

Contemporary Aesthetic Education in the UK, University of York, 10/12/12

The day started with a talk from Gary Peters on ‘Aesthetic Education and the Irony of Teaching’. After briefly delving into the Kantian notion of the aesthetic idea in order to raise the questions ‘can we practically instrumentalize an aesthetic education?’ and ‘can we even communicate what an aesthetic education is?’, Peters proceeded to present us with a number of ironies that an aesthetic education potentially embodied. The first concerned how we might incorporate a mode of creativity that is forgetful when contemporary models of knowledge and education are so obsessed with the retention of information. The second was the idea that whilst an artistic education might be transformative for the participant this is rarely an expressible change. You are not filled with knowledge but a creative space is developed around you. Thirdly, Peters brought up the notion of the ironic teacher. This teacher is one who is knowing rather than knowledgeable and is often duplicitous in their methods. In other words, a teacher who flaunts many of the traditional, humanist values of teaching. Fourth was the role of the teacher in an ironic system. In this system, teachers are not the masters of a body of knowledge. Instead, they are the master of the educative *situation*. They retain that mastery by maintaining a dissymmetry between teacher and student and by keeping the space open and fluid for individual learning. Finally, he discussed the problem of a ‘Common Sense’ (in a Kantian sense) that isn’t actually ‘commonly sensed’ and is without commonality.

We then had our first panel session of the day. The initial speaker was Élise Derroitte whose talk was on ‘Critical Education: Interpreting Walter Benjamin’s Writings on Learning’. Her presentation focused upon theories of self-learning potentially arising from Benjamin’s ‘Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre’. Second, Sarah Hegenbart gave a talk entitled, ‘Participatory Art and the Idea of Aesthetic Education: Does Every Participant Get Something Out of This Engagement?’ She roughly argued for a virtue approach to this question and that participatory art is warranted if the mode of participation calls upon the virtues of the participant. Participation is a form of aesthetic education if it engages the aesthetic virtues of the participant. The final talk came from Jon Robson on ‘What Can We Learn from an Aesthetic Education?’ He presented us with his initial musings on the questions of: 1) What *can* we learn from aesthetic education? 2) What *do* we learn? 3) Are there any cognitive benefits to reading fiction?

The second panel then took place after lunch. The initial talk was given by Arthur Rose and was entitled ‘Financing Aesthetic Education: Anxieties in *Students at the Heart of the System*’. This talk focused upon the current mode of thinking in terms of contemporary education and how funding is viewed not only in relation to the system as a whole but particularly the arts and aesthetics. Secondly, Connell Vaughan spoke about ‘Rancière and the Politicizing of Aesthetic Education’. His talk was based upon Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and how the text might be read as a critique of a Marxist political model as well as how such a linking of politics and the classroom is an important field of study and enquiry. Thirdly, Jane Slinn discussed ‘Aesthetic Education, Cultivating Sympathy and

Recognising Human Dignity in Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*. She focused upon, what she termed, Nussbaum's utopian misinterpretation of Adam Smith's account of sympathy.

The penultimate talk came from Philip Davis and was entitled 'Poetry Not Prozac'. As part of the Centre for Research into Reading, Information and Linguistic Systems (CRILS), Davis took us through the Centre's mantra of placing art before knowingness, ontology before epistemology, and new life before institutionalisation. He also presented to us several practical examples of their work with people suffering depression and other emotional and mental afflictions. For instance, he showed us the transcripts from one group's work with Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 29' in order to aid their recovery in a way different to self-help books. Davis drew out several important points about this kind of group work. In particular, he argued for a form of aesthetic education which involves the participant becoming aware of "hot-spots" and the parts of the text which are "alive" as opposed to merely finding disengaged interpretations and coming to understand form and style. The fact that poetry is a language entirely different to that of medicine means that there is a shift to an alternative mode of being that cannot be achieved purely in institutional therapy such as drugs and self-help. People appear to need literature's catalytic power in order to step into a realm of active criticality that can combat some manifestations of depression.

The closing discussion for the day was one between Derek Attridge and Peter Lamarque and their similarities and differences as manifested in the former's *The Singularity of Literature* and the latter's *The Philosophy of Literature*.