence, James gives us a significant clue as to his overall strategy in the novella.

Douglas's prologue provides some further contextual information. The forthcoming story, he explains, involves a twenty-year-old unmarried woman, the daughter of a country parson, who has recently completed her governess training. For her first post, she is hired by a Harley Street businessman to provide for his orphaned nephew and niece, Miles and Flora, at his remote country estate called Bly. This guardian uncle, who is funding the care and education of the two children, stipulates one binding condition on the governess's employment. Once engaged, she will make no further contact with him and will assume all further decisions around the care and education of the two children. She will assume the position of "supreme authority" at Bly (p. 8). After a second interview, partly out of a wish to please her new employer, and perhaps also motivated by aspirations to improve her own future lot, the young woman agrees to abide by his rather odd employment conditions. This essential contextual information, as conveyed by narrator Douglas, functions to frame the story that follows.

The ensuing chapters recount the governess's personal recollections, recorded in her own voice, of her time at Bly. There are four main characters in this "inner" story: the governess, the elderly housekeeper Mrs Grose, and the two orphaned children, Miles (ten)

and Flora (eight). (Other presences are the ghosts of Peter Quint, the former valet, and Miss Jessel, the former governess, although these two are only ever witnessed by the governess.)

Here we learn about the governess's first arrival at the Essex country house, her initial meeting with the two children, the context for her first apprehensions of the ghosts and her mounting anxiety that all is not well. In time, the governess's increased anxiety and her deteriorating state of mind lead her to the conviction that there are malevolent forces at work at Bly that place the children in mortal danger. Yet although the story's plot details can be readily provided in summary form, the fascination of James's story lies less in the plot line than in the literary and artistic complexity of James's work. James's novella is as much about giving attention to what is *unsaid*, and about inviting us to think, as it is about traditions of fireside stories or the experiences of a mad (or at least a neurotic) Victorian governess. James's reader is apt to experience some of the same heightened anxiety and bewilderment that the governess confronts when she declares, early in her time at Bly: "The more I go over it the more I see in it, and the more I see in it the more I fear. I don't know what I *don't* see, what I *don't* fear" (p. 45).

Leithauser (2012) also explores this point, arguing that "attempts to 'solve' the book, however admiringly tendered, unwittingly work toward its diminution...Its profoundest pleasure lies in the beautifully fussed over way in which James refuses to come down on either side" (para. 8). Leithauser notes the paradoxical way in which James's text, which seems to offer the reader an open and inquiring narrative that provides a range of interpretations, actually works on the reader's mind in an opposite way, so that the reader's attention is crowded, rather than enlarged, in such a way that "the ultimate effect is precisely the opposite of openness" (para. 11).

Leithauser also notes the story's clear links to Victorian melodrama and fireside ghost tales and leaves open the possibility that the central evil of James's story is that of overlooked and unreported child sexual molestation. Raine (2007) also takes this line and insists that readers of James's time would have readily detected the story's hints of sexual abuse, easily seeing Quint and Jessel as likely child molesters (p. 69). For James, the refusal to name the evil was a way of magnifying it: each reader would supply his own horror. In practice, the novella's restraint goes for nothing. The reader rapidly supplies the only solution commensurate with the narrative's squeals of horror—sexual abuse.

Hints of adult predation on children in the text of *The Turn of the Screw* through such references as to the “criminality of those caretakers of the young” (James 2011, p. 67), and statements from the governess like “I continued, unmolested” (p. 75), are reiterated in James’s literary preface, where he notes that “the essence of the matter was the villany of motive in the ‘evoked predatory creatures’” (James, 1962, p. 175). From the very start of her sojourn at Bly, we get some insight into the psychology of the governess. When she declares her spirited aspiration to succeed “where many another girl might have failed” (James, 2011, p. 41) we are reminded of Plato’s conception of the ‘spirit’ as the instinct of ambition, the slightly exaggerated sense of one’s own importance. Captivated by Flora, whom she describes as “the most beautiful child I had ever seen” (p. 12), the governess’ initial love is effusive and gushing. Initially her pedagogical attention to Flora seems to be guided by Flora’s own interests and curiosity. She announces her intention to support Flora in a pedagogically rich way that is dedicated to the little girl’s flourishing: “To watch, teach, ‘form’ little Flora would too evidently be the making of a happy and useful life” (p. 13). After a relatively short time, however, the governess’s fulsome praise of the child has waned considerably, and she is demonstrably less patient with the child, complaining of “the singing, the gabbling of nonsense and the invitation to romp” (p. 50). The governess now demonstrates some antagonism towards the little girl’s repetitive, explorative play: “It was a pity that I needed once more to describe the portentous little activity by which she sought to divert my attention” (p. 50).

James provides us with very little descriptive information about the governess. She is vaguely sketched by way of a few biographical details. We learn that she is “the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson...the age of twenty...a fluttered, anxious girl” (p. 7). We know that this is her first position following her training. The fact that James gives her no name is also significant. By this means he underlines that she is unacknowledged, faceless, and, as a member of the house staff, entirely taken for granted. Bell (1991, pp. 223–242) develops this point and discusses the novella as essentially a story about social classes in Victorian times and their relations to one another. Poovey (1989) provides a detailed account of the complex fundamental ambiguity in the social status and standing of the nineteenth century governess, an interpretation that helps to explain why, virtually invisible in terms of society, the Bly governess lacks self-confidence or confidence in social interactions.

6.4. *Forgetting and disorientation*

James's story employs various familiar figures and features of nineteenth-century education—a private governess, boarding schools and headmasters, school reports, scheduled daily lessons. Yet the figures of education in this story feature only as vague presences, never as named and fully delineated individuals. Characters are cast either as ghostly apparitions (in the case of Quint and Jessel), or as blanks (in the case of Miles's previous school classmates). Housekeeper Mrs Grose is a vague, uneducated woman who, presumably through life circumstances, has never learned to read (James, 2011, p. 17). Unlike some housekeepers of Victorian fiction (such as Mrs Fairfax in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*), Mrs Grose proves not to be a force for stability and good sense. Not herself an independent thinker, but a subservient person, she readily falls in with the governess's efforts to find fault with the children, herself fuelling the climate of suspicion against them (p. 49). While Mrs Grose does ultimately remove Flora from Bly, she does this only in obedience to the governess's order, and not out of any sense of her own moral obligation or sense of what is morally right.

The newly appointed governess proves in many ways to be the antithesis of a conscientious educator. While the novella provides few details about the lessons that the governess provides for her two young charges, the nature of the children's education at Bly is strangely limited and circumscribed, emblemized in the account of Flora's lesson that involves "a sheet of white paper, a pencil, and a copy of nice 'round O's'" (pp. 17–18). The governess reports that "There were naturally, things that in Flora's presence could pass between us only as...obscure round-about allusions" (p. 13). We learn of a teaching programme where "almost every branch of study or subject of conversation skirted forbidden ground" (p. 73). The governess admits to the limitations of their classroom inquiry:

It was as if, at moments, we were perpetually coming into sight of subjects before which we must stop short, turning suddenly out of alleys that we perceived to be blind...the doors we had indiscreetly opened. (p. 73)

The educational environment that the governess provides is thus characterized by parochialism, narrowness, and ignorance and there is much that remains ever firmly unspoken. Vexatious topics are to be avoided at all costs, never to be discussed or even countenanced, and the school-room lesson content is very domestically focused. While she provides the children with ample "details already supplied as to the cleverness of the vicarage pony" (p. 74), it is evident that there is great deal of territory that is off-limits to the children

and that “the element of the unnamed and untouched became, between us, greater than any other” (p. 73). Further, the governess is not herself well informed, and the material of instruction is focussed on her own limited domestic biography rather than on an exploration of the wider world of aspirations, experiences and ideas:

They [Miles and Flora] were in possession of everything that had ever happened to me, had had, with every circumstance, the story of my smallest adventures and of those of my brothers and sisters and of the cat and the dog at my home, as well as many particulars of the whimsical bent of my father, of the furniture and arrangement of our house and of the conversation of the old women of our village. (p. 74)

From the get-go, James’s governess reveals that she is inclined not only to inconsistency, but also to flights of fancy. She (naively) considers herself to be “a remarkable young woman” (p. 23) and holds to the fancy that she might herself one day become installed as the Lady of Bly house. She seems oblivious to the declared indifference of her employer, and fails to notice that, against her reading of the situation, he views her with spectacular indifference. While he is explicit that he is interested only in signing her up to a contractual arrangement that will absolve him of all further responsibilities towards the two orphaned children, it remains her deeply-held view that this “was part of the flattery of his trust of me” (p. 77). She likes to imagine that the Master thinks about her when she is at Bly, and continues to fancy that he might pay her an impromptu visit. (She is musing on this very possibility when she first apprehends the ghost on the tower—a figure that only she is witness to, but whose description is later confirmed by Mrs Grose to belong to the previous, now deceased, valet, Peter Quint.)

In James’s portrayal, the governess remains vague, ill-defined, shadowy—implying that she is a person of little interest or worth, since a literary character described in more specific detail would inevitably be more nuanced, more complex, and therefore perhaps more understandable. James, who elsewhere refers to the story’s central character as “the small, recording governess” (James, 1962, p. 71), increasingly implies the Bly governess is somewhat captious, inflexible and self-confirming in her interpretations, nitpicking and anxious rather than thoughtful and reflective.

The governess reveals having had some slight reservations about her new role, noting that “[t]he attraction of my small charges was a constant joy, leading me to wonder afresh at

the vanity of my original fears” (p. 28). She observes that she still suffers some misgivings about her decision to take up the position, and that “a small shifty spot on the wrong side of it all still sometimes brushed my brow like the wing of a bat” (p. 51). She also reveals that her readings of events are inclined to be error-prone, since she is somewhat flighty and subject to extremes of interpretation. This tendency to “flights and drops” (p. 11) in her judgment suggests that she is not a clear thinker. Her further admission to Mrs Grose that she is a person “rather easily carried away” (p. 11) (by which she implies that she has readily fallen in love with her employer), indicates that she is perhaps also naïve socially.

Despite the absence of a physical description of the governess, we glean various aspects of her personality. Through the filter of her own recollected narrative, she reveals her inability to cope with ambiguity or ideas or experiences that are difficult to explain. Although she *appears* to seek answers to difficult questions, she habitually seizes too readily on interpretations that are close at hand. She claims to have had “the flash of this knowledge” (p. 31), she declares that her interpretation of an event “can have but one meaning” (James, 2011, p. 17), or she recalls that “there was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever, at least, in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me” (p. 42).

Despite showing some momentary uncertainty about the soundness of her own conclusions and the implications of her moral judgments, such self-reflections are short-lived. For an instant she considers whether or not her assessment of Miles as ‘guilty’ has merit, but the idea that she might therefore herself be in the wrong is so abhorrent to her that she dismisses the notion out of hand:

I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent, it was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he were innocent, what then on earth was *I*? (p. 123)

As the tale progresses, these fluctuations in the governess’s judgment become increasingly problematic. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to separate out the governess’s alleged memories of her experiences from the interpretations and inferences that she draws from them.

Early in her account, James’s governess-narrator reflects on her situation at Bly by invoking the metaphor of a ship adrift on the open sea, a metaphor that calls to mind

Melville's 1855 novel, *Benito Cereno*. The governess ponders "wasn't it just a story-book over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream...I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely at the helm" (p. 15). Later in the story she returns to this nautical metaphor, describing herself somewhat arrogantly as "clutching the helm...very grand and very dry...left thus to myself, I was quite remarkably firm" (p. 112). James's governess is not unlike Melville's Amasio Delarno who, when confronted by the evidence of inescapable evil (to Delarno's very eyes, the evidence that the ostensible whaling ship, named *Bachelor's Delight*, in fact transports slaves), initially chooses to move on, apparently intent to read the horrendous experience before his eyes in some other way and to ignore altogether the meaning he ought to be taking in.

Delarno's capacity to overlook evil endures even the revelation to him of a fact long obvious to a reflective reader, that, prior to Delarno's boarding the *Bachelor's Delight*, insurrection has occurred, subjugating the *Bachelor's Delight's* crew to tyranny by the would-be slaves. For, when Delarno and his men at the last instant comprehend the tyranny and give aid to the *Bachelor's Delight's* crew and their captain Benito Cereno, the original tyranny, of slave-taking, is never for a moment in his mind. It never seems less than obvious to Delarno that Cereno has deserved his help, even though Cereno has himself grasped the horror of being captive, and so cannot reckon himself morally when those who were his captives and then his captors are made again captive and in fact fated to die. Just as Melville challenges *Benito Cereno* readers to read to the depths morally of a tale that its main protagonist would be unable even to tell, so this also is James's challenge to readers of his *The Turn of the Screw*.

Despite the passage of time and with no good reason for believing it to be so, the governess persists in maintaining the (false) belief that her employer, the Master, is immensely grateful to her for her sacrifice in coming to Bly. She remains convinced that he finds her attractive (and desirable), and that he will eventually come to Bly to see her again. This erroneous belief connects interestingly with the work of Grosz, a noted contemporary psychologist, who developed the view that it is sometimes "less painful ... to feel betrayed than to feel forgotten" (Grosz, 2013, p 83).

Grosz cites Fussell who, in his historical study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (2000), recounts British soldiers' widespread belief that French farmers were signalling to the German artillery fighters in order to reveal the precise location of British soldiers "by fantastically elaborate, shrewd, and accurate means" (Fussell, p. 120), notes that the truer circumstance of the British soldiers was that they were forgotten, sacrificed by their own, yet it was

psychologically both more acceptable and more compelling to feel betrayed. This interpretation could also apply also to the unnamed, unvalued and ignored governess. Alternatively, perhaps the governess does sense that she is being treated with indifference by her employer, and perhaps she grows cold towards the children in self-defence, to protect herself from the realization that the Master does not think at all about her.

Perhaps, because of her own insecurities and fears of being unvalued, the governess's mind becomes similarly affected, afflicted, and she attempts to hide her own anxiety and insecurity, even putting the children in danger, as part of her own deteriorating condition. Her agitated attention to both her ghostly apparitions and to the two children in her care become strangely conflated and she keeps watch on both the ghosts and the children to such an extent that she entirely loses her perspective on other matters, until her very attention, in the name of virtue, becomes a kind of paranoid obsession.

It is plausible that the governess's drift into paranoia can be explained in part by her unspoken sense of the Master's indifference to her. Even though, surely, her discovery that Bly represented a place of grave danger for the children constituted the one situation that would entitle her to contact her employer, still, full of anxiety, she remains unable to act on her fears, and so to take definitive action. Her increasing suspicion of her ghosts leads her to a state of hyper-vigilance, and in this condition, she suffers from a distorted, or at least significantly narrowed, vision. Moreover, by imposing her own personal conviction that her fears are justified (and the children are possessed), she thereby renders herself increasingly susceptible to her own fears, and quite unable to countenance other possible explanations for her unease—perhaps including the very plausible possibility of child abuse.

The governess's use of language is elaborate and complex in terms of both linguistic and technical complexity. Hers is a story that involves "intense anomalies" (p. 129) and that presents some bewildering contradictions and puzzles. At times, her declarations literally defy understanding, as when she states: "Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not" (p. 43). Her speech involves unusual word combinations and irregular word order, features that give her prose a quaint sense of being located somewhere in the past. She uses phrases like "innocent little precious lives" (p. 40); "I preternaturally listened" (p. 63). She describes Miles as "an unperturbable little prodigy of delightful loveable goodness" (p. 51). Her use of poetic, slightly stilted expressions, as well as figures of speech such as alliteration, assonance, rhythmic and repetitive language, all lend to her account a sense of oddness and distance.

These qualities of the governess's language serve to work *against* the reader's compassion for her, rendering her a figure somewhat remote and distanced. By these technical means James further establishes a sense of tension in the emotional state of the governess. In her recounted conversations, the governess's sentences are frequently unfinished, laced with ellipses and dashes as she seeks to give voice to thoughts that are interrupted or inchoate, or to give expression to ideas that are ill-formed or difficult to articulate. James's reader, like the governess, struggles to give coherence to the ideas being expressed. In some instances, sentences are written in such a way that any interpretation leaves open the possibility of a quite different, equally plausible alternative readings, such as when Miles laments "I want my own sort" (p. 80). (Miles's meaning is ambiguous between his wish to be in all-male company, or in youthful company, or among people of his own social class, or perhaps in the company of those who are corrupters from having been corrupted.)

By the language the Bly governess uses, the quality of her moral imagination is shown to be humanly limited, insular and ungenerous. She shows, through the words she uses, that she does not try to see the children accurately or kindly, but increasingly, that she sees them as villains. Although she tries to grasp the facts of the events at Bly as she encounters them, she appears insufficiently responsive to the humanness of her situation to read the situation accurately or well. True moral attention, as understood by Weil and Murdoch, calls for more than recording events. It involves a more delicate and fine-grained intellectual response that combines both imaginative and cognitive aspects. By the words the governess uses to describe the children, her moral imagination towards them is shown to be increasingly insular, egotistical, and ungenerous. (For an entirely contrasting moral revision, one that is deliberately aimed at an "improving" interpretation, Murdoch offers the parable of M and D in *The Sovereignty of Good* (2014, pp. 16–23).

