

So Much Truth, so Much Being: Poetic Provocations to Philosophical Musings

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Article abstract

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So Much Truth, so Much Being: Poetic Provocations to Philosophical Musings

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This bricolage of verses and prose, addresses the themes of poetics in and of philosophizing, and brings poetic provocations to philosophical musings. The authors muse on what it is to philosophize in the mood and mode of poetics, and why that matters for education. Preliminary incursions are made into the issues of entrenched dualism between intellect (mind) and senses (heart), and ensuing privileging of the former over the latter. A collegially written introduction sets the general framework.

Framing Our Bricolage

The ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets as portrayed by Plato (1966) in the Republic is still very much alive today. Of many forms of animosity the quarrel takes, there is first of all the separation of philosophy as a “rational,” “logical,” or “left brain” activity from poetry as “non-rational” or even “irrational,” “non-logical,” or “right brain” activity. It also takes the form of separating intellect from emotion, science from arts, facts from values, fight of debate from flight of fancy, argumentation from reverie, analysis from intuition, and so on. Not only do we separate these functions, but also we then proceed to privilege one side of functions over the other. Philosophy, once known as the “Queen of All Sciences,” still behaves like one today and has identified itself with the rational side, with an unbecoming pride of place. But philosophy is far more than and far greater than this one-sided portrayal. Philosophy need not be and must not be only identified with the rational, logical, and analytic side, notwithstanding Plato’s mission of banishing poets from the Republic of Philosophers.

Erizim Kohák (1984), the Czech ecological philosopher, reminds us about the birth of Ancient Greek philosophy: that she was the daughter of *techne* and *poiesis*. He likens *techne* to the bright daylight that shows everything in clear and distinct details. *Techne*, representing the masculine aspect, brings to the world “the precision of analysis and the artifice of constructs” (Kohák, 1984, p. 32), rendering it fit for human action and manipulation. In contrast, *poiesis*, the feminine aspect, is likened to the soft darkness of night-time that fuses all shapes into vast oneness. In the world given to us by the night vision, “[n]othing is left to do, to say: a human can only stand in silent awe and thanking devotion before the immense wonder of it all” (Kohák, 1984, p. 32). Night is the time of poetry—of deep dreams. Philosophy, Kohák tells us, takes up the intermediate vision between *techne* and *poiesis*. Such vision is best had in twilight. Yet, twilight is typically not the light condition of the academy, whose patron saint seems to be Descartes with his rallying cry of clear and distinct ideas to be revealed

by the bright searchlight of logical analysis, notwithstanding the irony here of his own propensity to have vivid dreams and exalt poetry! Our effort in this piece shall be an attempt to tone down the blindingly bright light of the academy and its shrill intellectualism so that we can philosophize in twilight and “see and grasp the *sense* of being” (Kohák, 1984, p. 33) and the intrinsic worth of beings (Bai, 2003). We shall learn to soften our gaze and open our consciousness to the evocative presence of Being.

Our proposal to bring poetics into the *heart* of philosophy is, of course, not new. Both in East and West, we encounter numerous examples of philosophers who practiced and advocated poetics in philosophizing. Socrates was never too far from the evocation of the *Daimon*, and was seen not infrequently in a state of trance. In the Far Eastern philosophical traditions of *Dao* and *Zen*¹, philosophy and poetics never separated, for they merged in the Daoist practice of nonduality (Bai, & Cohen, in press). Consider the Lao Tzu’s (2003) text, the *Dao De Jing*: is it poetry or philosophy? To say it’s the former would be tantamount to denying that the ancient Chinese had philosophy at all! What an error of judgment that would be! Fast-forward to our own time, Martin Heidegger (1971) worries about our increasing instrumental relationship with the world and ensuing alienation. He contends that for humans to make sense of this universe and to feel “at home”, we need to *dwell poetically*. Gaston Bachelard (1969) is another Western philosopher who gives a demonstration of poetic reverie as a philosophical (phenomenological) method.

