The Song of Marsyas: Lessons in Pedagogical Modesty. In reply to Theodore Christou

El Canto de Marsias: Lecciones de Modestia Pedagógica. En respuesta a Theodore Christou

La Chanson de Marsyas : Leçons en Modestie Pédagogique. En réponse à Théodore Christou

Fernando Bárcena
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

After the satyr Marsyas (the first virtuoso and alleged inventor of the flute) challenged his rival, the god Apollo to a musical contest and lost, he was hung from a tree by the god of the lyre and flayed alive. His song was interrupted by the gods, as often happened to the lives of those who dared deny them complete domain over the earth absolutely. At the end of his life, Oscar Wilde could read his own life in this myth, as he acknowledged in a letter of March 9, 1898 to his friend Charles Blacker, with regard to the publication of his poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”: “I regret to have to end with a cry of pain: song of Marsyas, not a song of Apollo; but life, which I have loved so much — too much — has torn me to pieces like a tiger.”

We may interpret Marsyas’ gesture in a number of ways: as the punishment which all human arrogance merits, especially when it is directed at the gods—who are capricious and arrogant themselves, though more powerful than we are,—or as the fate that must inevitably befall us if we forsake life in our quest for the absolute in any of the arts, that is, when in our desire to make life a work of art, we open an irreparable divide between idealized art and the experience lived, instead of linking them. I had no sooner read “Satan or Socrates: The Perils of Excessive Pride in Pedagogy” than I remembered this mythological reference, the victim of which is Marsyas, and I considered that alluding to it here might be a good way to respond to Theodore Christou’s suggestive text. It is an essay which, resorting to literature, seeks to give expression to ideas of a pedagogical nature. And it is precisely this attempt, linking a
literary resource with the aim of reflecting on education, that I not only found striking but for which I was above all grateful, at a time when what one normally comes across is writing on education which, as it is supposedly scientific, eludes all reference to a good literary style, as if form and content were not at all related in our field. So I can only be sincerely grateful for the kind invitation extended to me to reply, in these pages, to Theodore Christou’s article.

The first formulation of the central thesis of the essay is simple: “This essay argues that modesty in pedagogical practice is necessary.” Christou adopts the term “modesty” here to describe a type of orientation towards educational knowledge which perceives educators and pedagogues, in the different contexts and areas in which they perform their tasks, as individuals who should acknowledge their ignorance in their pedagogical outlook. It is “acknowledged ignorance” as a virtue inherent in a humble and modest attitude, a virtue all the more necessary the greater the importance granted in the educational sphere to educational idealism, in its most varied forms which, although necessary, may end up being an enormous burden both for the theory and the practice of education, when the real and the ideal do not succeed in being articulated.

It seems strange to propose “ignorance” here as a pedagogical virtue, precisely because in the so-called “information society” — which rather than promote it has actually destroyed the very possibility of a discourse on experience — knowledge, expertise and competence is what we are supposed to demand from our schoolteachers, educators and professors. Theodore Christou’s thesis is a bold one, for all that. “We educationalists are always ignorant. Not because knowledge is unknowable (in the relativistic or postmodern sense), but because our pedagogical knowledge can never be complete.” And it is not complete because every educational situation possesses a profoundly hermeneutical character, where interpretations are unceasing and the answers to educational problems are never completely final. Rather than provide closed answers, what we do, or should do, is formulate increasingly intelligent, reflexive, and deep questions. For in no sphere like education may one apply more appropriately and relevantly the sentence which asserts (and which Wilde himself reiterated in De Profundis) that everything that is understood is good. Which is why against the excessive weight placed on education by pedagogical ideals and utopias, it is advisable to preach Socratic modesty, which was no more than an expression of his irony, another pedagogical virtue that we need. Or to put it another way: to counteract arrogance, modesty; to refute the arrogance’s accompanying utopias, a certain disenchantment, which is an ironic and melancholic form of hope. This disenchanted hope is a necessary virtue, because it moderates the generously optimistic pathos which scorns the possibilities of moral regression and the barbarism latent in history and in modern logic, which has set progress as the goal of the human condition. It should be the other way around, since we would be hard-pressed to call progress what ridiculously lessens our own humanity.