Although she tries to grasp the facts of the events at Bly, the governess is, we come to see, insufficiently aware of her context, and insufficiently responsive to the humanness of her situation and the plight of the others. Her initial efforts to "love" the children are forced and unconvincing, and ultimately it becomes evident that what she wants most of all is to be appreciated and beloved herself, and as well, to be herself entirely in control. She lacks rapport with the children and there is no evidence that she respects them as individuals. She does not act in a way that involves "attending" to the children in the sense understood by Weil and Murdoch.

In her philosophical writing about attention, Murdoch repeatedly draws on Platonic metaphors of vision—of seeing, looking and perceiving, in terms of a moral discipline:

It is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge...with refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes, but a ...familiar kind of moral discipline. (Murdoch, 2014, p. 38)

Murdoch notes that the metaphors we use to describe both moral progress and aesthetic appreciation are crucial to the shape of our thinking. She reminds us of the ways that conceptual metaphors can usefully challenge and broaden our literal understanding precisely because of the insights and inter-connections they provide: “I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of “see” which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort” (p. 37). Murdoch also acknowledges that such “clear vision” is difficult to achieve, and that moral thinking is hard work that has to be revisited and reflected upon in a disciplined way. This is because the human ego works tirelessly to limit connection with the reality of other people or with the world: “We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continual active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world” (p. 82).

Neither generous nor attentive, the Bly governess is never fully “present” with the children and she appears unable to determine what is the right thing to focus on given their situation. She is increasingly commanding and overbearing towards them. She seems unable to see that the two children are the ones who deserve attention, and why. Moral attention, as understood by Weil and Murdoch, calls for more than intellectual activity, it involves a more delicate and fine-grained response that combines both imaginative and cognitive aspects. This, we discover, is to a large degree undeveloped in the governess.

A marked negative change in the governess's attitude towards the children dates from when she learns that Miles has been expelled from his boarding school. It is implied that the headmaster's letter that purveys this news attends only obscurely to the cause, perhaps implying that the provocation is something so dark as not to be admissible to description. (The contents of the letter are never disclosed to anyone but the governess.) Yet even this initial urge of disquiet in the governess abates as she assumes what should be the redoubled duty of educator to both sister and brother. Her ease within the redoubled capacity is partly from her stance becoming notably that of an observer of, rather than an active participant in,

their education. She declares “My attention to them all really went to seeing them amuse themselves immensely without me: this was a spectacle they seemed actively to prepare and in that engaged me as an active admirer” (James, 2011, p. 44).

For the governess, as well as for the reader, the paucity of any description calls out eloquently that a sinister reading of events is called for. On the heels of the disconcerting news concerning Miles, the governess learns that both Miss Jessel (the previous governess) and Quint (the previous valet)—whose sudden departures from Bly are never fully explained—have each died in somewhat mysterious circumstances. Now the governess becomes further anxious and filled with foreboding. She begins to harbour suspicions that that the children are themselves in some way involved in unspoken malevolent designs, and she begins to suspect the two children of wrongdoing. Ultimately, she develops the conviction that the two children are themselves part of an evil-minded scheme. She holds this idea with a conviction that is unyielding.

Thus within a few short months, the governess has entirely abandoned her initial, positive bearing towards both Flora and Miles as eminently beautiful and impressionable, and has adopted a much more stern and authoritarian bearing towards them:

I could only get on at all by taking ‘nature’ into my confidence and my account, by treating my monstrous ordeal as a push in a direction unusual, of course, and unpleasant, but demanding after all, for a fair front, only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue. (pp. 113–114)

She now begins to consider the children in terms of their potential faults, their implied errors, and she interprets even their acts of play as pernicious and troublesome. Whereas she had initially sought to be enchanted by Flora and Miles, her attitude has changed to one of anxious concern. But this attitude soon transforms again, into a sense of heightened suspicion towards the children, whereupon she will barely let them out of her sight. Ultimately the governess appears to suffer from some kind of *schadenfreude*, where she views the children as themselves the source of evil and players in some malevolent, possibly supernatural, scheme.

The governess is, we learn, a keen reader of gothic and romantic novels, including Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Henry Fielding’s *Amelia* (1751), and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, (1847), all specifically named. The gothic romances that she reads would typically involve themes of romantic love, melodrama and mystery, as well as plots in which the good and virtuous female heroine is rewarded with marriage and financial security. Bell

(1991, p. 288) observes that the Bly governess is inclined literally to “enter into” the impossible romantic literary plots that she reads, and that she appears to envision herself as literary heroine involved in her own little romance tale at Bly. (This is consistent with the governess’s fanciful belief that the Master might one day come to Bly and transform her situation from governess to that of Lady of the house.) Bell notes further that while James describes this story in his literary preface as “a perfect example of the imagination unassisted...unassociated, a fairy tale pure and simple” (James, 1962, p. 171), James’s description seems to be more the view of his governess narrator than that of James the author.

The governess is shown to be a reader who cannot both enter into, and at the same time stand outside of, the literature she reads. She cannot find a suitable balance between surrender to her reading and reflection on what she has read. Her predicament is that she cannot countenance being lost and confused herself. She is unable to recollect, let alone recognize, connections, clues, possibilities, that would make different interpretations possible.

It is clear that there obtains a very direct connection between her idealizing reading of romance novels and her personal apprehension of ghosts, for it is precisely while she is reading Fielding’s *Amelia* one evening that she finds her attention interrupted by the ghostly apparition of Quint: “I recollect in short that though I was deeply interested in my author I found myself, at the turn of a page and with his spell all scattered, looking straight up” (James, 2011, p. 58). Murdoch, unlike Weil, who explicitly mistrusts the imagination, acknowledges the way that a susceptibility to personal fancy can work against clear thinking, which Murdoch refers to as the “tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 57).⁴⁰

Similarly, it is implied that the governess seeks to impose on her lived experience, as on her reading, a simple fairy-tale interpretation of the world, rather than to countenance expansive or open-ended interpretations. The question whether James’s *The Turn of the Screw* is or is not unequivocally a ghost story is now scarcely to the point: the point rather is that horrors, real in every measure to those who are directly or even indirectly involved, will

⁴⁰ If we look closely at Weil’s comments in *Gravity and Grace*, we find ideas that resonate with this theme. In considering the relationship between literature and morality, Weil contrasts imagination (which to her was synonymous with fantasy), and the real. She argues that “imaginary evil is romantic and varied, real evil is dreary, monotonous, barren and tedious” (1997, p. 120), suggesting that real evil is able to pass our notice unremarked precisely since it is so banal as to be unexceptionable.

follow from the horror of adult sexual predation upon children, and even the governess's benighted recounting of her own experiences fully brings this out.

Although the governess appears to use her powers of reasoning to make sense of her oppressive situation, her sense-making powers prove to be flawed and she is not, for the most part, open to question or self-reflection. Even through her filtered recollections, her incapacity for sustained thinking, for reasoned argument and for fully coherent explanation are all duly exposed. The governess is unable to determine what matters most in the situation she finds herself in. She candidly admits to the reader that her decision-making is largely driven by random or coincidental happenings, rather than being based on a searching response to the given situation: "If it was a question of a scare my discovery on this occasion had scared no more than any other, and it was essentially in the scared state that I drew my actual conclusions" (p. 76).

Williams (1993) discusses the nature of moral behaviour in another of James' novels, *What Maisie Knew*. In relation to an understanding of moral sense in that novel, Williams observes that "the practice of *morality* demands receptiveness and freedom from preconceptions, because individual dilemmas must be solved through an imaginative appraisal of their complexities" (p. 42). Williams's comment applies equally well to James's depiction of moral attention in *The Turn of the Screw*: to act morally is to bring to a situation an appropriate, measured, informed, but not a stock, already programmed, or pre-determined response.

In time, the governess's initial interest in the children's charms has turned to a negative focus on their failings and their potential faults. She begins to interpret even their sibling interactions in negative terms—not as signs of healthy play and outdoor exploration, but as evidence of likely subversive activities. She starts to blame Miles and Flora for deliberately denying things that, she claims, they can see quite readily—in particular physical reality of the ghosts of Jessel and Quint. It is her insistence on this point that leads to a crisis in her relationship first with Flora, and subsequently, with Miles.

The governess's crisis with Flora coincides with a rare moment when Flora's voice sounds like that of an authentic child. Challenged repeatedly by the governess to admit that she has seen Miss Jessel's ghost, Flora declares passionately: "I see nobody, I see nothing. I never *have*. I think you're cruel. I don't like you!" (p. 103). At this instant, Flora perceives the governess as nothing more than another dangerous and fearsome adult. Simultaneously, the

governess's perception of Flora is transformed such that she no longer sees Flora as she had previously, as a "beautiful child" (p. 12), but as "an old, old woman" (p. 98, and also p. 102). In that instant the governess observes that Flora's "incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished...she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly" (p. 103).

Does the governess experience, at this instant, a fleeting insight into the truth of the abysmal horror that Flora, abused, has effectively been deprived of her childhood? In her 1944 essay "Morality and Literature" Weil comments on the achievements of writers of genius to capture such transformative revelations:

In the words assembled by genius several slopes are simultaneously visible and perceptible, placed in their true relations, but the listener or reader does not descend any of them. He feels gravity in the way we feel it when we look over a precipice, if we are safe and not subject to vertigo. He perceives the unity and the diversity of its forms in this architecture of the abyss. (Weil, 1968, p. 162)

James's story presents us with two, equally ruinous, dimensions of predation: on the one hand, we see evidence of the irreparable harm that is done to Miles and Flora by the adults entrusted to care for them, while on the other, James shows how these two children have themselves learned to behave in highly manipulative ways. This is troubling to the reader and it is right to be thus troubled. As Weil reminds us:

... among our institutions and customs there are things so atrocious that nobody can legitimately feel himself innocent of this diffused complicity. It is certain that each of us is involved at least in the guilt of criminal indifference. (Weil, 1968, p. 184)

Significantly, all of the adult figures in this story are cast as either shadowy, silent, fearful, ignorant, or as duplicitous and manipulative. None of them responds to the children in a positive way, and they all work either to dismiss or to suppress, rather than openly to acknowledge and discuss, any dangers or difficulties that the children might encounter or be subject to.

Hadley (2002), notes that this story, with its complex mix of gothic horror, mystery and anxiety, was written towards the latter period of James' career (the late 1890s), a transitional period marked by what has been described as James's turn to a more

introspective writing style, and in particular, one that involves critical scrutiny of adults—including tutors and governesses—as ostensible sources of moral authority. Significantly, the three novels written by James during the three-year period 1897 to 1899 each, in different ways, examines themes of innocence, guilt and the moral ambiguities experienced by young people who are in some way forsaken by the adults closest to them.⁴¹ James himself refers to his works of this period as sharing “an unforeseen principle of growth” (James, 1962, p. 98).

The two children at the centre of the story, Miles and Flora, are themselves eminently unlikeable—over-indulged, spoiled, yet also ignored, and unmistakably damaged. They come across as artificial, unreal, tainted, and rarely do they react as children. Not exactly helpless, they are palpably vulnerable as well as unloved. They live a life of privileged wealth and seclusion, and are largely stiff and unsympathetic. They have been cared for by a series of minders, none of whom appears to have had a genuine interest in them. Their only living relative, their distant uncle, is indifferent to them, clearly keen to be absolved of all responsibility towards them. Neither the governess nor any other characters attends to the children in a discerning and loving fashion. The governess is neither generous nor loving, but is increasingly commanding and overbearing towards them. She does not “attend” to the children in the sense of attention as understood by Weil and Murdoch, and she increasingly interprets attention as a form of authority or surveillance.

For Weil and Murdoch, attention is both a disposition and a moral good, and they hold to the view that attention involves the interdependence of intellect and emotion. By contrast, the Bly governess is emotionally “absent” from the children. She seeks increasingly to exert her will over them and to monitor their every move. The governess fails to ask the children any interested questions or to engage them in genuine conversation. When she does question them, it is clear that she is working to her own agenda, and that the only answers she will countenance are those that satisfy her own mounting suspicions. It appears that what the governess most desires, is to be appreciated and beloved herself, and as well, to be herself in control. She lacks compassion for the children and increasingly treats them as means relating to her own ghosts and to her own exorcising of those ghosts, and thus as means to ends that she has established for herself.

The governess insufficiently acknowledges the children as individual people in their own right, and so she fails to regard the children under a sense that their own persons merit

⁴¹ These novels are *What Maisie Knew*, 1897; *The Turn of the Screw*, 1898; *An Awkward Age*, 1899.

her direct focus and ethical interest. The governess is too obsessed with what lies beyond the children to be attentive to the suffering within them that their lived experience has caused. Yet if the children deserve her attention as individuals whose needs have been wrought by maltreatment they have received at the hands of their previous adult carers, it is not from their possessing any very sympathetic characters that this is so. Both their situation and the response of the governess are woeful in truly deep-going ways.

6.5. *An aporetic text*

James text involves layers of questions and questioning, both those posed both by the characters, and those raised by the reader. These questions are, however, largely left unanswered, or the answers that are provided lead only to further questions. We could call this novel an aporetic text in the sense that Plato's dialogues are also aporetic—that is to say, the questions raised in the text typically end in answers that are themselves inconclusive or they fail to provide resolution. James's text offers explanations that are invariably either unsatisfactory, incomplete, or in tension with other possibilities, in a way that tantalizes. In Plato's *Meno* (84 a–d), Socrates points out that a person who doesn't know an answer to a question (and who is thereby rendered somewhat perplexed), is likely to be sufficiently provoked by this impasse to want to investigate further:

At first he did not know...even now he does not yet know, but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and he does not know, neither does he think he knows...Indeed, we have probably achieved something relevant to finding out how matters stand, for now, as he does not know, he would be glad to find out...So you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know? (Plato, trans, 1997, pp. 883–884)

In a similar fashion, James's text draws us in to find explanations, but at every turn, we are confronted by flaws or weaknesses in those explanations. We encounter explanations that are baffling, or we encounter further puzzlement. The governess approaches the mysteries at Bly as if her task is to solve a carefully constructed mystery. She scrutinises and interrogates her environment in search of clues of explicit clarification—but, as James's prefaces make clear, the nature of moral attention is something that takes the seer well beyond what is immediately at hand. The governess declares, too hastily and categorically, on

learning about Miles's dismissal from school, that "that can have but one meaning...that he's an injury to the others" (James, 2011, p. 17). (This points to a further horror of the story—that the governess readily attributes responsibility for faults to the young children themselves rather than to the adults in their lives.) In the meantime, the incentive to make sense of the tale works on us as readers, and finding resolution becomes more and more compelling. Felski (2015, p. 104) notes that paradoxically, the less the reader of this particular text is sure of his or her ground, the more enticing and engrossing the reading experience becomes.

Felski's comments links in interesting ways with Weil's writing on pedagogical attention. In her famous essay on school studies (Weil, 2009, pp. 57–65), Weil describes pedagogical attention in part by stressing what it is *not*. She says that people will often confuse her notion of attention "with a kind of muscular effort" (p. 60), and explains that "They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles" (p. 60). Weil continues by observing that "The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work" (p. 61). To instil such a sense of desire in his readers is James's achievement in this story. Through the tantalizing experience of puzzlement and failure, James's reader is challenged to linger further over the complexities of the story.

Felski (2015) warns that the critical reader always must be sensitive to assuming a position of superiority over any text. She argues that there is considerable virtue in being mindful always of what she calls the 'limits of critique' (the title of her work), and that we ought not be too hasty in seeking to "solve" our reading puzzles. She admonishes us that while we may feel in command of a reading of *The Turn of the Screw*, "our confidence is premature; it turns out that James' text is already far ahead of us, offering a prescient reading of its own critical readings...escaping the net of our analytical concepts" (p. 105).

Just as the new governess approaches the mysteries at Bly as if her task is to solve a carefully constructed puzzle, James's reader is similarly disposed read the text intently an intense search of particular clues of clarification—but, as James has made clear in his literary prefaces, the nature of moral attention involves mystery and strangeness, and is likely to lead the reader well beyond what is immediately at hand. The importance of the reader thus approaching James's text with a degree of intellectual humility is also relevant to the overall theme of pedagogical attention. True humility in education is not based upon thinking your view is unworthy. Rather humility involves taking an interest in other views that might not initially seem robust, and with openness to discovering that other views have merit, and are also interesting and of worth.

In his essay “Speech genres and other late essays” Bakhtin (1986, pp. 60–102) argues that whenever we speak, write, or read, we encounter a plurality of voices since these forms of discourse are, by their very nature, “inherently responsive” (p. 68). In his discussion of how dialogue ‘works’, Bakhtin observes that in this context the speaker “does not expect passive understanding that...duplicates his or her own idea on somebody else’s mind...Rather, the speaker talks with an expectation of a response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth” (p. 69). When we consider the conversational utterances and rejoinders of the Bly governess, we see that she never works to establish a shared understanding through dialogue in the manner described by Bakhtin, and nor does she ever enable her listener to respond and engage. Rather, she appears systematically to block meaningful conversation with either the two children or with the housekeeper, Mrs Grose, her chief human companions at Bly.

