

## Beyond the Sublime, Back to Responsiveness

Paul Smeyers

*Ghent University & KU Leuven, Belgium*

Drawing on Kant's three kinds of aesthetic judgments (the agreeable, the beautiful, and the sublime), which all rest on subjective grounds, Derek Ford and Tyson Lewis outline the characteristics of these. Pleasure in the agreeable is particular; judgments that something is beautiful are *subjectively universal*; finally, the mathematical sublime (absolutely large; large beyond all comparison) and the dynamically sublime (which refers to a magnitude of power) are dealt with: "While the sublime first gives the impression of contra-purposiveness in which we feel our sense of finality through our failure to grasp something as a whole (and thus make sense of it), there immediately emerges a second feeling. The failure of the senses to represent the immensity of the sublime leads us to contemplate the nature of reason itself, and its ability to think the world beyond the senses and the imagination."<sup>1</sup> The sublime gives way to the supersensible realm of reason and critical self-reflection on the mind's autonomy; thus it pauses to reflect on its own conditions of possibility. Making a leap from Kantian reflections on the beautiful and the sublime to contemporary political issues, they then identify two questions: the political (how to conceptualize this excess beyond the beautiful), and the pedagogical (whether one can teach an excess that defies communication, that defies figuration/formalization).

Ford and Lewis claim that philosophers of participatory democracy have turned to Kant's theory of the aesthetic community to theorize politics, and those on the left to the sublime. In order to avoid the sublime from becoming yet another form of the beautiful, they suggest a return to Lyotard who foregrounds the disruption inherent in philosophy (from a discipline or thing to an act), highlighting that, like the sublime itself, it is not bound by any question or form: "Childhood is like philosophy, or at least how philosophy *should* be. Rather than being grounded in rationality and striving towards systematizing the world, philosophy is an act of asking, listening, of interrupting, and letting

oneself be interrupted.”<sup>2</sup> Philosophy does not entail achieving understanding at all, but rather, a particular kind of forgetting, thereby allowing us to be guided by the unrepresentable. Lyotard’s pedagogy entails teaching one to be open to alterity, to be seized and held by the monstrous childhood of thought: “... a form of philosophical education that speaks the ineffable within the effable, the uncommunicative within the communicative, *without* thereby reducing this excess to yet another consumable signifier.”<sup>3</sup> His philosophy gives us a way to conceptualize the excess; Lyotard asks attention for dialogue and offers us the opportunity to enter into an (un)communicative communism.

Ford and Lewis’ article covers a lot of ground: it addresses Kant’s aesthetic judgments, it criticizes communicative capitalisms pushing the political and the pedagogical to conceptualize the excess (economic inequity) and to teach what defies figuration/formalization. Further, a characterization of philosophy is given and a particular pedagogy is hinted at. Questions can be raised concerning all of these: Is what has been outlined an alternative for social relations? Has it now been shown that the sublime is a resource for educators? Confusions have been slipping in, or more precisely I am confused, when the Lyotardian position leads to expressions such as “another consumable signifier,” or “speaking the ineffable within the effable.” I am not claiming that Ford and Lewis offer an erroneous interpretation of Lyotard, but I find it difficult to appreciate what they are trying to offer. Surely there is no problem with the characterization of wisdom as never sure of itself, and of course there should always be an openness to another point of view, another conceptualization of a problem, but when it is said that philosophy does not entail achieving understanding, I am no longer sure what could be meant. That such understanding is always partial cannot imply that it entails instead a particular kind of forgetting that allows us to be guided by the unrepresentable. How can the unrepresentable guide us? And do we really want to be indeterminate monsters, I mean as educators? I will leave the sweeping generalizations about what the child knows or what she really wants aside. I am intrigued by what is claimed, but I find it difficult to make sense of it; it sounds hollow, idle talk, making insufficiently clear what all of this adds beyond the openness to another point of view.

There is a more serious worry behind these matters of meaning and making sense, which is that for one reason or another it seems to be deliberately unclear. But it is one thing to accept that the necessary and sufficient conditions to use a concept correctly cannot be exhaustively spelled out, and another to offer the kind of discourse they embrace. Do teachers and parents recognize themselves in the metaphor of indeterminate monsters? Do we, as philosophers of education? This is a strange picture of philosophy, even if one accepts that it has to do more than entail achieving understanding. It is also remarkable that, on the one hand, the authors are looking for the sublime in Kant and Lyotard and everything that characterizes this, yet on the other, they embrace the latter's advice to listen, a place for inclusive dialogue and debate. I am not sure one can have it both ways.

Following Wittgenstein, I too abhor the crystalline purity that some have been looking for. He writes:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. -- We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!<sup>4</sup>

Is it really an interesting move to go to Kant's and Lyotard's sublime if one is interested in an alternative for social relations and a resource for educators? Is it not enough to appreciate that every situation is in some sense new (It is different from a previous one; even if it has all the similarities of the previous one, if that is possible, it comes *after* a previous one and hence differs from the first), as accepted within the meaning-as-use position, which tackles the idling of language when an essence is invoked? But one should not forget that one has to start somewhere, as Stanley Cavell writes:

In Wittgenstein's view the gap between mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human "convention". This implies that the *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a stranger to, alienated from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance.<sup>5</sup>

For Cavell, the return to the ordinary is required to close the gap. What does this mean in the context of the parent and the child, where education is at stake, when the subject, the one who says "I" and the "Other," is focused on and responsiveness is invoked? Both the adult and the child have to take responsibility for what they say. Yet this cannot mean that both of them find themselves in the same position. The relationship between the parent and the child cannot be modelled after the relationship between adults. And, concerning the nature of the resistance towards the given, it can be asked whether there is always a need to escape conformity, for departure; could the assent to what is given not also evoke a positive appreciation for the worthwhileness of what is passed on? Raising children requires the parent in many situations to explain why certain things are the case, why certain things need to be done, why restraint is required and demanded, why the child should behave in a particular way. The child's initiation into the form of life, into the setting of what makes sense (is the case, is valuable etc.) should not be seen as to be resisted or to be departed from right from the very beginning, but as something possibly to be continued, possibly to be changed (and resisted). Without question, the adult can be surprised by what the child says or does, and this may press the parent to reconsider her position, but such a disruption by the child does not question the importance of initiation itself. Closing the gap requires initiation, for being able to speak oneself, for becoming part of the *polis*, for understanding what it means to say "I," and at the same time for being responsive towards the other.

---

1 Derek R. Ford and Tyson E. Lewis, "Lyotard and the sublime unconscious

of education: Communicative capitalism and aesthetics,” this volume.

2 Ford and Lewis, this volume.

3 Ibid.

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans., G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), #107.

5 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 109.