What follows is a textual bricolage of three fragments that were presented as a panel at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society (as part of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference) on the theme of poetics in and of philosophizing. Our panel was an attempt to bring poetic provocations to philosophical musings. Each of us three panelists mused on what it is to philosophize in the mood and mode of poetics, and why that matters for education. In the introduction to our presentation, we declared: “Our panel will do more than discursively invoke these poetically dwelling philosophers and traditions; we will theoretically frame our session and argue for the integration of poetics into philosophy. Evocation will follow invocation. We on the panel are poets, practitioners of *Zen* and *Dao*, and denizens of the margins, who live the life of poetics, and the poetic life, in the midst of our philosophizing, and who philosophize through our poetics. We will bring to the panel our own poetry and inspired words to evoke the poetics of philosophy. This proposal itself is a piece of reverie, and we shall see what fantastical opportunities to philosophize emerge from it.”

¹ Not many are aware of the original meaning of ‘*zen*’. This Japanese word consists of a Chinese character, 禪, that is derived from the Sanskrit word *dhyana* (*jhana* in Pali), meaning ‘the state of absorption’ as in trance or meditation (see Nyanatiloka, 1946/1970, p. 70).

Toward a Pedagogy of the Imagination

Daniela Bouneva Elza

“To begin with
all words do an honest job
in our everyday language,
and not even the most ordinary
among them, those that are attached
to the most commonplace realities,
lose their poetic possibilities
as a result of this fact.”
—Gaston Bachelard (1964)

“Words—
I often imagine this—
are little houses,
each with its cellar and garret.
Common-sense lives
on the ground floor.
...To mount and descend
in the words themselves—
this is a poet’s life.
...Must the philosopher alone
be condemned by his peers
to live on the ground floor?
—Gaston Bachelard(1964) ”

“The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being.”

—Gaston Bachelard (1964)

(of non-verifiable truths 3

each one of us is the beginning
of a city. we cannot ignore

(for the language

to dwell in it.
pyramids of needs

justify
the existence of temples

and order.
the stone makes visible

what a word has already stolen

out of thin air

we fall (a snowflake

our words)

re-interpreted
re-drawn re-constructed by other.s
to live

(as if

one snowflake makes a winter
(is what we do—

a slow down to earth melting
in palms and mirrors

(a round memory
of cherry blossoms. on the tongue

the way knowing holds (knowing
the transformation in the holding

(the blooming after.

“Space that has been seized by the imagination cannot remain indifferent.”
—Gaston Bachelard (1964)

shifting	point	(a triptych ⁴
wait. watch your mouth.	hold Now how wind	this way. pointing is in poplars.
yawn: void	and in this watch	gaping how much
our crows	hands on snow.	can say blink.
and it is	a willow by a brook.	bubbling
such prior to	luminous surround our	arcs us
naming. lymph	sparrows in urban light.	vanishing crumbs
in sorrow. myths	mourning	axioms of
span with loss as if caught missing	our damp doubt. of sound. in a throat colours.	sky such clouds consonants as if
(in— out. twisting	sight strings	turning crows of light.

⁴ *shifting point* (a triptych) first appeared in *Existere*, 26 (2) as first place winner in their contest “can we exist without Es” <http://www.yorku.ca/existere/>

“. . . not only poetry but literature in general implies a mutation in the use of language. This redirects language toward itself to the point that language may be said, in Roland Barthes’ words, to ‘celebrate itself’ rather than to celebrate the world.”—Paul Ricoeur

“He loved this part of the city, the evening streets an extension of his limbs.”—Michael Ondaatje

in the skin of the city

“The poet speaks on the threshold of being.”
—Gaston Bachelard (1964)

“The lamps are broken time.”—Alan Davies

<i>he loved this part of</i>		<i>the city</i>
the tap-tap of	rain	drops
on cardboard		on copper
	reverberating	
on roof tops		through walls
on street lights		
	(in-sight—	
the movement	of rain	
	(in-words)	
the emptying		of streets
a deepening		dichotomy.
	(is poetry	
<i>a mutation</i>		<i>in language?</i>
where <i>the lamps are</i>		<i>broken time</i>
the image	of rain	caught
between side-	walks	
of distances		
bridging the split-		reference—
the streets.		
<i>he loved this part of the city</i>		<i>(the evening)</i>
<i>the poet speaks</i>		<i>on the threshold</i>
	(of being	
a space where		rain repeats itself
washes away		his footprints from
right underneath	him.	<i>streets</i>
<i>an extension</i>	<i>of his</i>	<i>limbs.</i>