While the Bly governess may appear to wish to initiate dialogue, her practice is to pose a question but then to interrupt the other person without giving them time to reply, and without any attention to the nature of their response. The governess repeatedly cuts in and finishes the other person’s sentences for them, and she also artfully changes the thrust of a conversation to her own advantage. For instance, when Mrs Grose asks the governess, in relation to Miles’s conduct, how it is that “if he was so bad then as that comes to, how is he such an angel now?” (James, 2011, p. 53), the governess replies in a way that gives credence to her own ideas rather than to provide a direct answer to Mrs Grose’s legitimate question of her. The governess declares: “Yes indeed—and if he was a fiend at school! How, how, how?” (p. 53). Sometimes the governess uses the first person plural pronoun “we” when talking with the housekeeper, to give a (false) sense of a shared understanding between herself and Mrs Grose (p. 44), but this sense is short-lived, for while the governess appears to want to have a kinship relationship with the housekeeper, she is nevertheless also quite capable of being condescending towards the older woman. She admits that she “makes Mrs Grose the receptacle of lurid things” (p. 66).

The governess uses other various linguistic tactics of blocking and obstruction in her communications with others to ensure that she controls how much can be said. She seeds in her hearer’s mind critical words and phrases that imply her own authority, and those words work, even if subconsciously, to give a sense that hers is an informed judgement. She uses terms like “know”, “see”, “certainty”, “clearness”, “evidence”, “proof”, with unjustified frequency. To Mrs Grose, despite her limited grounds for the claim, she declares she

absolutely knows Quint's purpose, declaiming "I know, I know, I know!" (p. 38). And while she hounds the children with questions about their own whereabouts, the questions she poses are clearly not intended to open up opportunity for explanation or discussion. On the contrary, they are proffered for the purpose of providing confirming evidence for the governesses' established views. While she urges the children to be open with her, the more they tell her, the more her suspicions grow, and in this way, the greater her suspicions of them become. In a perversely contrary fashion, the more her suspicions *fail* to be confirmed, the greater are her suspicions.

6.6. *A governing authority*

As the story progresses, the governess is shown increasingly to exaggerate in her own mind, her sense of authority over her charges. She observes that "It would distress me much more to lose my power than to keep it" (p. 75). (A possible exception to this is her momentary display of ambivalence when the governess witnesses the ghost of Miss Jessel in the school room. As a fellow governess, Miss Jessel is a figure with whom she might share at least some sympathy, but apart from a brief acknowledgement that Miss Jessel "looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers" (pp. 83–84), the Bly governess almost immediately thereafter berates Miss Jessel with "you terrible, miserable woman!" (p. 84). The implication for the reader by this comment is ambiguous. Is this the moment when the governess recognizes the harm that Miss Jessel may have perpetrated on the innocent children? Or is the governess perhaps giving voice to her own self-realization that she is also implicated in the harm that has been done to the two children?

The Bly governess appears to have no capacity for playful or spontaneous responses. She is entirely uncreative in her relationship with them. She never reaches out to them or responds to them in a genuinely loving way.⁴² It is not even clear if she likes them, for her observations are frequently couched in a thinly veiled criticism: "Both of the children had a gentleness—it was their only fault" (p. 29). She is never generous, and she appears to have little respect for the children's autonomy or their individuality. The quality of her attention to the children (and to the housekeeper, Mrs Grose), is far from the patient, loving regard that is, for Weil and for Murdoch, the basis of true attention.

⁴² This point is more fully developed by Hadley (2002, pp. 53-55).

In an essay written in the early 1940s, Weil noted that “the glossy surface of our civilization hides a real intellectual decadence...we seem to have lost the very elements of intelligence” (Weil, 1986, p. 156). Here, Weil warns against too hasty readings, imaginative fancies, unexamined assumptions, or grasping aspirations towards personal prestige. For Weil, attention (and so love) involves a freedom from self-limitations, and the recognition that there is a reality that lies beyond one’s own self. Attention has a further bearing on this story: an attentive governess would love the children indiscriminately and generously. She would do all she could to preserve them from harm.

In her philosophical writing on attention, Murdoch reminds us that a person’s capacity for attention to another involves being open, focussed and engaged in “a perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline” that involves generosity of spirit rather than thoughts of recompense or fair exchange (Murdoch, 2014, p. 37). Attention involves being responsive even to that which might not yet be fully clear or fully comprehensible. Murdoch reminds us that a person’s capacity for attention involves being open, focussed and being interested in “looking carefully at something and holding it before the mind” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 3), even though it is not always clear just what is being looked at. Murdoch’s attention is less an orientation than an attitude, and has more to do with willingness to be open to possibility rather than descriptive of a specific demeanour or disposition. (This point is developed by Pfau, 2014, p. 37.)

As time goes by, the Bly governess’s vocabulary register changes. She begins to use words of incarceration and control. She describes herself as “like a gaoler with an eye to possible surprises and escapes (James, 2011, p. 78). She insists on keeping the children under her control. She boldly casts herself as “judge” and “executioner” (p. 123), and dislikes it deeply when Miles catches her out: “the boy, to my deep discomposure, was immensely in the right” (p. 82). At the close of the story, she appears to have herself become the very prowling beast that she had accused Quint of being, when “with a single bound and an irrepressible cry” she leaps straight upon Miles, which results in his death by suffocation (pp. 123–124). The governess seeks increasingly to dominate and influence the children, declaring that “my equilibrium depended on the strength of my rigid will” (p. 113).

Of this change in herself, the governess appears quite unaware. While she earlier casts herself as the children’s “poor protectress” (p. 56) and claims (naively) that the children “were at this period extravagantly and preternaturally fond of me” (p. 56), she begins actively to impute bad meanings to their actions. She continues to entertain a false sense of her own

importance in the eyes of the Master, and possesses as well, a greatly exaggerated sense of her own understanding of herself. These are failings that are entirely human, but what James seems to be suggesting is that the governess, in the absence of any checking on her own moral judgment and motivations, has the potential to become quite destructive towards the children.

Doubtless James's governess, like Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe, embodies very human sentiments. She demonstrates a wish for recognition. She harbours a wish to please and possibly attract, her employer. Perhaps as a young person she has not quite worked out her role and function, and she is as yet unclear whether her primary task as governess is to serve, to entertain, to guide, or to protect the children, or whether her purpose is simply to improve her own professional situation. Seen in this light she might be understood as a young person simply seeking to create for herself a function in life without quite knowing yet what that function might be. Yet James's governess is depicted not so much as a humanly flawed and damaged but nevertheless authentic individual like Lucy Snowe, but as a figure who is increasingly distorted, even grotesque. In her increasingly obsessive treatment of the children, she comes to deny their self-respect and their dignity, and wants to control their every move. Her description of Miles at the close of the story reduces him in her eyes to the status of a frantic domestic animal (p. 124). Notably, in the final moments of the story, the governess admits to "a fierce split of my attention" (p. 120).

Hadley (2002) notes that although the Bly governess's account "pretends to be a story of service and sacrifice in Miles' and Flora's name...there is a sense in which all her obsessive attentiveness to them misses their actuality in the text" (p. 55). Hadley observes that the governess talks *about* rather than *to* or *with* the children. That is to say, she relates to them more as objects of her attention than as interesting and worthy individuals in their own right. Her interest in the children appears to be motivated more as an assignment than as an undertaking based on respectful relations. Hadley further observes that as the story progresses, the governess's language changes from her initial subordinate "conventional gushing, grateful and self-doubting girlishness" to a "climactic disastrous assertion of dominance" by the close of the story (p. 54.)

In time the governess effectively turns against the children and begins to treat them almost as if they were tainted (blighted), while simultaneously magnifying in her own mind her sense of her own legitimate power over them. She becomes increasingly eccentric, neither sensible nor reasonable, yet she persists in denying to herself that her motives are selfish and

egotistical. Initially she described the children as “adorable” (James, 2011, p. 77), “charming creatures” (p. 69), “young friends” (p. 77), having “more than earthly beauty...absolute unnatural goodness” (p. 51) but then, almost in the same breath, she admits to “the strange steps of my obsession” (p. 51) and refers to them as “little wretches” (p. 51). The governess seeks to impose on the children a modified interpretation of events—that is to say, *her* interpretation—and they must accept her accusations. In her mind, for Miles to be “saved” will require the governess literally to close his eyes and ears, to silence him and literally block his view to the outer world. She imposes on Miles the kind of attention that is stifling and ultimately annihilating. Thus the novella expresses something powerfully negative and monstrous about her fixed view, her absolute and unquestioning denial of the possibility of any further investigation. We are reminded of Weil’s comment: “Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention” (Weil, 2009c, p. 64).

There is ample evidence that the governess’s ego becomes increasingly unstable as the story progresses. She declares: “The more I saw the less they [the children] would. I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness” (James, 2011, p. 41). She talks of her own “rigid control” (p. 40) over the children. Increasingly, she reveals herself to be obsessive: “What it was least possible to get rid of was the cruel idea that, whatever I had seen, Miles and Flora saw *more*” (p. 76).

The Bly governess settles too quickly on a fixed interpretation of events, she too readily falls subject to her own imagination and fears, her own quirky stubbornness. When puzzles arise, her thoughts go immediately to herself, her own personal situation, and the possibilities of her own ascending prestige at Bly. Her reading of the situation becomes increasingly narrow and suspicious, to the extent that she comes to see even the two children as sources of evil and wickedness. She shows she is incapable of thinking of what the children might themselves be going through, the afflictions they must have suffered as displaced orphans, let alone as abused children. James’s story gives truth to Weil’s comment that “whenever one tries to suppress doubt, there is tyranny” (Weil, 1959, p. 103).

In time, the governess reveals herself to be unreliable both as narrator and as witness. She tells Mrs Grose of her intention to write to the Master and tell him exactly how things are at Bly, but it becomes evident when Miles (who pockets her letter, reads and subsequently burns it), that while she has written a letter, she has included no revealing details in the letter

at all, and that it contains, in Miles's words, "nothing" (p. 121). The governess is untruthful in other ways as well. She insists to Mrs Grose that Flora definitely did see Miss Jessel's ghost at the lakeside, whereas in her earlier account of ghost Jessel's appearance at the lakeside, she had said that Flora had been sitting "with her back to the water" (p. 43) from which vantage point Flora would not have been able to see what was happening across the lake.

This lakeside scene is of further interest since it involves a return to the earlier nautical metaphor, and brings to mind again James's metaphorical suggestion that what is being viewed is perhaps not being adequately registered in the minds of the observers. On this occasion, Flora is absorbed as she attempts to screw into a small flat piece of wood a second, upright wooden fragment "that might figure as a mast", thereby creating a structure that could pass as a convincing little boat (p. 43). While the little girl with her back to the lake clearly could not have witnessed the ghost that the governess wants her to have seen, we as readers see that the governess may herself thereby fail to recognise in Flora's waterside play a connection back to Flora's private time with the previous house staff. The reappearance of the metaphor of the boat reiterates the notion that this image is related to correct seeing and accurate interpretation.⁴³

The governess's capacity for subterfuge is made evident by the way that she encourages the children to hope (falsely) for a visit from their custodial uncle, despite being aware that a visit from him would be highly unlikely. She reports that the children question her keenly, asking "When do you think he *will* come? Don't you think we *ought* to write?" (p. 77), and comments obliquely (but also in a way that reflects her own personal fantasy about the master) that "we lived in much profusion of theory that he might at any moment arrive at any moment to mingle in our circle...He never wrote to them—that may have been selfish, but it was part of his flattery of his trust in me" (p. 77). The governess deliberately obstructs the children's channels of communication. She secretly pockets children's personal letters to their uncle, and justifies this action to herself (and to the readers) with the comment that their letters were "too beautiful to be posted; I kept them all myself" (p. 77). This covert action on her part amounts to an act of hypocrisy, prefiguring as it does her reaction to Miles' later

⁴³ In her writing on social harmony, Weil also draws upon the metaphor of the ship's rudder, whose function is to respond to "a light pressure at the right moment to counteract the first suggestion of any loss of equilibrium" (Weil, 1997, p. 225).

action of pocketing her own unsent letter to the master so that he can see what she has written—an occasion on which she reprimands Miles severely.

The governess's relationship with Miles reaches a crisis when he expresses a wish to return to boarding school. The governess, who admits to her fear of "having to deal with the intolerable question" (p. 82) (presumably the question of the reason for Miles's earlier dismissal from school), finally raises the issue with him. Given that she alone has read the letter of dismissal from the headmaster of Miles's previous school, she presumably already knows the details surrounding his departure. If so, her seemingly innocent protestations to Miles that he ought to reveal these details to her appears somewhat disingenuous. She declares plaintively: "Never, little Miles—no never—have you given me an inkling of anything that *may* have happened there" (p. 89)

Miles's explanation of the reason for his dismissal from boarding school is given in the vaguest of terms (albeit with vague hints of implied sexual innuendo) and is never made explicit. The governess chides him about being left "in the dark" (p. 89), noting that "you've never mentioned to me one of your masters, one of your comrades, nor the least little thing that ever happened to you in school" (p. 89). James thus deflects the reader's attention away from the issue of the governess's unreasonableness to Miles, and towards a view of Miles's own unreasonableness. Then, following the governess's own strategy of blocking meaningful dialogue, Miles responds to her questions with a question of his own and so, in an established pattern, their conversation goes no further. Some days later, the governess returns to the topic, and again queries Miles about the circumstances surrounding his dismissal from school. Miles's eventual answer to her is again full of gaps and elisions:

"Well I said things...Well, I suppose I oughtn't...I don't remember their names...only a few. Those I liked...they must have repeated them. To those *they* liked...Yes, it was too bad...What I sometimes said." (p.123)

When the governess then instructs Miles to explain to her "What *were* these things?" Miles holds his silence. The governess interprets this response as a sign that Quint is somehow present, and in the governess's agitated mind, Quint's purpose can only be "to blight his confession and stay his [Miles's] answer" (p. 124). So great is the governess's wish for authority over Miles, and so determined is she to be in the right, that she cannot countenance the possibility that Miles has simply chosen to ignore her question.

Hadley (2002, p. 58) notes that despite being just ten years old, Miles demonstrates considerable spiritedness in his attitude towards the governess. He is aware of her tactics of evasion in dialogue, and her resistance to discussion or the open sharing of ideas. When she demands of Miles “How do you know what I think?” Miles replies, wisely, “Ah well, of course I don’t; for it strikes me you never tell me” (James, 2011, p. 81). Miles notices too that the governess, in wanting always to emphasize his goodness, appears intent to have him conform to her ideal of how a little boy ought to be good. This motivates him to challenge her authority, and to head outdoors in the middle of the night to explore the grounds, seemingly to provoke her. He tells her that he does this to entice her to try to “think me—for a change, bad” (p. 68).

Although the governess’s story provides a detailed account of how she exercises her appointed “authority” at Bly in the name of goodness and morality, there is no evidence that her recollected experience at Bly ultimately counts for anything in her life. It remains entirely unclear whether or not she had progressed subsequently, following the events at Bly, to a greater understanding of herself or others, although we do learn that that she continues her career as governess, since we learn in the outer tale that she has served time as governess to the sister of the second narrator, Douglas, and that Douglas felt love for her (“she was the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position” (p. 5). Given the absence of information to the contrary, we may infer at best, that the Bly governess is a person entirely disconnected from the experiences of her youth, someone who as an adult has entirely forgotten the events of her own past. In her own reflections on her memories she notes “I hadn’t really in the least slept; I had only done something much worse—I had forgotten” (p. 94). The governess demonstrates that she is quite unable to dispatch her sense of herself, or to ‘recognise’ in what she attends to, in the sense of achieving ‘re-’ ‘cognition’ or realization of ways to see things from a wider perspective. Attention, as understood by Weil and Murdoch, not only humbles the self, but at the same time is the only veritable path to self-realization. Weil and Murdoch argue that the best personal existence is one that constantly steps beyond or outside of itself, and that education at its greatest lifts an individual quite outside of being merely individual.

If the holy grail by which we measure the success of a literary work lies in the degree to which a character, or characters shows change or development, this we don’t see in the Bly governess—or indeed in any of the characters in James’s story, none of whom are in any way sympathetic. James’s governess who essentially seeks to “govern” the freedom of thought and

speech of all who are at Bly, ultimately stifles Miles' ability to participate in the world at all. In her mind, for Miles to be 'saved' (if only from her own unarticulated fears) requires her to stop his eyes and ears, to silence him and literally block his view to the outer world. She imposes on him a kind of authority that is stifling and deadening.

