

**pedagogical immediacy, listening, and silent meaning: essayistic exercises in
philosophy and literature for early childhood educators**

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abstract

This essay concentrates on philosophizing that happens outside and in addition to planned philosophical discussions, philosophizing that comes alive in practice, that is intensified in children's encounters with the world, with others, with language, in play. It contemplates how adults, educators and parents encounter children and are affected by children's philosophical explorations. What is the role of the adult in children's philosophical questioning? How can we respond to children's philosophizing? What does it mean to do so? The essay explores philosophical exercises for early childhood educators in a range of examples from literature - memoirs, autobiographies, fiction and works that play in between those. By thinking through these literary examples, it investigates how educators can prepare for philosophical encounters with children through exercises of reading and thinking. In doing so the essay experiments with a form of writing that itself becomes a philosophical exercise. Through the examples and exercises the essay suggests how early childhood educators can train for a pedagogical immediacy that involves listening to the philosophical and existential questioning in children's play, tantrums, and silences. The investigations and readings of the examples are not meant to lead to conclusions that can be directly applied in pedagogical practices; neither do they work as arguments for listening or listening in a particular way to children. What we get, and what I am looking for, is rather the experience of working and thinking through these examples.

keywords: philosophy of childhood; early childhood education; literature; silence; immediacy.

imediatez pedagógica, escuta e significado silencioso: ensaio de exercícios em filosofia e literatura para educadores da primeira infância

resumo

Este ensaio se concentra no filosofar que acontece fora e além das discussões filosóficas planejadas, filosofar que ganha vida na prática, que se intensifica nos encontros das crianças com o mundo, com os outros, com a linguagem, em jogo. Ele contempla como adultos, educadores e pais encontram as crianças e são afetados pelas explorações filosóficas das crianças. Qual é o papel do adulto no questionamento filosófico das crianças? Como podemos responder ao questionamento filosófico das crianças? O que significa fazer isso? O ensaio explora exercícios filosóficos para educadores da primeira infância em uma série de exemplos da literatura - memórias, autobiografias, ficção e obras que brincam entre elas. Ao pensar através desses exemplos literários, ele investiga na forma como os educadores podem se preparar para encontros filosóficos com crianças através de exercícios de leitura e pensamento. Ao fazer isso, o ensaio experimenta uma forma de escrita que por si só se torna um exercício filosófico. Através dos exemplos e exercícios, o ensaio sugere como os educadores da primeira infância podem se preparar para uma imediatez pedagógica que envolve a escuta do questionamento filosófico e existencial nas brincadeiras, birras e silêncios das crianças. As investigações e leituras dos exemplos não pretendem levar a

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conclusões que possam ser aplicadas diretamente nas práticas pedagógicas; nem funcionam como argumentos para ouvir ou escutar de uma forma particular as crianças. O que obtemos, e o que estou procurando, é antes a experiência de trabalhar e pensar através destes exemplos.

palavras-chave: filosofia da infância; educação infantil; literatura; silêncio; imediatez.

imediatez pedagógica, escucha y sentido silencioso: ejercicios ensayísticos de filosofía y literatura para educadores de la primera infancia

resumen

Este ensayo se concentra en el filosofar que ocurre fuera y más allá de las discusiones filosóficas planificadas, el filosofar que cobra vida en la práctica, que se intensifica en los encuentros de las/os niñas/os con el mundo, con los demás, con el lenguaje, en el juego. Contempla cómo adultos, educadores y madres/padres se encuentran con niñas/os y se ven afectados por sus exploraciones filosóficas. ¿Cuál es el papel del adulto en el cuestionamiento filosófico de niñas/os? ¿Cómo podemos responder al filosofar de niñas/os? ¿Qué significa hacerlo? El ensayo explora ejercicios filosóficos para educadores de la primera infancia en una serie de ejemplos de la literatura: memorias, autobiografías, ficción y obras que se encuentran entre ellas. Al reflexionar sobre estos ejemplos literarios, se investiga cómo educadores pueden prepararse para encuentros filosóficos con niñas/os mediante ejercicios de lectura y pensamiento. Al hacerlo, el ensayo experimenta con una forma de escritura que se convierte en un ejercicio filosófico. A través de los ejemplos y ejercicios, el ensayo sugiere cómo educadores de la primera infancia pueden formarse para una imediatez pedagógica que implique escuchar el cuestionamiento filosófico y existencial en el juego, las rabietas y los silencios de niñas/os. Las investigaciones y lecturas de los ejemplos no pretenden llevar a conclusiones que puedan aplicarse directamente en las prácticas pedagógicas; tampoco funcionan como argumentos para escuchar o atender de una manera determinada a niñas/os. Lo que obtenemos, y lo que busco, es más bien la experiencia de trabajar y pensar a través de estos ejemplos.

palabras clave: filosofía de la infancia; educación infantil; literatura; silencio; imediatez.