“I hear the cane falter on a step of the stairs,
 the body that makes itself secure, sighing,
 the door opening, the dead man coming in.
 Between a door and dying there is little space,
 and there’s hardly time enough to settle in,”
 —Octavio Paz

a meta eulogy⁵

<i>the dead man</i>		<i>coming in.</i>
how small		
		a metaphor is
to start such		contradictions.
<i>I hear the cane falter on a step of</i>		<i>the stairs</i>
inside words		our small gestures
<i>the body that makes itself secure,</i>		<i>sighing</i>
the breath of		lyric distances
		invites
		<i>the door opening,</i>
<i>the dead man coming in</i>	Remembering	that
	which never happened	
<i>between a door and dying there is</i>		<i>little space</i>
a yellow threshold	where	The image
raps its rhythms with a wooden spoon		
calls us by	(name	
<i>and there is hardly time enough</i>		<i>to settle in.</i>

⁵ *a meta eulogy* was first published in *Contemporary Verse* 2, 29 (3), 43.
<http://www.contemporaryverse2.ca/home.html>

The Call to Respond, the Call to Responsibility

Robert Manery

Lately, I have been thinking about the ethical dimension of literature. There have been a number of theorists who have written about narrative literature and ethics (e.g., Nussbaum, Ricoeur), but it seems few have examined how lyric poetry (especially the modern lyric) contributes to ethical understanding. However, there are a couple of exceptions to this silence that suggest possible openings into a dialogue between the lyric and ethics. Both Levinas and Gadamer have found a contemporary exemplar for their philosophical inquiries in the poetry of Paul Celan. Predictably, their responses to Celan have been radically different.

Gadamer wrote a number of essays on Celan's work. Though he did not explicitly discuss ethics, these essays suggest an ethical relationship between the "I" and the "You" of the poems that Gerald Bruns names a "Poetics of Intimacy" (Bruns, 1997, p. 15). Gadamer's reading of Celan's "Atemkristall" cycle investigates the question of address in these poems. Gadamer maintains that, while the "I" and the "You" of the poems are not elided, the reader must occupy, at times, the position of the speaker of the poem, to become "equally implicated" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 69) in the poem.

Levinas also wrote on the work of Celan, though his attention is focused on Celan's "Meridian Speech," Celan's most sustained discussion of poetry and art, rather than on Celan's actual poetry. Levinas saw Celan's work in terms of Levinas' own conception of ethical alterity. The poem reaches out towards the Other, "for-the Other," a reaching that necessarily involves a "responsibility for the neighbour" (Levinas, 1987, p. 100). For Levinas, the address of the poem is first and foremost an ethical relation, one that calls one to responsibility.

Bruns regards Levinas' discussion as a reductive "appropriation" that is explicitly opposed to any account of the poem couched in a Heideggerian ontology. Bruns (1997) claims the importance of Gadamer's study is that "it helps us to understand the reductions in each of these appropriations," (p. 26) reductions to ethical alterity or to Heideggerian ontology, since Gadamer's account requires neither ethics nor ontology. It seems a difficult task to see Gadamer's readings as being in any way independent of an ontological account of the poem. Despite this opposition, however, I want to look at Gadamer's readings of Celan's poems alongside Levinas' to create space for these "appropriations" as possibilities rather than reductions. Both accounts are concerned with the question of address. For Levinas, the relation toward the Other is always already an ethical relationship where one is called to responsibility by the Other (Levinas, 1981). For Gadamer, to allow oneself to be addressed by the Other (the poem) is to put oneself in a position of responsibility toward the Other (Grondin, 2003, pp. 100-110).

For the remainder of my fragment, I want to create a mosaic of words by juxtaposing passages from Levinas, Gadamer, and Celan in order to present the ethical relation involved in the reading of lyric poetry.