In this way James's novella expresses something powerfully negative and monstrous about the governess's fixed view. Her denial of the possibility of further inquiry and investigation is, obliquely, an exploration of what might happen when authority and domination quash imagination and exploration, and when manipulation and control masquerade as patient and loving care. Does this mean that *The Turn of the Screw* is somehow the *antithesis* of a 'bildungsroman'—is it in fact a story in which no-one learns anything at all, and where moral behaviour counts for nothing? Or is it perhaps a 'bildungsroman' in quite a different way—one that is solely directed to the questioning mind of the reader?

6.7. *Summary*

The Turn of the Screw calls for patient, deliberate, reflective, and so, in Weil's and Murdoch's special sense of the word, attentive reading. On one level the story shows that to take up a conviction and to hold onto it doggedly (as does the governess), without further questioning that idea, or without being prepared to reconsider that interpretation in the light of further, different information, can prevent a person from achieving worthy insight, and may lead them to error, cruelty, even catastrophe. Similarly, the reader who is too eager or too determined to find an easy explanation, or who settles too readily upon the most consoling explanation rather than countenancing the possibility of other possibly more taxing readings, risks depleting the work of its essential power and mystery.

While James's novella yields no explicit, definitive reading, I have argued that James's moral purpose, as articulated in his literary prefaces, is to lead out the attention of his reader into areas that go beyond what is explicitly stated. He prompts us to consider our own ways of thinking—how we develop a moral position, how we draw conclusions based on evidence, why we believe what we do—and it thereby brings to mind considerations about what might be obstacles to our own moral perception. This novella invites us to reflect on the Bly governess's powers of self-assuredness, her absence of self-doubt, and her persistent failure to countenance whether or not she is distorting events. It invites us to think not just about the particulars of the governess's story, but about the wider social malaise that the story alludes to.

James tacitly invites us to see that certain social practices that are entirely accepted may also be viewed as unacceptable, unjust, pathological. He invites us to consider the proliferation of such social malaise as blindness to child sexual abuse, and to consider the ways that social conventions or group assumptions can operate as a kind of group neurosis that effectively impedes either individual or collective moral attention. The story implies that in addition to the governess's individual blindness, there may be a wider social malaise at work that permits such horrors as child sexual abuse to be perpetrated, unremarked. It falls to the reader to take the imaginative step of considering this possibility. James's story reminds us why we all need to take moral responsibility, both individually and collectively. It reminds us that attention to literature is a vehicle to help us to find value in the world.

The Turn of the Screw provides insight into James's conception of moral attention—that it can have application not only at an individual level, but at a collective level as well. James achieves this wider perspective by his deliberate authorial “suppression” of an explicit meaning, in order to activate and engage the reader's own attentive and imaginative response to what amounts to a societal pathology. It is for James's reader to determine whether or not the ghostly apparitions are to be taken simply as tropes of an oral storytelling tradition, as evidence of the governess's psychosis, or as psychological manifestations of the impact of systemic child abuse on the victims as well as on those close to them.

While Weil's and Murdoch's thesis that all learning is partly moral learning may strike many people as implausibly strong, the present chapter has subjected their thesis to a test that it has passed handsomely. James's *The Turn of the Screw* explores the form that moral learning may take even when a society has entirely blinkered itself against certain forms of moral reflection. James's work succeeds pedagogically only through a kind of individual accomplishment by his or her readers—not so much by way of new descriptive insight that leads to new forms of moral reflection, as the very opposite. As James's readers, we accomplish moral insight which leads us towards new powers to describe how things may be.

The present chapter concludes the literary investigations within this thesis. The next and final chapter turns to twenty-first century education policy and practice. It is an application of lessons learned to this point concerning the pedagogical worth of attention. It critiques a recent policy directive for state education in Aotearoa New Zealand, that imposes onto our state funded schools, open plan classrooms. The chapter finds little to recommend this drastic change to classroom design and delivery. It argues that conditions of thought and activity in the open classroom undermine the possibility of meaningful attention, partly in the

way that they militate against the standing of the teacher, and against a teacher's ability to help orchestrate attention in the sense that Weil and Murdoch attach to that word.

Chapter 7: The destruction of attention?

7.0. *Introduction*

This final chapter critiques the imposition of so-called “innovative learning environments” onto Aotearoa New Zealand state schools. It examines the sudden, swift, and profoundly consequential government directive that imposes onto state-funded schools an open classroom architecture. Ultimately it asks whose interests these changes to the physical fabric of a school were ever truly intended to serve, for it would seem impossible that the changes are intended to serve the interest to be educated of those who come to state schools as students. Nor are these changes likely to foster society’s coming into a situation of best educated citizenry. If choice of architecture for state school education could be made from some position of neutrality to the best interests of all, if it truly could concern what optimises education and brings society along best towards the ideal of an educated citizenry, then that choice of architecture for state school education would not, this chapter argues, be towards an open classroom design. A main argument that supports this conclusion concerns attention.

The chapter calls out what a threat to attention the open classroom architecture represents almost as simply as by asking the question. But there are some initial specific questions to ask first, concerning a directive that urges open classroom architecture onto our state-funded schools. These initial questions are disconcerting in the negative answers to which they lead:

- Is there a sound research basis to support this directive? *No.* (See 7.1 *Origins of the open classroom directive*)
- Has in-service retraining of teachers occurred, so that experienced, existing teachers, are helped to be as functional as they might be in the open classroom environment? *No.* Are teachers likely to enjoy security of professional employment if they explain what the changes imperil and if they therefore oppose the change? *No.* (See 7.2 *The deprofessionalisation of teaching.*)
- Does the circumstance of public school governance in Aotearoa New Zealand—“Tomorrow’s Schools”, enlisting parent-elected trustees to govern each school—create appropriate professional reflection and scrutiny surrounding whether open classrooms truly are spaces for effective pedagogy? *No.* (See 7.3 *Institutionally-endorsed inattention.*)

- Are the usual measurables (such as concern reading attainment and numeracy) that scale learning by students themselves telling a happy story concerning pedagogical effectiveness in open classrooms? *No.* (See 7.4 *The normalisation of inattention.*)
Concerning even just these usual measurables, would a moment’s professional reflection lead to any other expectation? *No, not at all.*

We can also ask whether the training colleges and programmes that prepare novice teachers are expert at preparing novice teachers for the new open classroom multi-teacher teaching experience. It is very difficult to understand how they could be, so swift has been the widespread introduction of open classroom design to Aotearoa New Zealand state schools.

The chapter again draws on the philosophical ideas of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, both of whom saw attention as foundational to education. The chapter’s argument is that the new physical arrangements for teaching and learning make it virtually impossible that students will cultivate their individual powers of attention either to the depth or to the quality that is required in order truly to learn. It argues centrally that, for virtually all students and virtually all teachers, experience in open classrooms will not enhance opportunities for attention, but will, to the contrary, mostly defeat or destroy such opportunities. Structured into two main parts, the chapter provides first (sections 7.1–7.3) a critique of the open plan policy directive by addressing the questions itemised above. Part two (sections 7.4–7.6) advances several possible criticisms regarding this directive, including the diminution of the standing of the individual teacher, the inevitable loss of opportunities for classroom quiet and contemplation, and the loss of group cohesion. Overall the chapter provides reasons for us to take pause and think critically about the implications of the vaunted “innovative learning environments” currently being crafted for New Zealand’s state schools.

7.1. Origins of the open classroom directive

The phrase “innovative learning environment” (and earlier iterations of the official terminology—“flexible learning space” and “modern learning environment”)—has clearly been crafted for positive effect. Yet the vast, unprecedented and comprehensive restructure of the physical spaces for teaching and learning ought not be regarded as necessarily benign, let alone necessarily beneficial. The phrase “innovative learning environment” vaunts a condition where the teachers float, where children variously group themselves, where a buzz of interaction is omnipresent, and where activities leave children for not a single moment alone in their thoughts. The very phrase appears to have been chosen so that one could not

possibly think anything negative or critical of it. For who, after all, would want to be non-”modern”, who would oppose “learning”, and who would resist, relative to education, the use of the encompassing, ambient, generally positive concept of an education “environment”?

Looked at in another way, what these terms point to is not only the wholesale deconstruction of the traditional classroom (specifically, its replacement by open-plan, so that the one-time norm of a single teacher with say twenty-six school students gives way to a new norm of say three teachers together with around eighty school students) but also, and perhaps even more concerning, they point to the potential dismantling of a classroom teacher’s standing, as well as of that teacher ever standing up in front of a group of students whom she may call her own.⁴⁴

It is timely to pause over this present-day policy directive in order to reflect upon its potential for adverse consequences. This is not necessarily to be against innovation, not necessarily to propose to impede learning, not at all to discount the environment, and in no way implies a resistance to the changes to education brought about by the increased use of digital technology—changes that can bring wonderful and marvellous new opportunities for learning (but that do also introduce new dangers). This is simply to look again at the directive itself, under a determination to be critical if criticism seems called for. While we are told that that open classrooms emphasize personalized learning, that they foster a collaborative ethos and promote flexible, self-regulated learning—said to be necessary skills to prepare students for the twenty-first century workplace—it is appropriate to question these very assumptions as well as raise some other questions about education itself—questions that have not hitherto been addressed. In the sections that follow, reasons will be presented for why student experience in open classrooms is unlikely to transcend what is commonplace, but is very much more likely to emblemise what is commonplace. But first, let us consider the origins of this change, and just whose needs it is intended to serve.

To date (May 2019), there appears to be no compelling research evidence to show that open classroom design impacts more favourably either on teacher performance or on student development than do traditional classroom arrangements. A survey of academic journal articles published between 2010 and 2016 provides no evidence that what is being aspired to is actually of academic or developmental benefit. While there is much emphasis in

⁴⁴ The chapter is specifically concerned with those designs that involve up to three classes, where there is scarce opportunity for a single teacher to work in a sustained way with their own class of up to thirty students in an enclosed, acoustically adequate, separate, furnished, walled-off space.

these articles on the modernity of open classroom design, no pedagogical conclusions are available to establish the superiority of open plan arrangements over the traditional arrangement of one teacher per classroom, and various cautions are sounded. Similarly, a survey of recent international academic studies concerned with the open classroom design⁴⁵ provides no definitive evidence to support the view that open plan arrangements are conducive to academic achievement. Questions around the pedagogical challenges for the teacher who is required to balance spaces for autonomous student learning while managing the complexity of a shared space, greater teacher/student ratios, variable student responses to the new environment, inappropriately high noise levels, visual distractions, teacher vocal strain, divergence across the team of teachers regarding educational practice, logistical challenges negotiating spatial collaboration, and students' sense of dislocation and being constantly "on the move" are just some of the themes and cautions that are raised.

Open plan workplaces were first instigated in Europe and the United States in the 1940s and 1950s as a means to increase worker productivity and interaction. Yet while the original intention of the open design was to enhance employee teamwork and creativity, subsequent evaluations indicate that open office design, despite offering some advantages, falls short of those aspirations. Repeated research investigations into the merits of open plan workplaces find that although these arrangements increase opportunities for aspects of sociability, their negative effects are considerable. On balance, investigations into the long-term impacts of open plan configurations on workplace satisfaction have identified negative effects including loss of worker satisfaction, increased worker distraction (caused by intrusions of audible and visual events), negative effects on worker cognitive processing, as well as increase in worker sickness.

Kim and de Dear (2013) identify what they call a "privacy-communication trade off" in open plan offices (p. 18). They conclude that "although occupants are satisfied with interactions in open-plan layout, their overall workspace satisfaction will eventually decrease unless a certain level of privacy and acoustical quality are provided" (p. 25). In their 2012 longitudinal field study, Brennan, Jasdeep, Chugh and Kline investigate the long-term impact on workers of a change to open office layout. Their research identifies diminished employee satisfaction and indeed enduring employee dissatisfaction in response to the change. More

⁴⁵ Sheild, Greenland and Dockerell (2010); Brennan, Jasdeep, Chung and Kline (2012); Connolly, Dockrell, Shield, Conetta and Cox (2013); Kim and De Dear (2013); Deed, Lesko and Lovejoy (2014), Deed and Lesko (2015).

recent empirical research (Bernstein and Turban, 2018) into the effects of open offices on the quality of human interactions, finds, perversely, that open offices, rather than increasing opportunities for people to interact and collaborate, achieve precisely the opposite effect. Rather than fostering positive collegial interactions, workers in open offices find ways to disengage and effectively “turn off” from those around them. They retreat to the relative privacy of online interactions, and use noise-blocking headphones. Perhaps counterintuitively, this research finds that the removal of spatial boundaries has a negative impact on human collective interactions—possibly because the larger space is over-stimulating and impedes people’s ability to focus, or perhaps because people function better in groups that occupy a more bounded environment, or in smaller groups *per se*. The researchers conclude that the relation between open architecture and collective human interactions is not yet well understood, and likely to be far more complex than initially assumed.⁴⁶

Today’s communication technologies such as voice-activated computers and mobile telephones contribute to the noise distractions in the open plan office, and also significantly jeopardise opportunities for quiet or private conversations (which are themselves essentially rendered public, albeit that they may be held within a glass-walled break-out room). Open workstations, sometimes termed ‘hot desks’, now feature in many corporate offices. These are workstations not assigned to anyone in particular, but available to be used by anyone in an *ad hoc* fashion. In these many ways, open plan workplaces introduce elements of impersonality into the workplace. They effectively eliminate any sense of pride of space or of place, even potentially rendering workers “homeless in their own places of work” (Weil, 1977, p. 64).

Like open plan offices, open classrooms feature opened-up spaces (the removal of classroom walls) and the creation of smaller breakout areas for small-group work. Open classrooms house up to three or more classes at a time, all day, every day. These spaces introduce issues of noise, of thronk-like groupings, as well as presenting constant visual and auditory distractions. These factors are clearly detrimental to sustaining levels of concentration and attention.

Although access to multi-use space may be very attractive for some teachers, this is not necessarily the case when the entire multi-use space is effectively ‘commons’. In this

⁴⁶ Their report concludes “While it is possible to bring chemical substances together under specific conditions of temperature and pressure to form the desired compound, more factors seem to be at work in achieving a similar effect with humans” (Bernstein and Turban, 2018, final paragraph).

context, there needs to be constant managing of competing group needs. Furthermore, teacher management of the movement of large numbers of students within the open classroom inevitably brings with it some degree of regimentation and inflexibility. In the open classroom, groups of around eighty students may be bundled together under the watchful eyes of three or more teaching staff. In order to manage the sheer volume of students in this space, and even to comply with health and safety regulations, the overriding function of these teachers is likely to be reduced to one that is largely task-oriented and humdrum.

Open classrooms are said to bring a strong imperative for teachers to become more collaborative and less individualistic in their practice. Yet open classrooms can also be shown to represent a serious challenge to an individual teacher's capacity to enthrall and captivate his or her own class. The open classroom design seems deliberately intended to deflect education delivery right away from the focused, challenging teacher who seeks to foster independent thought. Open classrooms promote a deliberate and intended de-privatization of teaching, a model that inevitably brings its own orthodoxy, both in conception and in consequences. Open classroom design mimics workplace trends, although school is not a workplace, and nor is the sole purpose of school a preparation for the workplace. Why, then, are we emulating the open plan work environment in our schools? There is to date no compelling evidence to support the notion that the amalgamation of several classes of students and their teachers into vast open classrooms is any less industrial than what has gone before, nor that such an arrangement will improve the quality of state education.

Many of New Zealand's school buildings were built around sixty or seventy years ago. Rectangular classrooms with doors and windows are now seen as negative emblems of that earlier time, which involved a formal style of educational delivery, one that typically involved the teacher as the sole focal point, often telling the entire class what, and how, they were to learn. Such teacher-dominated instruction as the sole or even the dominant mode of teaching has today largely disappeared from our schools. Nevertheless, all state schools are now required to identify, through their school property plans, how they will remediate their physical environment to eliminate or mitigate such design features as separate classrooms—even although the educational and academic merits of these structural changes have yet to be determined. This raises important questions relative to New Zealand education policy: what educational considerations if any have been brought to bear on these policy decisions, and what if any effort has been made to base policy decisions on proper research by education professionals or professional education researchers? What discussion of policy has been

allowed for, and who has been involved in these policy discussions? What alternatives to open classroom architecture for schools were considered? In opting for the open classroom architecture as a policy directive, whose interests have been prioritised? These are reasonable questions to raise, and to answer them is perfectly possible without mooting whether some kind of conspiracy lies behind the change.

Roots of this change appear to date back to 2010 when the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced alterations to each school's ten-year property plan. As a result of this directive, Boards of Trustees are required to identify their planning against three priority areas: health and safety; essential infrastructure; and environment. A 2012 report commissioned from NZCER, entitled *Supporting future-oriented learning and teaching: A New Zealand perspective: Report prepared for the Ministry of Education* (Bolstad and Gilbert, 2012) contains hints of the current seismic shift now being suffered by our state schools—a shift that requires not only a drastic change in the physical and spatial design of teaching spaces, but that also implies a change to teaching practice itself.