Perhaps true teaching, teaching what is human (even when it deals with what is inhuman), teaching which is capable of addressing everyone in the singular, is simply a practice which adopts a kind of literary gesture. I shall explain.
If for a moment we set ourselves the difficult task of reading the whole of Samuel Beckett's *Trilogy*, at one sitting, what would we find? On finishing, the reader won't have come across any mention whatsoever of expressions such as “concentration camp” (*Lager*) or “holocaust”; however, Beckett describes a world which is the living hell of Auschwitz. Of course, we can only know this if we read the stories of Primo Levi, Robert Antelme, or David Rousset, among others, who were direct witnesses of the event. This then is the literary gesture I am speaking of, one which has enormous pedagogical potential. This gesture practises modesty, and, of course, opposes the arrogance with which some pedagogy, when transmitting dramatic events to the memory, often trivializes them by employing pedantic strategies. Wherever there's a rule there's an exception to it. Education, culture are the rule, and art and literature the exception. These help us in an indirect way, or as Wittgenstein says, they enable us to “show” (*Zeigen*) what we cannot “say” (*sagen*).2

And in education there are many situations in which educators must learn to show what does not fit in a logical discourse. It is a question of being aware that the exceptional cannot be taught, it can only be *experienced*; it must be transmitted by different means than those of single knowledge. Arrogance will not help us in this case, but modesty will.

The fact is that Theodore Christou turns, as a model of pedagogical arrogance, to the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*,3 a figure expressing a particular hubris; a figure exemplifying Evil whom Christou contrasts with Socrates, whose conscious ignorance expresses Good. Milton endowed the figure of Satan with the fascination of the indomitable rebel which other classical figures already possessed, such as the Prometheus of Aeschylus or Dante's Capanes. Theodore Christou, who shows that he is an enthusiastic reader of Milton's long poem, quotes fragments from it which help us to map Satan's utterly lost soul; his rebelliousness, his arrogance, his repeated blaspheming and his stubbornness; better to be the prince of Evil than a submissive servant in Heaven: “nor…do I repent, or change, / though changed in outward lustre, that fixed mind, / and high disdain…” (*Paradise Lost*, I, 623-624)

In Milton, Satan seems to take on the form of a decayed beauty, a beauty which only holds the memory of a lost beauty, something akin to a figure of decadence and, perhaps for that very reason, of disappointment. Milton's Satan is disappointed, but he is also melancholic. He possesses a darkened splendour, his eyes harbour melancholy and death: “…round his baleful eyes / that witness'd huge affliction and dismay / mixt with obdurate pride and stedfast hate.” Milton's Satan possesses, as a permanent attribute, a cursed beauty. Some commentators' interpretation is that, in Milton, the devil embodies the figure of heroic energy, perhaps the more expressive anti-hero of an inverted *bildungsroman* or, also, the waning hero surviving the wreckage with a certain romantic flourish. Perhaps Milton's devil arouses opposing feelings: he arouses some pity, as the defeated side in a great war would if fated to lose it from the outset, and repels us by his arrogance and pride.

In pedagogical terms, Milton's devil repels us because he reminds us of an affected gesture in pedagogy. Pedagogy, justifying itself to itself as an activity because of the existence of children—who are always the new ones (*pais*), the ones starting
out,—ends by transforming childhood into an absent presence. Childhood is transformed into the object of a knowledge which seeks to know everything about it ignoring the fact that the child is never only a small adult, but a presence with a present, a disturbing presence. And it is truly a lesson in modesty that Socrates admitted his ignorance, as a philosopher, whereas Protagoras, in his arrogance, sought to teach political virtue, a possibility which will be left unanswered, as we know, in the Platonic dialogue, as, perhaps, it could not otherwise have been.