Gadamer on Celan:

Readers of lyric poetry always already understand in a certain sense who I is. Not just in the trivial sense of knowing that it is always the poet who speaks, rather than a speaking person introduced by him. Beyond that, readers also know what the poet-I actually is. For the I pronounced in a lyric poem cannot be conclusively limited to the I pronounced in a lyric poem cannot be conclusively limited to the I of the poet, which would be different from that of the I-pronouncing reader. Even when the poet is 'cradled in his characters,' expressly separating himself from the 'instantly mocking' crowd, it is as if he no longer means himself, but rather also includes the reader in his I-character, separating him or her from the crowd in the same way he knows himself to be. This is especially true with Celan, where 'I,' 'you,' and 'we' are pronounced in an utterly direct, shadowy-uncertain and

constantly changing way. This I is not only the poet, but even more so 'that individual' [jener Einzelne], as Kierkegaard named the one who is each of us.
(Gadamer, 1997, p. 69)

Now, Levinas on Celan:

A language of nearness for nearness's sake, more ancient than that of the truth of being – which it probably holds and upholds. The first among languages, an answer preceding the question, a responsibility for the neighbour, making possible, by its for-the-other, all the wonder of giving. (Levinas, 1987, p. 100)

Now, Celan: "Letter to Hans Bender":

Only truthful hands write true poems. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem. (Celan, 1986, p. 26).

Celan, again: "Atemkristall"

*BY THE UNDREAMT etched,
the sleeplessly wandered-through breadland
casts up the life mountain.*

*From its crumb
you knead anew our names,
which I, an eye
similar
to yours on each finger,
probe for
a place, through which I
can wake myself toward you,
the bright
hungercandle in mouth.*

More Celan: "The Meridian":

*The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.
For the poem everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading.*
(Celan, 1986, p. 49)

Back to Levinas:

The inescapable: the interruption of the playing order of the beautiful, and of the game of concepts of the jeu du monde; the interrogation of the Other, a search for the Other. A quest consecrating itself in a poem to the Other: a song rises in the giving, in the one-for-the-other, in the very significance of the signification. A signification older than ontology and the thought of being - and one which knowledge and desire, philosophy and sexuality, presuppose.
(Levinas, 1987, p. 104)

Back to Gadamer:

Who the You is cannot be determined because it hasn't been determined. The address has an aim, but it has no object - other than perhaps whoever faces up to the address by answering.
(Gadamer, 1997, p. 69).

Back to Celen: "Atemkristall":

*STANDING, in the shadow
of the stigma in the air.*

*Standing-for-nobody-and nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you
alone.*

*With all that has room therein,
even without
language.*

Academic Death⁶

Avraham Cohen

I really do think with my pen, for my head
often knows nothing of what my hand is writing.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1998, p. 24)

Academic/Death Comes Running

*The news arrives,
I will be dying.*

*I must finish my work.
The academy becomes very human,
Special arrangements are made.*

*I run
The sweat pours off me.*

⁶ All poems by the author in this part of the manuscript were previously published in the author's doctoral dissertation (Cohen, 2006)

I feel my body move.

Even the President of the University
All there...
Death creates human flesh out of the institutional skeleton.
I die before I die.

Feeling deep emotion.

Join me here
In the heart of the matter...

Learning to hear the sound of my beating Heart,
Engaging senses,
Smelling the Blood of my Heart,
Tasting the Blood,
Becoming Blood...

In the midst of the silence of the Way.....
—a. cohen

Leonard was kind enough to respond:

Dear Roshi,
I'm sorry that I cannot
help you now, because
I met this woman.

Please forgive my
selfishness.

I send you birthday greetings,
deep affection and
respect

.
Jikan
the useless monk
bows his head. (Cohen, 2006, p. 23)

Ranting Against the Storm

Was school ever fun? When did we forget curiosity and replace it with knowledge accumulation? Is job readiness really the most important learning outcome? How and when did security become equated with wealth accumulation? How did teachers come to forget about awe and delight and become the minions of the state and technology? Of course, I'm not talking about all teachers. There are still a small minority living out and beyond the margins, who prefer, or choose, or who have no choice, who live dangerously.

Against the storm of institutional and systemic pressure, some teachers work and live courageously; holding true to an inner compass and reaching for the hearts of their students. In my

other life as a psychotherapist I see teachers in my private practice. The truth is that those who have support from educational leaders within their schools do not come to see me about their pain related to teaching, but within my experience these are the rare exceptions. And, educational leaders who come to see me are almost invariably speaking about the personal and professional cost of supporting a more heartfelt and poetic environment in their school. In the tradition of Socrates there are still a few educators who can and do stir up the youth and the youth-fullness of the elders; a rewarding and potentially life and career threatening endeavor.