It is now the policy of the Ministry of Education that all New Zealand state school classrooms be modified or retrofitted into larger, open spaces. Older school buildings are to be adapted by the removal of walls between classrooms, while new school buildings are being designed as predominantly large open spaces that will accommodate vast numbers of students with some limited segregated quiet areas provided.⁴⁷ Such designs are considered to reflect the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development view (OECD, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2013) that students learn best when self-led, and in a context that is social and collaborative:

The Ministry of Education shares the OECD's holistic view of learning environments as an ecosystem that includes learners, educators, families/whānau, communities, content and resources like property and technology. It's about everything working together to support teachers and learners and ensure our young people are confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners. (Ministry of Education, 2018, What's It All About section, para. 1.)

⁴⁷ Christchurch's newly built Haeata Community Campus, which opened in 2017, is designed to fit up to 300 students within four walls.

However perilous it might be to consider definitive for education the pronouncements of an organisation concerned with economics exclusively, it is in any case a non-sequitur to argue that self-led learning, in a context that is social and collaborative, was not liable ever to be accomplished in traditional classrooms. Not only has such learning been accomplished within traditional classrooms, but whether such learning can be accomplished as much or as well within large open classrooms is also perfectly pertinent to question.

The current physical re-design of New Zealand state school classrooms represents a very significant change to the delivery of public education. The directive for open classrooms strongly reflects ideals for education, wherein educational processes are harnessed as part of a push for economic competitiveness. It could even be argued that open classrooms are very largely intended to socialise and prepare young students to be bland and tolerant co-operators who have developed the personal mental resilience to survive amidst the hubbub and distractions of open-plan workspaces.

Like open plan offices, open classrooms feature spaces that are made physically vast by the removal of opaque walls. Within these vast spaces, smaller, so-called ‘breakout’ areas are created, for small-group interactions and targeted teaching. Open classrooms are designed to have multiple uses, and are closely modelled on the open plan office workplaces, with their extended utility stations, hot desks, and meeting spaces in separate glass-walled breakout areas. Advocates of these arrangements defend them as embodying a symbolic sense of a school’s organisational vision as one of transparency, and that fosters innovative, sociable and contemporary approaches to education. Open classrooms are said to epitomise priorities of “flexibility, openness, access to resources” (Osborne, 2013, p. 2).

Yet although access to multi-use space may sound attractive, a raft of complexities are likely to arise when a multi-use space is effectively deemed ‘teaching commons’—a space that a cohort of around eighty or more students occupy for extended periods of the school day. These vast open spaces cannot but introduce issues of noise, of anonymity, of throng-like groupings, as well as constant visual and auditory distractions. Such factors are surely detrimental to establishing, let alone sustaining, appropriate levels of concentration and attention in both teacher and student. There is every reason to be concerned that we are moving far too quickly to embrace this pedagogical innovation, and that insufficient consideration is being given to what we risk of losing by this drastic change.

Whether open classroom design has been “visited upon” education (that is, has not in the first instance been instigated by educators) is a pertinent, open question. Relatedly we may ask who invented the official terminology that describes open classroom redesign in New Zealand. Given that the terminology is so seductive and clever, and so well-crafted to neutralise any opposition, presumably those who are behind the change operate to some extent under ulterior motives. They may nevertheless sincerely believe that the implementation of their ideas will improve state-funded education in New Zealand. Yet it is legitimate to ask just who exactly are these people? What specific insights into or interests concerning education do they possess? What vested interests might they possess? These are relevant questions to ponder even if this change is explained not by conspiracy but by quite a different kind of political analysis.

Certainly the current radical change in educational design and delivery appears not to have come spontaneously from professional teachers and educators who think that it is a really good idea—even though it is professional teachers and educators who are expected to embrace the required changes to their own practice and work conditions. It is fair to mention but also not unexpected that some educators have embraced the change, and even declare that they would never return to the now pejoratively-termed “single-cell” classroom.⁴⁸ An explanation why the change would be embraced by some is developed in the second half of this chapter. Despite the warm glow surrounding the advertising buzz words, and despite the educators who have embraced the change, there may be ill in what open classroom redesign of state schools will bring to education. There is every reason to pause, to take stock and reflect, and to consider critically why the currently charted course towards open classroom design may be a colossal mistake.

What is significant about the open classroom directive is that it entrenches the idea that education is a skills training ground, and school is a preparation for the workplace in an inescapable way. Open classroom design mimics workplace trends, although surely school is not a workplace, and nor has it been established that the sole purpose of school ought to be to prepare students for the workplace. Pinar (2012) laments the influence of self-interested political and business ideologies on education. He argues that curriculum design should be motivated by educational priorities, and definitely not those of the “self-aggrandizement” of

⁴⁸ The connotations of seclusion, imprisonment, and a punishingly depleted environment in relation to the teacher-led classroom are both inaccurate and propagandistic.

corporations (p. 208). Pinar underlines that “the point of being in the world is not to exploit its resources and peoples for profit” (p. 207). If, following Pinar, we agree that education’s purpose is far more than to prepare for work, and that education plays a role in helping students to (begin to) shape their own conception of the world, and to develop themselves towards being in the world most fully, not merely via the paid work that they eventually do, we must strongly question the philosophy that underlies the design of the open classroom.

An ‘industrialising’ influence on state education is all the more worrisome, when we recall the obligation of a democratic state to help the powers for critical, independent thinking of its citizenry to grow. Education grows democracy, it does not only aid industry. Implicit in the open classroom arrangement is the idea that each individual student is in preparation to be a collaborative and productive participant in an industrial economy, rather than an individual, contemplative and reflective, thinker, sporting values that are truly self-authored, and a purpose in life that is truly self-owned. The open classroom directive is also a challenge to the professionalism of the classroom teacher, who is now required to operate as part of a teaching “tag team” on a daily basis. The next section examines this change.

7.2. *The deprofessionalization of teaching*

One argument given in defence of open classrooms is that they enable teachers to determine how best to connect with a particular student or group of students, while for the students, the open design enables students to gravitate in the space to whichever teacher they best relate to, or to whomever can best assist them with particular problems or challenges. (Yet by the same inference, teachers would also be selective in the attention that they bestow, and, in particular, would expend little time or effort upon students whom they least relate to.) Open classrooms are thus said to bring a strong imperative for teachers to become more collaborative and less individualistic in their practice. Also implied in this arrangement is the educational philosophy that students learn best by way of their own, self-directed learning. (One also sees survival-of-the-fittest, social Darwinism, expressed in this design.) Yet while the open classroom is said to overcome the structural isolation of the teacher, it significantly alters the quality and nature of the interaction between teachers and students. Worse, it has the potential to significantly de-professionalise the role of teacher who has now in some sense lost that “proprietary” connection to their own class.

Equally, the teacher’s intuitive calls, judgements, grasp of “teachable moments”, and their responses to students are, in the larger space, potentially weakened, since everything

within the collaborative context must now align with the agreed interests of the teaching team and the priorities of the larger group. The oversight of eighty plus students surely renders truly responsive teaching particularly difficult. An aspect of the professionalism of any teacher is to be concerned to advance as far as possible the learning of the least advantaged student, and this aspect is undermined if the least advantaged student is liable to disappear in the crowd. The eighty-student teaching environment is redolent with industrialism. Decisions regarding the overall management of such a large group must be maximally responsive to the clock, or else “slippage” over the course of the day will mean that valuable teaching time is inexorably lost.

Until recent decades, New Zealand teachers operated in a largely autonomous fashion, and followed a predominantly didactic teaching style. While teachers in a traditionally-run school would interact, maintain friendships with, support and collaborate with, their colleagues, sometimes pooling resources and often providing enriching across-classroom opportunities for the benefit of their students, they would also typically hold a certain professional distance from one another, in the sense that each teacher would have licence to respond in their own way to the professional delivery of the daily, weekly, termly and annual programme for their students, in line of course, with school and curriculum guidelines. Teachers would not typically encroach upon the complexities of their colleagues’ teaching style. Now, within an environment that contains up to or even exceeding eighty students, teams of two or three teachers are housed together, and must collectively attend to that larger group’s needs. Such teacher oversight of very large numbers of students, while these students move in and out of smaller groups for specific daily instruction, fundamentally alters the student-teacher relationship, and must inevitably bring with it some degree of organisational regimentation and inflexibility. It also means that teachers are now constantly audience to one another.

In the open classroom environment, the potential influence of each individual teacher relative to the larger group is surely less than the ability of a single-classroom teacher sometimes to enthrall, captivate and propel into quiet reflection his or her own class. The open arrangement minimises each individual teacher’s capacity to teach as they individually and creatively see best, or to respond individually and intuitively to the arising needs of their collected students. All of this diminishes the professional standing of the teacher.

As we saw in Chapter 1, Weil considers that if school studies are to have any lasting worth, training the attention is paramount (Weil, 2009, p. 63). The teacher is deeply involved

in developing the students' capacity for attention. The teacher must work with the class to develop a shared attentive culture. The teacher is involved in fostering practices that enable student attention to form. Teaching involves providing a safe and suitable place in which specific activities can be questioned, investigated, challenged. Within the classroom, attention can be a shared event, in which everyone, separately, is aware of the process of mutually sharing something as a collective. To teach well in this environment involves taking the time to form attentive and appropriately loving relationships with individual students. A necessary condition of success is that the teacher be engaged with all her students, all considered equally and loved.

To reiterate, an effective teacher seeks to engage humanly and intellectually with all of the students, taking into account the different personalities, interests, cultures, and other various particular situations within the group. We could say that that individual teacher's work is founded upon attention. It is by way of attention that the teacher sets up the classroom, establishes with the students the culture of the classroom, responds to the plurality of events and people within that room, and embarks on the complex task of connecting appropriately with those students and leading them forth. The move to open classroom design appears to be driven far more by political ideology than by care for pedagogy. Certainly it is deleterious if as Murdoch and Weil teach us, the connection between attention and pedagogy is tight.

Concurrent with the move to open classrooms has been an increased use of digital technology. There is coincidence in the timing but no necessary link. While there are undoubted merits and opportunities in the adoption of digital technology to deliver some aspects of the school curriculum, just as there are merits in students learning to work collaboratively, it is naïve to embrace open classroom architecture as if there were no other option that would allow digital technology to do good work to the extent that it can, or as if there were no other option for allowing students to learn to work collaboratively. Opportunities may well be lost in open classrooms to discover, as was often discovered in traditional classrooms, that learning can take its most emphatic forms quite without any use of digital technology at all. The enhancement of some kinds of learning by digital technology is no good reason for eliminating other kinds of learning, including some of the best kinds of learning. As Murdoch herself comments, "if something is no use it does not matter much whether it's there or not" (Murdoch, 2014, p. 10), and so it would properly be with student tablets and lap-tops when the most precious moments in learning are being achieved.

Of course to lament the open classroom is not to argue for the total privatization of teaching, since teachers, as any professionals, benefit from interaction with colleagues, as well as opportunities to critique and reflect upon their own practice. No teacher should be considered “above” observation or feedback. The point here is that in order to be effective in their role, which is so fundamentally about forming positive educative relationships, teachers must be able to establish effective relationships with their students individual by individual. Yet one of the complexities of “tag team” teaching is that teachers must now focus on their own interpersonal and professional interactions with colleagues even more continually than upon their interactions with students. They also are faced with far greater numbers of individual students to think about, far more than they can grow to truly know.

Given their already various teaching responsibilities, and the very public nature of the open classroom, a dominant teacher personality is likely to prevail if or when particular pedagogical, ethical, or interpersonal challenges arise. Teachers are assumed to have the requisite skills to work out their shared decision base, either on the spot, or at a time when the students are not present. The open classroom arrangement is likely to add to teacher workload since it necessitates subsequent meetings to address administrative or pedagogical and/or interpersonal matters, either before or after the hours of direct classroom contact.

The open classroom environment also brings with it its own orthodoxy. It effectively forces the teachers into a pedagogical relationship whereby they must work collaboratively with others in an environment that encourages enquiry- or project-based learning as the predominant mode of instruction, rather than enquiry- or project-based learning as one of a range of ways to organise classroom studies. In the open classroom, there is scarcely any place for direct teacher instruction, and the individual teacher’s pedagogical role is significantly diminished to that of mere facilitator. In this way, the concept of open classroom design risks diluting the nature of the teacher/student relationship altogether. In particular, it risks rendering impossibly difficult that the teacher should truly gain and guide his or her student’s attention. Although the open classroom design is promoted as suited to student need for variety and flexibility, it is arguably more likely to be, for at least some students and some teachers, a site of alienation and displacement. How is it possible to give focussed attention in the midst of hubbub, interchanges, and constant noise? An aspect of the professionalism of teachers that may be more crucial to education than any other aspect of teacher professionalism is lost in this circumstance. That is a major blow, and it is an insidious de-professionalization of the teaching role.

7.3. *Institutionally-endorsed inattention*

The theme of institutionally-endorsed inattention is explored by Boler in her *Feeling Power* (1999). Boler refers to what she calls our culturally “*inscribed habits of (in)attention*” (p. 180). Acknowledging that minds are prone to become “rigid and immune to flexibility”, Boler emphasizes that a fundamental role for the teacher is “to identify when and how our habits harm ourselves and others” (p. 185). Boler identifies the central function of the teacher as ethical, since it is the teacher’s role to encourage “[both] students and [fellow] educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment” (p. 179). In Chapter 8 of *Feeling Power*, Boler identifies what she terms a “pedagogy of discomfort” (p. 176) as a means of enabling students to undertake critical reflection. This approach, she explains, “is not a demand to take one particular road or action... not to enforce a particular agenda, or to evaluate students on what agenda they choose to carry out, if any” (p. 179). Rather, the teacher would, on Boler’s preferred approach, helpfully unsettle the taking of ideas as received, and so would encourage students to consider how to be reasonable, and to take responsibility for thinking as they do. This is to illuminate in terms of attention the truest function of the dedicated classroom teacher.

Such a truest function for the teacher is also an especially demanding one. And yet the open classroom design creates a contrary impulse for teaching to be “casualized”. In the open classroom the relationships between teachers and students are made less formal, less clearly defined, and respect for the specific expertise of the teacher is potentially muted. Classroom interactions are more fluid, involving an assembly of people, but without a strong sense of “belonging” within that community—group cohesion is now circumstantial, rather than pedagogical. Assembled students are as travellers who share a common destination, eventually to be participants in an industrial workforce, rather than individuals working out their own individual path within life generally and within the wider state. It is likely that the teacher’s pedagogical influence is made more, and not less difficult, by way of open design.

It would not be surprising if the implementation of open classrooms on the teaching profession proves to have a negative impact on teacher recruitment and retention. Teachers are typically attracted to teaching because they want to make a difference to the lives of students, and to participate in sharing their own expertise. For many teachers, a distinction between being respected as a professional in one’s own right, versus being viewed as a component member within a teaching team, may dilute those aspirations, and may lead to

levels of frustration, stress and burnout that will, for some, accelerate their departure from the profession altogether.

Of course, in considering the implications of this current change directive, it is important not to fall into a benighted sense of nostalgia for times past. Some readers will appreciate the importance of not glossing over previously poor aspects of state school education. Some school classrooms of earlier decades were thoroughly negative places, sites of rigidity, and even cruelty. Prior to the major reforms of *Tomorrow's Schools* in the late 1980s, teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand was viewed as a vocation, and teachers were considered above scrutiny, so not held to account. In former times, many schools used corporal punishment as a form of discipline. Many teachers used verbal threats and ridicule as weapons to bring students into compliance. New Zealanders who were educated even four or five decades ago may recall unbending and rigid classroom situations that involved didactic, negative, and vindictive teacher judgments. Little, if any attention was formally given in these times to human vulnerabilities around matters of gender, ethnicity, language, culture, or other areas of possible inequality. The call for teachers to work collaboratively could in this light seem clarion, as though the only good protection against teachers being bullies is for them always to be observed by one or more other adults.

It is perhaps arguable that overtly cruel, unfair, or patently unprofessional teacher behavior would not readily occur in an open classroom in which each adult is under the watch of other adults, although the mutual surveillance of teachers has not been identified as the motivation for implementing open classrooms. By the same token, however, gravitational drawdown towards overall teaching mediocrity, and suppression of any teacher's opportunity to be magnificent, surely also can follow from mutual surveillance. It is even possible that some bullying behaviours by teachers could rub off on the fellow teachers.

In terms of logistics, the open classroom structure introduces complexities including those around the best groupings of students, and the logistics of tracking and managing student movement in and out of groups and teaching spaces across the school day. As a 2018 New Zealand Education Review Office national report into so-called "innovative practice" reveals, teachers who teach in a collaborative setting are much more likely to rely on gathered assessment data than on their own intuitive readings of student behaviour and progress, since

these teachers may not hold a detailed picture of each individual student.⁴⁹ Thus the open classroom design further reinforces teachers' trust in gathered assessment data ahead of other more intuitive ways of knowing their students. This is not at all to discount the usefulness of testing and assessment information, if used appropriately and well, but rather to point to a way in which the open classroom arrangement effectively valorises assessment data, which can then be seen to provide the "final word" ahead of knowledge of each individual student.