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introduction

Anyone who listens to a child's crying and understands what he hears will know it harbours dormant psychic forces, terrible forces different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage, pain and lust for destruction.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 2e

"Anyone", says Wittgenstein, "who listens to a child's crying and understands what he hears will know it harbours dormant psychic forces, terrible forces different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage, pain and lust for destruction" (Wittgenstein, 1980 p 2e). Saying, "Anyone", may seem hyperbolic, but we are talking about anyone who *hears and understands*. Hearing and understanding seem to be important to our acknowledgement of the profundity and depth of a child's cry. Though often loud and definitely hearable in an audible sense it may be difficult to hear depth or profundity in their cries and tantrums. Difficult, because we - adults, educators, parents - who live with the children are emotionally engaged with and intellectually presumptuous about the meaning of such outbursts. We may hear that the cries and tantrums are abundant with meaning but still find it difficult to engage with or even acknowledge such meaningfulness. Likewise, when children are silent, when we do not hear any audible, explicit expressions of meaning, we may feel lost in the encounter with their thinking, or even hear and see meaning in such encounters. So how do we become "anyone" who understands and hears? One, perhaps obvious, answer is through practice and experience. In this essay, I explore different aspects of what it means to practice hearing children's thought.

The essay especially looks at examples of children's philosophical thought in tantrums and silences. This focus has grown out of an interest in philosophizing that comes alive in practice, that is intensified in children's encounters with the world, with others, with language, in play. Namely, this is a philosophizing that happens outside and in addition to planned philosophical discussions and the kinds of classes that are common in the philosophy for and with children movements, which

developed from the groundbreaking work of Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp and Frederick Oscanyan (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyon, 1980; Lipman 2003), and more recently that of Sara Stanley (2012), Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss (Haynes & Murriss, 2012; Murriss, 2016). Moreover, the lines of thought explored in this essay have emerged from questions that arose from my reading of Gareth Matthews' (1980; 1992; 1996) and John Wall's (2010) books on children's philosophizing, as well as my own work about the philosophy that happens in early years, among the one- to five-year-olds in kindergartens, nurseries, and early childhood centers (see Johansson 2019a; 2019b).

I have reflected on how adults, educators and parents encounter children and are affected by children's philosophical explorations. Still, the question of the role of the adult in children's philosophical questioning remains insistent. How can we respond to children's philosophizing? What does it mean to do so? At times I have turned to notions of improvisation, immediacy, of making ourselves strangers to our own practices. I have sought to stand with our children at the borders of established practices and cultural conventions, to hear philosophy in children's play and to philosophize in living with such play, to be at peace with not knowing how to answer the questions children ask or the questions that arise in our encounters with them (see e.g. Johansson 2019a; 2019b). Living with and in all this may give a sense of a need to develop practical pedagogical art, skills, and capabilities. But where can we practice such skills and art? Musicians have their practice rooms, time for practice before performing. Athletes have their gym, running track, and playing field. They can develop their skills, strengthen their muscles, and improve their reflexes. But where can educators prepare for encounters with young children's philosophizing?

To ask this question in this way is not only to ask what training educators, or what practice for educators could mean. To ask what exercises could prepare educators for encounters with children's philosophizing is also to ask what philosophy with children can be and, consequently, what philosophy can be. I think of an educator's philosophical pedagogy here as an art of living, in a similar manner to which Plato talks about justice in the beginning of *The Republic*. There, Socrates asks his interlocutors about definitions of justice. Notably, he begins to ask them in



terms of what it means to have the skills to be just. One can read *The Republic* as an attempt to develop an account of our abilities to be just – to live justly, to ourselves, in our relations with others, and in society as a whole – into skillfully creating a just life. The question of what justice is is entangled with asking what it means to live justly skillfully (Plato 2000, Book I). Likewise, while I am asking what it means to live philosophically with children, what it means to respond skillfully to their philosophizing, I am also asking what philosophy with children can be. The focus on the pedagogical art of responding to children's philosophizing is thus a focus on philosophical life by exploring how to skillfully live with children's philosophizing.