To live poetically does not require that you be a poet. It does require honesty about yourself, authenticity, and a willingness to be seen in the beauty of your own nakedness. Poetic educators are vulnerable, which does not mean that she is a walking wound. What it means is that she is open, receptive, and feeling. These teachers, like poets, are in touch with the Muse. And like poetry well done, teaching well done is not done at all. It emerges. The Muse stirs. The poet/teacher is the vehicle of delivery. Her job is to step aside and allow the muse to sing. Many educators have lost touch with their Muse. The systemic pressure against musing and reverie is immense. And, there are teacher educators such as Carl Leggo (2006):

I invite other teachers who pursue studies at the University of British Columbia to engage in researching their daily experiences by writing creatively and narratively and poetically about their lives, to research their lived experiences in order to pursue creative processes of transformation.

(Leggo, 2006, p. 2)

I too wait and watch,
my image upside down
in the smooth river,
all the world
topsy turvy but
still in balance,
learning to be still, even
in a vertiginous world.

this is the teacher's way

(Leggo, 2006, p.5)

The life force may be covered but surely its pulse is still throbbing.
Here is a little haiku-like poetry to accentuate the throb rate:

Opening
The Gateway opens
A subtle breeze comes through
The World changes,
Forever.

—Lao-Tzu's Mother⁷

—a. cohen

⁷ These lines, including the *source*, emerged spontaneously during my regular practice of meditation on the morning of March 19, 2006. Meditation is for me a playful and creative practice.

The Fine Line

*On one side of the edge or another
Each person resides.*

*From one side everything is known
And taken for granted.
—a. cohen*

On the Edge

Feelings are troubling, vision unclear.

*On the far side
Another person emerges
And the unseen world
Is seen.
— a. cohen*

N/o/ne is More

*No chicken,
No egg,
No flesh,
No bones,*

*No Nothing.
—a. cohen*

No-Thing

*I was no-thing
I will be no-thing
I am no-thing.
Who writes?
—a. cohen*

One

*The sound of one hand clapping
Is not so awesome as it used to be.
I now listen for the sound of*

Ten thousand hands clapping as One.
—Lao-Tzu's Protégé⁸
—a. cohen

Wind
*A student says,
I feel a still warm wind, and
My longing reaches toward you.*

*An educator says,
I feel a still warm wind, and
My longing reaches toward you.*
—a. cohen

Breeze
*I blow through you
Leaving no trace
Yet you know I've been here.*
—Lao-Tzu's child⁹
—a. cohen

I have no words, and yet above lie my words,
while something called *me* sits *here*, below.

Concluding, together: Being and Non-being in Saskatoon

The structuring of our dwelling places is interactive with our individual and collective consciousness and guides and shapes the way we interact with each other in the visible world. The way we practice philosophy articulates our relationship with the world and our purpose in it, as well as our numerous and diverse response to the 'other.' It was a pleasure to philosophize poetically at the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society's meetings. Whoever thought that we could philosophize by reading our poetry in these philosophy sessions? But we knew philosophy was so much more than discursivity

⁸ This emerged from the same source as footnote number 3, also in March, 2006.

⁹ Also, from the same source as footnote number 3 in March, 2006.

and argumentation. Philosophy is, as Hadot (1995) reminds us, *a way of life*. At the early hour of our morning session, the room was filled with life: breath added to the energy of images, laughter, a sun beam at the right time, a red wall, and a bit of magic bound those in the room together in Saskatoon. “And what is more,” Bachelard reminds us, “the imagination, by virtue of its freshness and its own peculiar activity, can make what is familiar into what is strange. With a single poetic detail, the imagination confronts us with a new world” (1964, p.134). For those who were not there (you will just have to take our words for it), we have offered you above the textual form of our musings and now this haiku:

Being and Non-being in Saskatoon

Prairie land flat

We see far.

On-line text

Outer reading/inner seeing.

This Becoming.

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge Heesoon Bai for initiating this project, gathering us up, and involving us in the Poetics and Philosophy panel from which this collaborative paper emerged.

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