The demands of open classroom design may also negatively influence the nature and quality of the teaching programmes that teachers devise. Back in 1987, philosopher of education Neil Postman observed that our expectations of what education entails have come to be heavily influenced by screen-based entertainment, particularly television, the chief consequence of which has been, in his view, the conflation in people's minds of the functions of teaching and entertainment (1987, p. 150). Postman warns of the risk of what he terms a "decline of the potency of the classroom" by this trend, since "no-one has ever said or implied that significant learning is effectively, durably and truthfully achieved when education is entertainment" (p. 150). Postman expresses a further concern that screen-based entertainment undermines the notion that human understanding is cumulative, hierarchical, or built up over time, and points to the fact that screen viewers are largely fed discrete events. Television-inspired material, because its purpose is entertainment, cannot be too perplexing or too intellectually taxing for its audience (pp. 152–153).⁵⁰

Postman's comments point to the kinds of teaching approaches that work best within the open classroom—the provision of a constantly moving series of activities that entertain and engage the larger group, while small-group 'targeted' teaching takes place, possibly out of sight of the majority, in a withdrawal area. Postman's observations are pertinent to our discussion of the open classroom insofar as opportunities to pursue the ideals of shared pedagogical attention, sustained focus, and the continuity of extended thoughtful enquiry are all perpetually 'marginalised' by these large open spaces. Attention to slow-moving activities like contemplative reading are highly likely to be marginalised within this physical arrangement. Postman also notes that teacher emphasis on perpetually short-term or discrete classroom activities are likely to undermine their students' conceptions of sequence,

⁴⁹"Agentic learning is great, but we always come back to the data." (Leaders, St Clair School, as cited in Education Review Office, 2018b, p. 29).

⁵⁰ Postman's comments are directed to television shows, and predate the arrival of televised dramas or filmed interpretations of literary texts, which are beyond the scope of the current thesis.

consequence, or of the progress of cumulative or reflective thought—again, such as are called upon in the experience of imaginative reading. Indeed, we might wonder if experiences as quiet, sustained reading are even possible within the large, open classroom space. Given the sheer numbers of students involved, and the absence of a set position in the classroom for each student to claim as their own, there is a potential sense of chaos, of the flux of constant movement,—a surfeit of energy that needs to be contained, managed, somehow restrained.

If, as this thesis insists, the aspects of education that matter most are also those aspects that are least able to be measured, the open classroom design appears to be an unfortunate educational experiment rather than a worthy educational approach. For Weil and Murdoch, it is the intangible aspects of education that are of greatest intrinsic value. Their vision for education, built upon the idea of learning as improving, involves, among other things, time to give due regard and respect to the achievements of others. Their vision leaves space in the educational context for individual thought and contemplation.

In considering the cogency of Weil and Murdoch’s inspirations for education, I turn in the second part of this chapter (sections 7.4–7.6) to consideration of some hitherto insufficiently discussed but nevertheless glaring demerits of the open classroom approach.

7.4. *The normalisation of inattention*

Contemporary educational philosophy as played out in the open classroom not only does not value quiet, thoughtful attention, but, to the contrary, renders attention virtually impossible. We could even say that open plan environments dictate that attention, as understood by Weil and Murdoch, *not even be part of education*. Sustained pedagogical attention within a group of eighty plus individuals is, if not unattainable, at least highly unlikely. Education in this manifestation appears fundamentally destructive of opportunities for attention. The open classroom *normalises* inattention to the extent that it destroys opportunities for attention.

Human powers of attention need to be inculcated, practised, repeated, and developed into patterns of behaviour. As Eppert (2004) observes, “powers of attention cannot simply become visible at the first call to pay attention in a meaningful way... Rather than being effortlessly acquired, these abilities demand extended cultivation” (Eppert, 2004, p. 52). Eppert comments further that “perhaps most fruitful and necessary to a relearning is to expose our students to the awareness of inattention as a problem of our contemporary times” (p. 52).

Debord (1995) also offers an analysis of contemporary culture that connects with concerns about societal distraction. He considers that “the spectacle epitomises the prevailing model of social life” (p. 13). Debord laments what he perceives as a generalised loss of critical awareness in society today. He identifies what he considers to be a societal inertia that “manifests itself as an enormous passivity out of reach and beyond dispute” (p. 15). In this state of mental inertia, Debord argues, individuals come to believe that “everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear” (p. 15). Debord’s comments are relevant to the current discussion, for open plan education appears itself to have embraced the character of the spectacle, with students and teachers alike reduced to the roles of spectator while simultaneously functioning as participants in an unfolding drama.

Open classroom design is founded on a mind-set that forces people away from private spaces, that diminishes the importance and influence of the individual teacher, and that inevitably compromises sustained contemplative opportunities. Officially, student studies are directed towards tasks of group interaction, analysis, synthesis, and categorisation, often through the use of technology. The reality for students who are not engaged is that many of these intended tasks of study do not occur. Yet even when these tasks of study do occur, their shape scarcely allows them to involve deep thought or individual contemplation. For after all, to think deeply for oneself or to contemplate requires quiet, space, time, and a far different, far richer, kind of stimulus that typically could only be orchestrated by a thoughtful, mature, loving, patient, inspired adult.

Most tasks that officially are meant to fill an open classroom also assume that there is a right way or a right answer, that defines what success is in the activity. A buzz of interaction is meant to reflect pursuit of that winning way or answer. The electronic devices may convey pre-programmed indications to individuals when success has been achieved. So what is not honed is judgment of the nuanced kind about which pre-programmed resolution is not the ticket. While critical and analytic skills of kinds about which there indeed are clear differences between right and wrong or between achieved and not achieved are obviously not unimportant, they alone are not adequate to the full development of a young person’s intellect and creativity.

In the open classroom, all social interactions are designed to be on display. Around eighty students are now bundled together, ostensibly under the watchful eyes of three teachers, who are themselves not only watchers but also watched. Following Debord, we could consider the open classroom as a panopticon whose very design imposes a form of

control on both students and teachers alike. The open classroom seems deliberately intended to deflect education delivery right away from the focused, challenging and professionally motivated teacher who seeks to foster independent thought. The extent to which children will be capable of belonging within their classroom is scant because they are ever to be in and out of associations that are more circumscribed than would involve eighty children and three teachers or the whole of the space let alone the whole of the school year. The extent to which the children will be capable of belonging to a teacher, as the teacher's special responsibility and object of love, is vanished in the open classroom by its very design.

Debord's lament concerning just such a loss of unity and a sense of dispossession and alienation resonates with Weil's comments in her posthumously published political treatise, *The Need for Roots*. In this work, Weil identifies up-rootedness as a profoundly disrupting societal phenomenon. A fundamental need for all people, if they are to live meaningful lives, Weil argues, involves their having a sense of belonging. In this work, Weil identifies two chief vectors in society that spread what she terms the "disease" of uprootedness—money, and education (Weil, 2002, pp. 44–45). Weil considers that uprootedness in education is characterised by what she terms a "stove-pipe atmosphere" of busy-ness, and production, emphasis on assessments and examinations (p. 45), priorities that, in her interpretation (and her experience), suffocate creative thought:

To be free and sovereign, as a thinking being, for an hour or two, and a slave for the rest of the day, is such an agonizing spiritual quartering that it is almost impossible not to renounce, so as to escape it, the highest form of thought. (Weil, 2002, p. 73)

Weil describes uprootedness in education as a form of impoverishment that raises ethical, even spiritual concerns. Her concerns relate not simply to the absence of a specific place for each person to call their own, but to a more serious disregard for the human need for a sense of connection. The quality of human connection, Weil would argue, is not achieved simply by assemblage based on proximity, or coincidence. For a sense of human connection, there needs to be appropriate attention, regard, and respect. Weil defends the importance of attention for education because the act of attending opens up and draws out each individual person. She argues that only when we experience truly focussed attention, and thereby genuinely acknowledge the reality of other people, other ideas, other achievements, can we be truly open to their value.

Weil also warns against what she sees as the systemic use of persuasive but empty rhetoric, another salutary warning for contemporary education aficionados. Weil argues that “when empty words are given capital letters, then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin...piling up ruin in their name” (Miles, 1986, p. 221). She notes also her disdain for what she sees as the destructive effects of capitalism on human aspirations, and records her discomposure over “the speed with which bureaucracy has invaded almost every branch of human activity” (Weil, 1958, p. 13). Writing of the soulless demands of blue-collar factory work, Weil’s comments can also be read in a way that sheds new light on the possible consequences of these latest educational developments in Aotearoa New Zealand:

Everybody in it is constantly harassed and kept on edge by the interference of extraneous wills while the soul is left in cold and desolate misery. What man needs is silence and warmth; what he is given is an icy pandemonium. (Miles, 1986, p. 59)

Weil’s warning of our human susceptibility to ideas that may in fact have no substance at all, including those delivered from the highest of levels, is salutary in relation to the rhetoric of innovation, modernity, and flexibility that surrounds the open classroom initiative. Weil is aware of the very great danger, not so much from those who promulgate such ideologies, as from the readiness of masses of ordinary people who fall in behind such ideas, whether the intentions be malign, or naive, without giving them due scrutiny:

We must also distinguish between the soul’s foods and poisons which, for a time, can give the impression of occupying the place of the former. The lack of any such investigation forces governments, even when their intentions are honest, to act sporadically and at random. (p. 92)

Inattention is, for Weil and for Murdoch, a moral matter because any kind of distraction implies a mind preoccupied, a mind vulnerable to suasion, too easily led, a mind that is wandering or wasting itself on fantasy, a mind centred on the self. This, they argue, is a moral problem. It reflects an imbalance and a failure to think well, and a failure to be sufficiently aware of the wider context. In *Oppression and liberty*, Weil urges us to consider the important intellectual demands that lie at the heart of education:

Thus, in all spheres, thought, the prerogative of the individual, is subordinated to vast mechanisms which crystallize collective life, and that is so to such an extent

that we have lost the notion of what real thought is. (Weil, 1958, p. 110)

Weil and Murdoch show us that attention importantly shapes our cognitive, moral and even spiritual thought, and that these matters are what is fundamental to education—to enable young people to form themselves in terms of values and priorities, and to consider what is of most worth. The vaunted emphasis on sociability and interaction in the classroom also brings with it a potential dilution to the process of individual learning, a process that Weil and Murdoch see involves encountering and addressing one’s own failings, misapprehensions, since acknowledging error, although sometimes hard, is a primary way of making educational (and moral) progress:

Each of us is always tempted to set his own failings, to a certain extent, on one side... relegate them to some attic, invent some method of calculation whereby they turn out to be of no real consequence. (Weil, 2002, p. 101)

As Murdoch says: “serious reflection is ipso facto moral effort and involves a heightened sense of value and a vision of perfection” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 437).

Thus the normalization of inattention via the promulgation of open classroom design is freighted morally. If it is destructive of the possibility of moral growth as Weil and Murdoch would have us understand moral growth, it doubtless comes with an opposite inclination concerning morality itself. But it is equally clear that this opposite inclination is not truly a thinking one. The apparent readiness with which the open classroom directive has been taken up by the New Zealand education community, seemingly without deep scrutiny, may itself be symbolic of a deeper societal inattention.⁵¹ An alternative reading could suggest how firmly neo-liberal convictions have taken hold in Aotearoa New Zealand according to which, the self is pitted simply towards self-advancements of ultimately material kinds, and towards getting down what needs to be got down in order to get ahead of others? Have even the teachers become caught up in decisions on the basis of what makes their own responsibilities clearer and easier? Is love for one’s still developing fellows at such a low-point with the ascendancy of individualized thought-forms, that the traditional motivations even to be a teacher are far remote from the present scene?

⁵¹ An exception to this is Mark Wilson, then Principal of Cashmere High School, Christchurch, whose 2015 sabbatical report, published on the Ministry of Education website, provides a balanced but searching critique of the open classroom initiative.

Publicly, at least, many teachers are said to think very well of their new arrangement into multi-teacher open classrooms. Such readiness to be seen to embrace new forms of functioning may be genuine, or may, perversely, reflect the phenomenon that sometimes members who operate within a particular system such as education, are unable themselves to provide a meaningful critique of its operation, so close is their involvement in it.

Weil writes about this very human tendency. In *Oppression and Liberty*, she explores themes of political and personal freedom, and examines various forms of oppression. In her view, limitations on people's personal freedom can have unexpected and counterintuitive outcomes. She argues that "slavery degrades man to the point of making him love it" (Weil, 1958, p. 117) and that "the powerful, if they carry oppression beyond a certain point, necessarily end by making themselves *adored* by their slaves" (Weil, 1997, p. 214). Postman's 1987 observations about the uptake of educational innovations are also relevant here. Postman observes that "educators are apt to find new methods congenial, especially if they are told that education can be accomplished more efficiently by means of the new techniques" (1987, p. 147). In a similar vein, philosopher David Hume, in his *A Treatise on Human Nature*, observes:

There is no quality in human nature which causes more fatal errors in our conduct than that which leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value. (Hume, 1952, 11, p. 239, as cited in Olson, 1971, p. 39)

This is to suggest that the largely unquestioned acceptance of open classrooms into New Zealand state schools may reflect a degree of passivity or acceptance within the teaching profession and the education community more broadly, and may reflect a systemic failure to critique adequately the full meaning of the initiative. This line of thinking is resonant with Dewey's lament in *Individualism, old and new*, where he argues that once there is a diminishment of intellectual and moral aspirations for education, the way is opened to standards of mediocrity and aspirations that are commonplace:

Difference and distinctions are ignored and overridden; agreement, similarity, is the ideal. There is not only absence of social discrimination but of intellectual; critical thinking is conspicuous by its absence. Our pronounced trait is mass suggestibility ... Homogeneity of thought has become an ideal. Quantification, mechanization and standardization... have invaded mind and character and

subdued the soul to their own dye. (Dewey, 1931, pp. 26–27)

Dewey's views hold relevance for us today, for they remind us that schooling reflects the wider society which it represents. Not only does the open classroom invite a profound level of homogeneity, for what teacher would ever be able to orchestrate anything extraordinary in such learning spaces as these, but on the contrary, teaching in the open plan classroom risks becoming a humdrum public performance, where the classroom environment is reduced to an open arena in which all hopes of attention diverge into fractured inattention.

7.5. *Diminished group cohesion*

Opportunities for joint attention of the quality championed by Weil and Murdoch, are far less likely to occur in the context of a three-teacher open plan space than they are in the integrated and supported way that is made possible in a teacher-led classroom. Within the confines of his or her own classroom, an individual teacher can curate opportunities for students to articulate and share their ideas. In this context, students can develop their oral language confidence under the safe but watchful eye of their attentive teacher. Individual teachers are also able to develop within their classroom a culture that is built upon a set of shared beliefs—commitments to what is of value, how the classroom will operate. Within a teacher-led classroom, the teacher is able to guide and develop the students' joint attention—to build upon this and to support the group to see and to understand what it is to belong to a whole community of individual selves. While this is not impossible to achieve within a huge crowd of students, it is far less likely to yield the same pedagogical benefits.

Indeed, as Olson's 1971 research indicates, to achieve such cohesion and sense of shared purpose is much less likely in a larger group. In his work *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*, he analyses through empirical study, the relationship between group size and group functioning. He presents an analysis of optimal group size in relation to individual members' overall benefits. His research indicates that group size has a significant bearing on group behaviour, and that smaller groups (in his research these are groups of under twenty) function far better for individual members than do larger ones (groups in the hundreds), in terms of fulfilling the group's overall common purpose: "The larger a group is, the more agreement and organization it will need. The larger the group, the greater the number that will usually have to be included in the group agreement or organization" (Olson, 1971, p 46). Olson's findings have a bearing on the current discussion in relation to the determination of a shared purpose and sense of community within an open

classroom. Olson champions what he terms “the coherence and effectiveness of small groups” (p. 53) and he establishes that the larger the group, the less attention is likely to be shown by (or to) each individual member, and that consequently, the proportion of overall attention given to any one member is likely to be less within a larger group than within a smaller one. He argues further, that larger groups cannot work towards a common or shared purpose in quite the way that smaller groups can: “The larger the group the smaller the likelihood of ...interaction that might help obtain the good”, and “the larger the group the higher the hurdle that must be jumped before any of the collective good at all can be obtained” (p. 48).

...the larger the group the farther it will fall short of providing an optimal supply of a collective good, and very large groups normally will not, in the absence of coercion or separate, outside incentives, provide themselves with even minimal amounts of a collective good. (Olsen, 1971, p. 48, cited in Cusick, 1992, p. 232)

Olson concludes that “size is one of the determining factors in deciding whether or not it is possible that the voluntary, rational pursuit of individual interest will bring forth group-oriented behaviour” (p. 52). In other words, “small groups will further their common interests better than large groups” (p. 52). It follows that members of larger groups are less likely to co-ordinate themselves or some kind of action, since there is little reason for them to do so. Members of smaller groups have greater incentives to work towards the collective good. The inverse relationship between group size and group cohesion offers further reasons to doubt that individual members a very large class group could ever achieve the sense of meaningful social cohesion that a smaller group can achieve. Olsen’s research provides further reasons to question whether students might attain collective, sustained, focussed concentration on anything at all for any length of time in the open classroom. As Nussbaum (2010, p. 55) argues, and as most teachers would agree, the size of the class group is critical to the quality of the educative interactions that take place therein.