This mode of philosophizing applies not only to the children's philosophizing, but also to the very way philosophy is performed through the writing of this essay. The essay follows what I think of as a pedagogical mode of thought in Wittgenstein's philosophy, I will look for exercises in a range of examples from literature – memoirs, autobiographies, fiction and works that play in between those. By thinking through these examples, I explore how we can practice philosophical encounters with children grounded in the experience of reading and thinking they offer (Wittgenstein 1953 § 71, 75, 133; Moi 2017, ch. 4). The examples of children's cries, tantrums, play and silences thus serve as a way of thinking about what practicing encounters with children's philosophy may mean. The investigations and readings of the examples are not meant to lead to conclusions that can be directly applied in pedagogical practices; neither do they work as arguments for listening or listening in a particular way to children. As Wittgenstein puts it while working through a range of examples where different emotions seem to follow the use of certain words, or when we hypostatize feelings when philosophizing: "In philosophy no inferences are drawn. 'But it must be like this!' is not a philosophical proposition. Philosophy only states what everyone concedes to it" (Wittgenstein 1953 § 599). What we get, and what I am looking for, is rather the experience of working and thinking through these examples.

the pedagogical philosophy of tantrums

Perhaps the answer to questions of how to practice for encounters with children's philosophizing is evident. By philosophizing ourselves, letting ourselves

be puzzled by philosophical questions, we practice our hearing of philosophy in many other contexts. This involves not only waiting for philosophical encounters, but also actively searching for them, studying them: in other words, to read philosophy. It is important to read philosophy that we are drawn to. Just as children sometimes allow us to be drawn into their philosophical encounters that arise through how they are in and with the world.

This is not to say that we can only practice philosophy as an academic endeavor, however, by reading philosophical texts and discussing them, their ideas, and the pedagogical questions they raise in seminar rooms and at universities and so on. We do not only encounter philosophy in philosophical texts or in discussions with explicitly philosophical aims. We are confronted by our culture's criteria and conventions in everyday life, particularly when we live and work with children (Cavell, 1979, p. 125). We encounter philosophy in our own lives. The limits of our experience and understanding are challenged when we watch movies or read novels or in the poetry we admire. We can practice philosophy with children by paying attention to what happens in our own lives, in poetry and literature, when we play, when we dream, indeed in all our everyday activities.

In this essay I focus in particular on the possibilities of literature and poetry for the practice of encountering children's philosophical explorations. Poetry's ways of questioning come alive in the intensities of meaning that emerge in encountering death, deep passions, enchantments, or heartbreak, while at the same time slowing down our reflections to a tempo fit for the rhythm of exercise and practicing the skills we need in the polyrhythmic complexities of everyday life with children.

An example of this can be seen in a short scene from Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs. She describes how, as a child, she had recurring tantrums. On one occasion, when she was three and a half years old, her mother stopped her from trying to peel a plum. Her mother simply did not want Simone to spoil her fine clothes. Simone would not give in.

I knew the struggle was in vain; from the instant that Mama had snatched the dripping plum out of my hands ... I knew myself beaten; but I wouldn't give in. I fought my losing battle to the bitter end. My convulsions and the tears that blinded me served to shatter the restraints of time and space, destroying at once the object of my desire and the obstacles of separating me from it. I was engulfed in



the rising dark of my own helplessness; nothing was left but my naked self that exploded in prolonged howls and screams. (Beauvoir 1959, p. 12)

With poetical poignancy Beauvoir presents the child's view of this situation. She shows how seemingly irrational groundless tantrums can on a closer look express the existential anguish at our vulnerability and defenselessness. She continues,

I fell not only prey of grown-up wills, but also of their conscience, which sometimes played the role of a kind of mirror in which I was unwillingly and unrecognizably reflected. They had also the power to cast spells over me; they could turn me into an animal, into a thing. 'What beautiful legs this little girl has!' enthused a lady who bent down to feel my calves. If I'd been able to say: 'Silly old woman! She thinks I'm a boiling fowl,' I'd have been all right. But at three years of age I had no means of redress against that fatuous voice, that gloating smile: all I could do was yell, and throw myself screaming to the pavement. (Beauvoir 1959, p. 12-13)

Beauvoir portrays how she as a young girl is at the mercy of the adult's discretions. On the one hand it works as a mirror; she sees herself, is validated, and is given position in the relational space of her community. On the other hand, she is trapped by the adult gaze in this image; the way the adults reflect her is their limited view of the sweet little girl, with sticky fingers, a screaming monster. Simone encounters the determinations of knowing. The gaze of the adult determines how she is seen and heard (Lindgren 2020). The questioning attitude of the child cannot assert itself in such situations. The sticky plum and the resistance to the lady's remarks about her calves becomes a way to question that limits the adults' responses. The tantrum become a way to keep the question alive; a way to show that there are other possibilities that the decisive certainty of adult knowledge does not recognize.