As David Hansen has pointed out, the place of ideals in education (and also, perhaps, of utopias and the pedagogical optimism derived from them) is both uncertain and ambiguous. Just as without educational ideals we would be lacking, as Kant said, “regulating principles” in education, which, although not always achievable, enable us to view the task of educating as something that goes beyond mere technical performance, a good education requires, together with an assessment of great possibilities of human achievement, important and prudent restrictions.4

These restrictions are, of course, “reflexive restrictions” which, while they dilute our pedagogical or moral arrogance, enable collaboration in the education of young people by avoiding the perils arising both, from pedagogy comprising a technê without roots on a horizon of feeling, and from a kind of education that has been turned into psychotherapy. Hansen proposes the notion of “tenacious humility”, a strange virtue (“strange” because non-existent) which encourages educators to persevere with their task without yielding to a kind of pedagogical obsession. It is a virtue which, somehow, forms part of a resistance pedagogy.

As Christou says, the enemy is not the existence of some pride but “excessive pride.” The problem, then, is hubris, of which Milton’s Satan is an exemplary figure, and one representing the highest and the most dangerous form of ignorance, precisely because he seeks the knowledge he lacks, but without knowing exactly what this is. This arrogance, which leads to pedagogical optimism that expects all our problems to be solved by means of successive structural reforms of the educational system, assumes that education is always the instrument that will resolve all our social and political difficulties. But it does not know what some writers and philosophers, who were persecuted by the anti-political barbarism of Nazism and Stalinism, succeeding in learning: that an individual may be extremely cultured, a lover of the humanities, and even be moved by the literary evocation of the sufferings of young Werther, and at the same time remain impassive when faced with the barbarity of Auschwitz. This is the case with Maximilian Aue, the main character in Jonathan Littel’s novel, *Les Bienveillantes,* who in the spare time left him by his work in the SS reads Gustave Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale.* “Is humankind that defenceless?” a character in the novel *The Sister (A nővér),* by the Hungarian writer Sandor Márai, asks. “Education, morality, social laws, aren’t they strong enough to contain the fits of passion at crucial moments?”6

Faced with this question, one can only practise modesty while continuing to try to transmit the best that, despite everything, humanity has created, trying to understand and formulating the right questions at the right time. If the arrogant individual does not know the limitations of his or her action and ambition, like Milton’s Satan, the...
modest individual, which is another way of naming the experienced individual — and what every educator works with is experience — acknowledges them at all times. "We live in a world of ideas, rather than facts. These ideas are elusive and mutable. They need to be approached humbly. Arrogance in pedagogical orientation is dangerous. It limits reflexivity. Educators who assume to know and venture to teach, do so blindly. Our prior assumptions, unchecked, blind us. Pedagogically, the consequences can be perilous."

According to Christou, Socrates provides an excellent metaphor for pedagogy by placing the educator in a position of modesty and reciprocity with regard to the learner. Revolutionary utopias, which turned into authentic dystopias and, finally, into destructive totalitarianisms, always held that since we are the result of the application of a programme, of a prior, technologically designed plan, then, when all is said and done, education is simply the creation of a "new being." We now know what the consequences of this educational philosophy were. Christou is quite right to remind us, modestly but lucidly, that "the educator neither creates the child nor deposits it in the expectant mother." Educators, rather, promote, provoke, respond and, above all, help. They respond from the other, but not for the other. The educator is there, in the otherness and discontinuity defined by the moral and existential plot of the educational relation, to bear witness to a mediation. Because every educator is a mediator in the conscience of the learner; a mediator, not a substitute.

Education is a promise of news and new beginnings. And precisely because this is so, the essence of education is conservation and protection: conservation of the newness contained in each newly-arrived learner and protection of the world's possibilities. Educators must not hope to create a new world with new beings. That is a totalitarian temptation. Rather they represent an older world, in a way, immemorial, a world which is time and which is transmitted creatively so that the question regarding the sense is not cancelled. Every educator, then, is current and is of another time. They help to educate the new arrivals on the basis of the memory of something which precedes them and which they are obliged to protect. They must guard that past, not to cancel the learner's possibilities of action, but to promote the unforeseen, while helping, with all the tenacious humility of which he is capable, to develop a common world, in order to provide a "human response" to the contradictions of the present time.

Notes
2. This is proposition 4.1212 of Wittgenstein's Tractatus logico-philosophicus: "Was gezeigt warden kann, kann nicht gesagt warden."