A further angle to consider in this regard is a May 2019 ERO national report, *Bullying Prevention and Response in New Zealand Schools* which identifies that New Zealand primary schools in particular, have a relatively high incidence of bullying. (Forty-seven percent of primary-aged, and twenty-eight percent of secondary-aged students report at least some recent experience of being bullied at school.)⁵² The report’s summary, while recommending further

⁵² Education Review Office, 2019a, p. 6.

actions against such themes such as racism and homophobia, concludes that some drivers for bullying behaviour may be beyond any school's direct influence. Given that some bullying can take the form of insidious practices like ostracization, rumours, or other repeated psychological practices that can be perpetrated unnoticed, a question for further investigation could be to investigate to what extent open classroom groupings expedite an environment where bullying can pass by undetected.

In *Experience and Education*, first published in 1938, Dewey reminds us that the class is itself a community, and as such, is bound by the cohesion of regular practices and activities:

The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organisation, and organisation in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (Dewey, 2015, p. 56)

A defining feature of open classroom design is the loss of quiet spaces for students to think quietly, or to read or be otherwise quietly involved in their studies, except in small withdrawal rooms. The majority of the teaching day is spent within the larger, open space. Writing in 2004, Zembylas and Michaelides suggest that “the current educational system in the West is ultimately built upon in what they term a “fear of silence” (p. 208):

It is a tremendous challenge for educators and students to construct the space and time in the classroom to foster the kind of “contemplative” silence that nourishes creativity, passion and wonder lying at the heart of all significant learning and living...The inexpressible also points out an aesthetic of silence that runs contrary to mainstream contemporary educational systems and their tendency to emphasize languages. (p. 209)

The majority of teachers would agree that when students are able to think quietly and to give a classroom task their full and undivided attention, this has a positive impact on their thought and concentration. Priorities of student collaboration and group work, such as the open classroom promotes, mitigate against providing such opportunities. As Hart (2004) notes, “whereas the analytic tends to measure categorize, and evaluate, the contemplative simply beholds what arises within us or in front of us” (Hart, 2004, p. 32). Neither the enactment of attention, nor a focus on the ethical implications of attention as understood by

Weil and Murdoch, have much of a chance to flourish within the current re-design of our schools and education institutions. Individual thought and reflection appear to be esteemed only insofar as they demonstrate mastery of completed inquiries or investigations.

What are the chances that each and every individual student in a group of up to eighty students will receive their due of watchful, sustained, attention from any of their three custodial teachers? Further, where, in this new open plan environment, with so many students congregated into a large space, are the opportunities for students to enjoy quiet, reflective thought, the intimacy of the whole class enjoying with their teacher a shared book, the entire class all reading or writing independently but simultaneously, the spontaneous decision by the teacher to take the class outside for a lesson under a tree, or to deviate from the planned classroom programme to talk to the class about something of interest and relevance to the wider world? Emphasis in the open classroom is invariably given to group activities, team problem-solving, explanations and presentations—activities that entail conversation and interaction, and away from more imaginative experiences. Thus the very architecture informs the curriculum, and in a sense becomes, the curriculum.

A further, related concern about the move to open classroom design is the impact that this is likely to have on those students not naturally drawn to large public spaces. Cain (2013) points to a contemporary preoccupation with people presenting themselves in terms of what she terms the “extrovert ideal”. Cain observes that while our culture claims to value individuality, this is implicitly limited to a particular *type* of individual—one who is, as she argues, comfortable “putting himself out there” (p. 4). Cain argues that contemporary culture posits as the ideal and the best kind of person to aspire to be, one who is “gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight,” someone who “prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt” (p. 4). Cain, whose research involves the relationship between work environments and productivity, disputes the notion that interaction and collaboration are necessarily always “the key multiplier for success” (p. 78). Even in the workplace, Cain argues strongly for the need to preserve quiet working spaces where people are able to think, focus and reflect quietly.

Cain’s research invites us to consider whether the open classroom arrangement subtly advantages students who fit with Cain’s picture of the “ideal self”, and whether the open classroom invites a preferential bias towards more extrovert students, by way of unacknowledged internalised stereotyping by teachers. Open classrooms are likely to be difficult and disorienting for shy, anxious, or culturally unfamiliar students, as well as for those

unfamiliar with spoken English, let alone those who are hard of hearing, or who find it difficult to regulate their own behaviour. Further, students who encounter specific cognitive challenges (such as in literacy, or learning another language), are likely to experience more difficulties within a large, noisy, so-called collaborative space. Open classrooms are designed to reward those who thrive on group activities and high levels of interaction. It follows that these classrooms may equally well disadvantage those students who are more quietly disposed, including those students who like to think quietly and slowly.

Murdoch and Weil consider education's purpose is to help form us in ways that we may come to appreciate, with others, the worth of beauty and goodness. This includes learning how to use language precisely. Murdoch emphasises the ways that we use language concepts to develop our thinking, and how that depth of understanding of language concepts develops over time: "The careful responsible skilful use of words is our highest instrument of thought and one of our highest modes of being: an idea which might seem obvious but is not now by any means universally accepted" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 462). Murdoch gives the example of an individual pondering over whether or not he feels repentance for some earlier event, and then mulling over just what repentance now means to him. Such reflections, Murdoch explains, involve the person in a review of their current understanding in relation to that of earlier times, in a way that takes account of their lived experience. Such developments in understanding are, she argues, fundamentally educative, and developments such as these are likely to be part of a teacher's dialogue with his or her students. Similarly, Lavery (2010) notes that "it is within the complex interplay of meaning and life that concepts come to be understood in greater depth" (p. 36). Attentive classroom teachers, in their myriad interactions with their students, develop and help advance shared understandings through language, in part by exploring with their students the importance of detail, context, and nuance. Again, Lavery provides clarification:

Language used well, like good art establishes communion through the creation of shared meaning. We understand one another and the world around us, better, saving us from the despair of a solipsistic universe. (Lavery, 2010, p. 36)

This gradual building up of collective understanding and appreciation is part of any teacher's task of inculcating a shared community of the classroom, and an appreciation, too, of the classrooms inhabitants' shared reality. The classroom teacher works to establish a particular kind of understanding with these students, a sense of human connection. In order

to determine what approaches and methods will work best with the students that makes up the class, any teacher, regardless of their style, needs some latitude, some degree of what we might call “discretionary space” (meant in terms both figurative and literal), to achieve this, for it is by means of the meaningfulness of the connection that the teacher establishes with the students that that teacher engages the attention of the students, and their motivation to learn.

In a single classroom, the teacher is able to build up a particular culture in negotiation with the members of the class. Individual teachers build in their classroom a culture of social awareness, justice and fairness. The class is a small community within the larger community of the school. Within each classroom there are agreed rules or protocols of respect and acceptance that are established early in the year and built upon as the weeks pass. These agreed “ways of operating” are likely to involve classroom protocols around routines, sharing different perspectives, and the use of the classroom space and place. Different teachers are likely to have different ways of working with their students to identify and embed these values, and, over the course of their school experience, students will benefit from this variety. It is unclear how, in the open classroom environment, where there are multiple points of view and multiple perspectives, teachers will be able to draw out ethical and moral values and qualities in community with their students, except in the most surface of ways. The open classroom arrangement appears to place little emphasis on group values, ideals, virtues, beauty and goodness. In particular, it runs counter to Weil’s notion of justice, itself founded on the Platonic view that individual interests are subordinate to those of the collective, and that the good of the group is in proportion to the needs of individual members.

According to Plato, harmony involves justice and balance. Each individual performs their duties in accordance with what they are best suited to. Plato’s ideal state is nothing like the potential disharmony and chaos of the open classroom, where roles are flattened out and where student movements are fluid and ever changing. Plato’s dialogues also remind us that the teacher’s influence on the student is one that is at its best, “experiential” rather than “directive”, and that the teacher’s task is to guide the student so that intellectual progress can be made in new directions. The teacher achieves this partly by the Socratic technique of *aporia*, and partly through positive guidance. The teacher’s task embodies Murdoch’s “just and loving gaze” (Murdoch, 2014, p. 33.) In *Meno* 86b, Socrates summarises:

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not

know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (Plato, trans, 1997, p. 886)

Weil's and Murdoch's views on inculcating attention stand in stark opposition to the educational priorities of neoliberalism as manifest in the open classroom directive.⁵³ These two philosophers advance a view of attention as a creative activity rather than something that involves either performance or prowess or mastery. They argue that to develop attention takes priority over specific subject learning, for only the former develops the mind, and only the former enables the individual person to develop his or her capacity to think well. They argue that attention is an orientation to that which is good in and of itself. For them, the goal of education ultimately connects with the question how to live a good life in community with others in the world. By learning to give attention to thought, we cannot but develop an awareness of others in the world, since intelligence and humility work together in fundamental ways. As we develop our capacity for attention, we sharpen our sensitivity to the predicaments of others besides ourselves. Thus to bestow attention is important both in that it reminds us of our own individual un-importance, but also points to the greater importance of interacting respectfully with others.

Dewey's insights are also helpful in this connection. In his *Experience and Education*, Dewey argues that "perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person only learns what he is studying at the time" (Dewey, 2015, p. 48). He argues further, that "collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important" (p. 48):

The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning. If impetus in this direction is weakened instead of being intensified, something much more than mere lack of preparation takes place. The pupil is actually robbed of native capacities which otherwise would enable him to cope with the circumstances of his life. (p. 45)

Just as Plato's dialogues are open-ended, thought-provoking, and require the reader to reflect and make sense for themselves, Murdoch and Weil consider the overarching imperative of education to be that of encouraging and training thought itself. They view education as much more open-ended, and much more concerned with possibilities and

⁵³ The term 'neoliberalism' is here used not as a catchphrase, but refers specifically to "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the centre of social life" (Wilson, 2017, p. 2).

potentialities for transformation and change than a training ground for skills or a preparation for the regulated and conformist behaviour expected in an open plan office. They view education in terms of individual self-fulfilment by way of coming to appreciate the value of an understood common good, and a belief in something larger and fundamentally more interesting than the interests of the self.

Weil and Murdoch identify the deep connections that obtain between ethics, morality, and education. They show that if education is to begin to address moral and ethical questions, its first task is to initiate students into communities that nurture such opportunities. They are aware that, without providing opportunities whereby attention may be enabled, attention is unlikely to take root on its own. They illuminate for us why education must involve a much richer perspective than one that is focussed on preparation for office work and gaining qualifications. As Weil says, “an education method which is not inspired by the conception of certain form of human perfection is not worth very much” (Weil, 2002, p. 216). They each argue that moral activity involves paying constant attention to the otherness of human life: we learn about ourselves precisely by attending to how well we understand the needs, situation, and achievements of others. They also argue that human beings can be readily deflected from what they ought best to focus on, by shallow collective thinking, by distractions, noise, false assumptions, egotistical preoccupations. They warn that that the things we come to focus on the most, or are exposed to the most, are the things we will end up most valuing. These insights are salutary reminders of what we are at risk losing by the unquestioned acceptance of open classrooms.

Weil and Murdoch consider that education is made worthy when attention is brought to the fore. They do not shy away from acknowledging that to achieve attention is likely to be difficult, elusive, demanding, even painful, and may take years. Attention involves pedagogical components that include withholding hasty judgement, seeking to be well-informed and to confront one’s own ignorance, and also a kind of decentring, an “unlearning” or readiness to change, to review previously held beliefs. Both Weil and Murdoch consider that the benefits of developing one’s capacity for attention have positive impacts on other aspects of life—a diminished sense of self-importance, appropriate humility, and a better sense of social connectedness. They also identify ways that, in the right conditions, educators (like literary artists) can work to unify rather than to individuate, human experience.

Weil and Murdoch share high expectations regarding a teacher's standards for intellectual and moral rigour. They each consider that we truly learn when we are faced with correcting our errors and our faults. As Weil says, "There is nothing nearer to true humility than intelligence" (Weil, 1997, p. 183). Weil warns that unless we take on board the need to correct our faulty ways of thinking, we won't change, and that is the height of unintelligence. Thus we make progress, both intellectual and moral, when we get things wrong and come to acknowledge, understand, and seek to remediate the source of our errors. Weil and Murdoch advocate an environment in which one is able to recognise and learn from one's mistakes ahead of one that overlooks accuracy, for the reason that they consider that latter is more likely to curb creative thinking:

The most serious mistakes, those which warp completely the mental processes, destroy the soul, placing it outside the reach of truth and goodness, cannot be discerned. For they are caused by the fact that certain things escape the scrutiny of the mind. (Weil, 2002, p. 219)

It is not unreasonable to suggest that today's open classrooms are much more likely to skirt around such matters of rigour and demands for accuracy, and rather, to applaud evidence of group effort and participation far ahead of giving attention to acuity in student work. This is because students in the collaborative setting are simply not required to work to the highest of aspirational levels, so much as they are encouraged to demonstrate the ability to work well together in teams.

I submit that Weil and Murdoch would consider such teaching and classroom arrangements as those of the open plan to be not only potentially chaotic, but also patently unjust. They would question how such an arrangement could be seen as morally good, or how it could serve the interests of any but the already most advantaged students. They would be likely to see that the arrangement imperils any opportunity for genuine pedagogical attention, and that this absence has ethical and moral implications for the quality of the education provided. They would fault the imposition of a market ideology onto the delivery of education since such an approach is so diminishing of ethical considerations of human dignity. As Murdoch reminds us at the close of her book on Sartre, "the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction" (Murdoch, 1987, p. 148).

Justifications for the open classroom directive include that themes of rapid and unprecedented social change are somehow unique features of the present day. Thus open classroom design is advanced as an approach that will somehow “future proof” students against looming (but still undefined) future developments. Education policy makers proffer the argument that the best and surest preparation for future employment possibilities in this unknown future lies in the development of teamwork, and skills of interaction and collaboration.⁵⁴ Yet, as philosophers of education since at least the time of Plato demonstrate, questions around how teachers might best equip their students to cope with themes of uncertainty and complexity are not unique to the present day, but are perennial. The difficulty of translating the principles of collaboration and teamwork into the classroom by way of the open classroom directive may reflect a deep misunderstanding of the complexities of teaching and learning.

In the philosophy of Weil or Murdoch, the teacher does not, indeed cannot, provide specific answers, nor can they provide for students anything like the depth of clarity that their students might or might not be seeking. Rather, the task of the teacher is one of engendering, through attention—both for themselves and for their charges—an awareness of what to take into account in framing such questions. Weil and Murdoch both understand the craft of teaching as one that is singular, demanding, open-ended, and humanly involving. They identify as best preparation for the future, the development in students a bearing that opens them to think well:

Education—whether its object be children or adults, individuals, or an entire people, or even oneself—consists in creating motives. To show what is beneficial, what is obligatory, what is good—that is the task of education. Education concerns itself with the motives for effective action. For no action is ever carried out in the absence of motives capable of supplying the indispensable amount of energy for its execution. (Weil, 2002, p. 188)

Before concluding this chapter, several limitations of this critique of open classroom design must be acknowledged. For one thing, there is to date no *prima facie* evidence to establish that teachers and students are patently worse off in the open plan space than they were in separate classrooms. To date, stated objections to open plan are based largely on

⁵⁴ It could be argued that students would better prepare for an unknown twenty-first century future through learning compass reading, edible crop production, or the identification of medicinal plants.

anecdotal reports or on the perceptions of individual students, teachers and parents. Nor is there to date any nationally gathered comparative achievement information that might shed light on the impact on student progress in the open classroom. A further limitation is that there is, to date, no peer reviewed field study with a control group, so that other variables might be considered. Without this information it is impossible to determine empirically whether the impact of the change directly improves outcomes, is neutral, or is deleterious to students and teachers. Therefore it cannot be concluded with any degree of certainty whether open classroom design truly is, as it appears, and as I have argued, a very bad thing, since there may be other factors at play.

Nevertheless, the current discussion is important for several reasons. First, it identifies the ideological change to the role of the teacher in the new environment. Second, it reminds us that for attention to flourish, the conditions for attention must be appropriate, and third, it points to the need for robust, longitudinal, peer-reviewed research into the long-term consequence of directives such as the change to open classrooms, to enable us to distinguish between enthusiasm for novelty, and more grounded considerations of the likely long-term educative value of such a change. Finally, the discussion exemplifies the way that the philosophical concept of attention is one that is, as Weil and Murdoch argue, is entirely grounded in everyday experience.

7.6. *Summary*

Teachers and educators inevitably and directly see some sobering things about society—they see that that some people, for reasons that are complex, are highly likely to live lives that are richly rewarded, and some other people, again for reasons that are complex, are highly likely to live lives that are impoverished both in opportunity and satisfaction. Educators also see that there are some people whom education fails completely. On average, educators would be likely to agree that all school students deserve to receive individual attention from their teacher in a coherent environment, that they are entitled to be helped specifically by their teacher to develop their own powers of attention, their capacity for concentration, their own sense of mastery, their own sense of belonging. Whether the open plan classroom school re-design will help or hinder educators from accomplishing these things does not seem to have been an operative question within the re-design. Rather the thinking seems to have related workplace themes of economic efficiency back to schools. The

vulnerability of least well off members of society seems liable to have been compounded. The purposes of education itself that surround attention, seem liable to be greatly harmed.