Cora Diamond wrote that, without remembering our childhoods we are moral cripples (Diamond 1991, p. 42). Perhaps we might also say that without remembering our own childhood's, we are philosophical cripples. Without remembering our childhood's vertiginous, wondering questioning of our existence, philosophy may not even begin. That may at least be a way of reading the adult's reconstructive memory of these events:

[...] I made up my mind that when I was older I would never forget that a five-year-old is a complete individual, a character in her own

right. But this was precisely what adults refused to admit, and whenever they treated me with condescension I at once took offence. (Beauvoir 1959, p. 13)

Does the insightfulness of Beauvoir the adult, the grandmother of feminist philosophy, with her capacity to question the demands on women that are taken for granted in our societies, lay in her memory of the powerlessness of childhood? Was her feminist philosophy a continuation of the tantrums of her childhood, a continuing resistance to adult prejudice?

philosophical attention

The reading of the scene from Beauvoir's memoir is an example of how, through reading a portrayal of childhood, we can practice seeing, hearing and responding to philosophy where it happens in everyday life. Simone's tantrum is an existential response to the stuffiness of adults' gazes and rules, a protest against not being allowed to be who you are. Reading such scenes, the power of literature to portray and to let us imagine what it means to say such words, to scream and kick, cry and laugh, at the arbitrary border conditions of our existence, is an exercise in seeing, hearing, and sensing how philosophical expression can explore the conditions of our lives. It is an exercise in attention and an exercise in which we empty ourselves of what we know and take for granted in a given situation by giving it our full attention. Studying literature becomes an exercise in meeting children attentively.

Writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch has tirelessly highlighted such attention both in her novels and her philosophical oeuvre. She writes: "the most 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). Reading literature *can* be an exercise in seeing and acknowledging the other. It is, perhaps, the philosopher's gymnasium, dojo, or laboratory. Reading and thinking through literature could also be one of the educator's practice spaces. As in encounters with children's philosophies, with their wonder and puzzlement, philosophy becomes a pedagogy of educators' work on their own philosophizing. A pedagogy among many other pedagogies, for sure, but a pedagogy that points perhaps towards what is most important to us: our own existential conditions. A pedagogy of emptiness.



The kind of emptiness that attention requires is not a forgetting of what we know but rather a matter of not letting what we know, or what we can do, what we think, determine what we see and hear. Rather it is an aspiration to slow down thought, to not draw fast conclusions about what we encounter, to resist trying to determine what we see and hear before we have given it our full attention. Simone Weil writes about how any kind of study, whether in classical languages, geometry or poetry (her examples), can work as an exercise in this kind of attention.

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, ... the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. (Weil, 1973, p. 111)

We can compare it to listening to a piece of music. We can intensively listen for all the details in the music without trying to determine what we hear. The listening becomes relaxed: it is not a search for anything, not actively. It becomes a form of waiting to hear, to feel, what happens. Practicing attention is an exercise in waiting. Weil goes on: "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, 1973, p. 112). And then: "We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them" (Ibid.). For Weil it is crucial that when we exercise our awaiting attention, we prepare to encounter the other, the suffering other, the other in existential agony. The kind of attention she describes is a necessary preparation for seeing the other's suffering: "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. Only he who is capable of attention can do this" (Ibid. p. 115). That is what it means to encounter someone, to see and hear a child.

philosophical immediacy and waiting

I suggest that we think of philosophical encounters with children through this emptiness and non-knowledge as a kind of pedagogical improvisation. That we respond to the child's philosophizing without the support of established conventions for how to go on. The waiting attention that Weil and Murdoch write about is vital for such improvisations. It is a matter of listening, seeing, and responding with a questioning, inquiring attitude.

Still, there are tensions in such a pedagogical approach between instilling better habits and acting beyond these to let our selves rest in the realm of the unknown. We can also see this as a tension between the will to act and to solve and the will to wait. For example, for the educator who responds to the child's expression, such as Simone's tantrum, with existential wonder, but can also sense the urgency of the immediate situation. Encountering Simone's frustrations and kicks we may be tempted to act, to solve the situation, calm the girl, comfort her. We look for solutions. At the same time, we may also see the need to stop, to wait. Finding solutions requires that we understand, and it is obvious that it is not possible to fully understand what is happening, what the child seeks, explores, investigates. We want both to wait and to act immediately. The more charged a situation is, the greater the tension between the realization that we do not know what is happening and the temptation to act in solution-oriented ways. Such tensions may be illusory, however.