Weil and Murdoch explain why it is fundamental to education to inculcate attention, to cultivate humility and respect for others, and to invite inquirers forward in such ways as invites them to relinquish the ego. If within the state school system we are to provide educational opportunities that directly engage thinking in the ways that Weil and Murdoch inspire us to do, then the policy drivers will be moral in quality, and concerned to foster human flourishing and intelligent democracy, not specifically concerned to do industry or business some good. If this were our purpose with the state school system, as it should be, then open classroom redesign would be halted.

Conclusion

The central concern of this study has been attention, by which is meant a kind of accomplishment by a person that quite dispatches that person's sense of herself or himself. By truly attending to something, one appreciates the shared world itself, that one is a part of, so that one's own existence as a thinking, experiencing individual eclipses itself in one's reaching out to something far greater. Attention kindles the recognition that we are all equally members of a community, and that we are all subject to inter-subjective standards for thought. These standards are not only greater than any one individual, but they are also greater than all individuals combined. Thus attention is a profound "leveller". When attention expresses itself in a school classroom, the participants in that attention fall into coherence with each other naturally, to the extent that reason in each individual pulls all individuals equally to the conclusion that is best or most beautiful. Whenever such coherence is negotiated and achieved, an educational accomplishment has been realized that is more precious than any other.

Now, it is true that, the barked command to "Pay attention!" appears to us pedagogically unfortunate. Such outward *command* to marshal the attention diminishes a person's individuality so severely that any opportunity to think for oneself is threatened. Such a command sets up in its hearers (to the extent that they submit to it) the stance of submission, as though *instruction under command* is the pertinent form for pedagogy to take—in other words, as though learning were best made by imprint upon a blank, anxious mind. Yet since minds that are submissive, blank and anxious are apt to learn nothing at all, there is clearly a lot that is wrong pedagogically with barking out a command to "Pay attention!" Does this argue against extolling the pedagogical worth of attention altogether?

This thesis has argued that it does not, and that all that the present example illustrates is the obscenity of barking at people in the name of teaching them. If one attempts to bark what is beautiful, one thereby simply vanquishes all the beauty. To think 'for oneself' is a veritable good, and yet this good concerns not only thinking 'for oneself', it also and more fundamentally concerns thinking. Truly to think is a requirement if one is to think for oneself. My argument has been that attention, rightly understood, preconditions the possibility of truly thinking.

A teacher-led classroom can be an environment in which effort by students to become better attentive is elicited, and is mentored. This quality of a classroom, that it is potentially

led by a teacher, who potentially possesses the courage and the insight requisite for leading her or his charges to learn to attend, the present thesis has extolled, in part by discussion of literary fiction. For in a classroom where time in reading and in thinking and in sharing are all mentored and brought to involve respect for the thinking and the perspective of others, individual students can also discover the way to be self-respecting, imaginative, judicious, curious, reflective, and alive. In short, the students can learn to attend. A teacher's aim to assist just such discovery is especially courageous, and when it succeeds will produce the profoundest learning.

This thesis has defended the accomplishment of attention as morally improving. It has even fashioned the accomplishment of attention as the very essence of being morally improved. Attention, while quietly humbling of the ego, improves persons not only in what they grasp and how they grasp things, but also thereby in the very quality of their being. To realise that there are standards for thought or judgment that are bigger than any individual and indeed bigger than all individuals, is humbling, yet at the same time this humbling realization is a precondition for education in the broadest sense.

To apprehend beauty is to take pleasure in something not according to whim or personal fancy, but rather in the recognition that such taking of pleasure is owed to that object, by anyone. Consequently, when beauty is apprehended, the individual self effectively drops away. Similarly, an accomplishment or recognition of something beautiful opens the mind to new thoughts, and to wonder. Beauty is in this way implicated in pedagogical progress. Attention is itself beautiful in an emblematic way. Attention truly happens only when the self, of its own accord, is diminished, and a plane higher than merely personal experience or conviction is achieved.

To *think* for oneself involves keeping one's individuality and ego in check. To think well is to weigh and to judge, and this is neither a capricious nor a fanciful process. To think well is to hold one's self to a standard, and this standard is not something that comes, as it were, from within. To think well is to think beyond one's own self-interest, since thinking involves the recognition that the self is not alone. What it is to 'recognise' some matter to which one attends involves 're-' 'cognition'. (The verb 'to recognise' comes from the Latin *recognoscere*, meaning to 'know again, to recall to mind', from *re-*'again' and *cognoscere* 'to learn'.) Recognition thus moves cognition to a higher, impersonal plane.

Through the use of reason, we are guided to re-attend, from an altered attendant perspective. Truly to think involves reaching out to something that is larger than the self. Truly to think is an act of humility, since it is an act of reaching out to something that is greater, beyond understanding. To think for oneself involves one in the presupposition that there are standards for thought that are beyond not only our individual determination but also our collective determination. These are standards for thought that somehow connect us to the possibility of thinking at all.

8.1. The metaphysics of attention

Attention, then, although it is the first step in thinking, at the same time requires orientation towards an ideal. While we cannot begin to comprehend if we fail to attend, we likewise cannot begin to attend unless we engage selflessly in the struggle to comprehend. When we direct our mind by way of focussed attention, we achieve this focus not randomly, but by virtue of mind itself involving capacity for thought. Attention advances us into recognition of other minds, other persons, for through attention we effectively ‘surrender’ for a time our subjective view, in order to orient ourselves outwards. Attention has an aesthetic quality: when we give attention, we value what we are focusing upon. We bestow attention on something in order to understand it better. We seek the best or most beautiful way to comprehend it. The quality of this attention is also moral. To achieve insight or understanding is to be improved as a person. When by achievement of insight or understanding we widen our perspective beyond its being merely individual, we come at the same time better to appreciate the claims of others in our shared world. Humility ineluctably accompanies any such achievement. Attention involves recognition that there is something attention-worthy that is quite beyond the individual self.

If, within the notion of a metaphysics of attention, the theme of spirituality comes to the fore, that alone is not a reason to dismiss the notion. The noetic dimension of attention is educationally relevant insofar as: attention allows us to separate the individual from the ego; attention involves connecting the mind to something larger than itself; attention is more oriented to connection than to isolation; and, attention adjoins us to the world. There are, as Weil and Murdoch agree, spiritual overtones in these ideas. Perhaps in order to avoid any acknowledged dangers from invoking the themes of spirituality, the best check is that of invoking the role of humility in attention. Through humility, the risk of one person’s spirituality achieving hegemony over others is avoided.

8.2. *Beauty and pedagogy*

When we register the beauty of something that we judge beautiful (another person, a natural scene, a literary achievement, a musical theme, a mathematical theorem), we do this not merely by being made pleased by it, but rather, by identifying in it qualities that are intrinsically pleasing, and that we judge that others would also be drawn to be affected and made pleased by as well. This registration of beauty involves us in a sense of what ideally others would also find pleasing. That is to say, there is in registering this kind of individual delight, a quality that is at the same time inter-subjective and that draws us to desire to connect to others.

Attention to the beautiful is also inseparably connected with humility, since to be arrested by something we find beautiful is to be involved in respectful admiration of something ‘other’ which elicits our own sense of wonderment. To think ‘for oneself’ is, similarly, to be drawn beyond one’s self. In this sense, humility and self-realization are not in tension with each other, but rather, are human qualities that mutually inform one another. Attention, which preconditions the very possibility of thinking for oneself, incorporates humility to its very core. At the same time, the most choice-worthy life (that is to say, the life that is the most meaningful, the worthiest of having been lived, the most fulfilling—and thereby, to use Platonic language, the most beautiful), is also the life that is the fullest of thought and attention. As Plato’s *Meno* suggests, we best develop the capacity for attention by turning away from self-interest and towards a more contemplative and reflective stance. We best realize our self by our efforts to get beyond or outside of, the limitations of the self.

8.3. *The educative worth of attention*

This thesis has argued that the educative worth of attention seems to be largely lost from view in the reigning contemporary understandings of education and pedagogy. Much as self-realization seems (in my view erroneously) to have become equated with coming on to a high income, so contemporary education is viewed under the desperately narrowed guise of necessary preparation for jobs. Individuality is understood in terms of self-advantage, appetite and the ego, and in terms of acquiring skills that confer competitive advantage within the economy (but that may confer disadvantage to other persons who lack that advantage). The only morality promoted in this context is that of winners and losers, almost so that Thrasymachus in Book 1 of Plato’s *Republic* (344c) is taken to have got justice right when famously he declares “justice is what is advantageous to the stronger” (Plato, trans, 1997, p.

988). In today's lexicon we use the words 'pleasurable' ahead of 'beautiful'; 'profitable' ahead of 'enlightening'; 'useful' ahead of 'inspirational'. Beauty is reduced to self-presentation, or is dismissed as a subjective nothing, a fuzzy distraction not liable to help one to get ahead.

The ideas in this thesis are potentially controversial, especially because they run against the tide of contemporary educational thought. In particular, they challenge the bias towards self-directed learning, personalised learning, student voice and student agency—themes that are integral to a student-centred, personalised curriculum. While the implications of the current educational directions are far from clear cut, the thesis has proposed a robust challenge to theories of what education stands for in this, the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

The thesis has argued that contemporary society has significantly lost its way in regard to the educative significance of attention, and can regain itself only by recovering to itself and to its institutions of education, an understanding of the singular worth of attention. While I have not shied away from the inherent rationalist-spiritualism of this idea, my interpretation of attention is more secular than spiritual. People are not well helped even to be scientists or worthy technologists unless they are helped with the apprehension of beauty, and helped to grow a deep moral sense. Yet we develop aesthetically and morally only by being helped to think for ourselves. The humility of attention is the humility that is inherent in the act of thinking independently. The capacity to be moved by the beautiful is fundamental not only to our effective functioning as part of a human community, but is fundamental to any capacity at all that we possess to develop our understanding. To this end, the present thesis points to the fundamental ways that narrative and storytelling (as well as other aesthetic forms) have (and maybe always have had) a significant part in shaping our humanness.

8.4. Learning from Weil and Murdoch

Two beacons who have guided this study are the mid-twentieth century philosophers, Simone Weil (1909–1943) and Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), for it is very much their ideas about attention that has been adopted and extolled. Following these two, the present study has found a special appreciation for the study of literature as an occasion to activate aesthetic awakening, to activate moral growth, for the cultivation of attention, and for especially deep learning about the world. (Doubtless pedagogy in mathematics, or science, or indeed in history, geography, physical education, music, or indeed in any subject, also is suitable for illustration, elaboration and defence of the points concerning attention that has been made

herein by reference to the study of literature. However, those other subjects are less familiar to the present author than is the study of literature, and so the point of choice of concentration has partly been to cleave to what is best known about.) A further purpose, however, in choosing to concentrate on literature, has been to criticize the environment of Aotearoa New Zealand state education precisely for its deep-going unfriendliness to cultivation of attention through the study of literature. The thesis presents the argument that pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand is enfeebled by this in ways that can be specifically pointed to, especially by following Murdoch and Weil in their point of view.

When the thesis argues that the concept of attention is largely absent in contemporary education policy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, whereas it ought to be given central importance as a matter of priority, it has regard for an absence that seems entirely conspicuous. Yet this absence is not liable to be in the least bit conspicuous to those who have themselves helped to set the contemporary priorities in education in terms of competition and production. Those people define education in terms of commercial imperatives, remarking education as “a machine for producing diplomas, in other words, jobs” (Weil, 2002, p. 121), or as skilling the workforce for the sake of the economy.

When the thesis has argued for a re-visioning of education in terms of the concept of attention, it has at the same time appealed to a very different understanding of educational imperatives. It has argued for quite different things to prioritize and to value. The rich capabilities that education ought to aim to achieve would manifest themselves in a person’s understanding of:

- how a life has worth;
- the dignity and worthiness of thinking for oneself;
- how goodness and beauty are interrelated;
- each person’s original and inescapable connections with their fellows;
- the dangers of tribalism;
- the dignity of citizenship.

Whether a person is destined to be a personal trainer, a technologist, an accountant, a mathematician, a tradesperson, a teacher, a leading hand, a scientist, a lawyer, an artist, or whether or not a person is destined to be someone else’s lifelong partner or a parent, the rich capabilities just mentioned remain of paramount importance for becoming truly good at other things, and for doing things at all for well-considered, best reasons. To view education

narrowly in terms of supposed imperatives of the economy is, arguably, to undermine everything, perhaps including, in the end, even the economy.

When the present thesis has argued that attention has an educative function that relates to the individual's capacity to be released from the self, and to enter into a more selfless realm, it has concerned itself with something that seems to Weil and Murdoch obvious and of most obvious worth; but the rub is that in current times very many people are oblivious to the worth of selflessness. The present thesis extols attention as not competitive, as not even capable of involving winners and losers, and as in no obvious way quantifiable in terms of metrics that could be standardised or reported against. The rub is that in our times very many people no longer catch view of anything beyond the terms of profit and quantification. Attention, as this thesis has argued, may aspire to levels of spiritual or mystical connection, and further, such aspirations are in no way feeble or pathological. Yet the rub is that in our current times very many people are disposed to deprecate or diminish the spiritual. Many present-day persons would disregard as passé, stodgy, or self-limiting, values with which the promotion of attention is deeply imbued.

Even if the reigning culture has become reductive, and so has rendered many people oblivious to values and insights that in fact are important for everyone, still every single person who is able to function in society will have been helped along their way at least somewhat, by attention (at least inchoately expressed), although they may not realize it. And even though the qualities of that attention may have been too little cultivated in them to have become central to their bearing or consciousness, still, if they were to reflect, it is likely they would be able after all to recall those instances of inchoate attention.

The current study has not claimed to provide a full account of the many and diverse philosophical traditions from which the concept of attention originates, nor has it pretended to be a complete analysis of the philosophical and psychological concept of attention. The purpose of the study has simply been to bring into the limelight the philosophical notion of attention through a detailed philosophical analysis of the thought of Weil and Murdoch, and to show how that can be applied to literary texts, in order to deepen an understanding of what pedagogical attention amounts to, and to consider the implications of pedagogical attention and its importance to contemporary education priorities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

8.5. *Implications of the present study and possibilities for further research*

The present study opens the way for other interpretative studies of literature to illuminate the ways that attention, which focuses thought, re-engages pedagogy. Further literary works that have an educational context and that invite textual study along these lines could include, for example, Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), Anton Chekov's short story *The Student* (1894), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2005). Many other examples could be found. Philosophically, I believe that the present study invites exploration of the relevance of habit to education. While the American philosopher of education, John Dewey, is referenced in the present study, thorough investigation into Dewey's philosophical writing, and in particular, into his theory of habit, is likely to raise further themes for critique in relation to pedagogical attention and contemporary education policy.

The present study holds contemporary relevance in that it has provided a critical response to some pressing current issues for public education in New Zealand state education, such as the strategy to introduce open classrooms into our schools, a move that could be seen as an effort to further industrialize our schools by making them more like open-plan offices, a policy directive that appears to be motivated less by principles of educational improvement, and more as a mechanism for rendering schools more like workplaces, with obvious detrimental results for our state-funded education system.

The present study holds potential significance on a broader scale as well. It proposes that such policy changes as the move to open classrooms may jeopardize opportunities for teachers to encourage their students to think critically, or to have opportunities to be intellectually challenged, to engage in question and debate, or to read and reflect independently. A democratic society is one where the citizenry is able to question, and, where necessary, to insist on changes to ensure that justice is done and seen to be done. An educated populace is one whose members have the capacity to question and to challenge authority. Any move to delimit quality educational experiences to the privileged (i.e. those who are able to avoid the open plan classrooms of the state education system entirely and have their children attend private schools), could be seen as a way to compound disadvantage for those students whose education is already potentially compromised by the current demographics of the national education structure.

8.6. In closing

It is with an eye to these wider themes that the present study has sought to be a voice on the front line of the debate about the function and purpose of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Educationists must reclaim the power of education to help to realize people's highest ideals. They must protect and enhance opportunities for contemplative and informed critical thought.

Educationists need to reflect deeply upon what counts as education, and upon what education ought to accomplish. They must speak out against reductive misconceptions of their calling. Society appears to have narrowed almost cruelly how it eyes the value of state school education. Yet a market-driven approach to education that views schools basically as training grounds for work simply cannot inspire, in the ways that Weil and Murdoch do, the intellectual, moral, and imaginative dimensions of civic education.

Reading literary fiction is not solely for entertainment or skill development but possesses profound purposes for education. That curated literary texts are a pre-eminently powerful teaching resource is an understanding that educationists need strongly to renew.

This thesis holds to be very dear and very important every implication of these considerations for our children and our grandchildren, so that indeed I dedicate this work to them.

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