The dissolution of this illusion may become clearer if we look more closely at Beauvoir's portrayal of her childhood tantrums. There are a range of conventions that would tell an adult, and an educator, how to react in such situations. Some are legal, others cultural, shown in the glances and whispers of onlookers. "She really should do something about that kid", they might say of Simone's mother. As Beauvoir describes it: She cried and expressed such severe pain and desperation that people around her thought she was abused (Beauvoir 1959, p. 12). In formal settings, such as early childhood centers, there are other norms governing how to respond. There are curricula and protocols, written and silent, peers, adults' unease, and the looks and silent judgment of other adults. So, what do we do with Simone in this moment of existential release? Don't we have to respond? But what is a response? Some things are given. If Simone risks hurting herself or others it seems evident that adults have responsibility to act. But in this case the worry is not that she hurts herself or others, beyond the unease her tantrum induces. Beauvoir describes herself as a mostly happy child. Nevertheless, she writes, "there must have been something wrong somewhere: I had fits of rage during which my face turned purple and I would fall to the ground in convulsions" (Beauvoir 1959, p. 11). Does Simone need a solution to a problem? Is that what the adults around her need? Here is where the dissolution of the illusion of a tension lies: perhaps it is not a problem we are



encountering, and so a solution is not exactly what we need. Rather the tantrum needs our full attention: we need to wait and resist the temptation to decide what is happening. Wait for Simone. If we view the tantrum as a philosophical moment our response may simply be, as Wittgenstein urges, “Look and see!” and “Don’t think, but look!” (Wittgenstein 1953 § 66). Look and listen to how the tantrum is used, here and now.

Simone is doing something with her tantrum, without determining exactly what it is. Waiting in this moment is not a matter of time, but of the attitude with which we are in the present (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, PPF iv § 22). An attitude of waiting that cannot in advance determine what we see, but rather empties us of what we know, opens us up to what the empty attention can show us. We may not see anything. So be it. Then we begin again. Look again. Wait again.

A waiting attention is like putting our hand on something and letting it rest there without holding on. When holding, gripping, we have already taken the first step towards determining what happens. The grip, the conceptualization, determines what we do and what we see. The resting hand awaits and allows the other, the child, to show itself to us beyond our grip, our conceptualization, our comprehension. By actively waiting, by laying our understanding to rest, and not intervening, not wresting the tantrum into our grip, we can stay in the disorder of the immediate moment. That means that we allow our attention to feed our questioning, rather than looking for answers and solutions, and the questioning attitude becomes a way to uphold our attention. “Questioning becomes”, as Walter Kohan has put it, “a form of attentive presence in the world” (Kohan, 2014, s. 114).

To read the scene from Beauvoir’s memoirs as an exercise in philosophical pedagogy is akin to listening to the masters of improvisational music. Miles Davis adds one note to the storm of sounds his band is creating. A gap is opening in the music. Not in time, but in our attention, in our way of listening, in the playing of the musicians. Miles’ note waits, listening. He goes on tentatively, questioning, listening. He does not govern. He seeks. Feels. Creates silence through sound. He empties the moment of expectations and new possibilities emerge. He is not looking for solutions, but for interplay, to share an expression with listeners and fellow musicians, consonance. That is a kind of attitude we can practice in reading. We

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practice improvisation by getting used to not having to presume, determine, or explain what happens to Simone. We practice immediate presence.

As an educator working with young children this means that all my knowledge and experience, like the improvising musician, is useful and can help me to hear and feel, but I should beware to not let it determine what I hear and feel. I need to exercise attention to the children by using what I know and my experience to empty myself.

a theoretical culture and documentation against immediate waiting

Even when we are practicing, reading, listening without interruptions, improvisational attentive waiting is still difficult. In practice, in our lives with children, when there are so many demands on our attention, it is even more difficult. As with so many things, it is not that easy to bring new insights from practicing and exercising into other situations, but varying our exercises can help. If literature is one of our practice spaces, we need to read a lot, often, and to read many different types of literature about different people, contexts, lives. We need a varied diet, as Wittgenstein suggests (1953 § 593). But there are things that stand in our way.

Philosopher Charles Taylor has characterized our age as a “theoretical culture” (2016, p. 77). That is, a culture – not limited to the west, but perhaps particularly evident in western politics, science, education, and economies – that values explanations of phenomena, solutions to problems, and systematic conceptual structures through which we can describe our world. Attentive waiting does not sit easily with the ethos of such a theoretical culture. Rather than trying to grasp and conceptualize the world, a waiting attentiveness means to wait for the world, above all the other, to show itself, or herself, to us. The difficulty is to uphold a waiting attitude in a theoretical explanatory culture.

When working with young children in early childhood education settings, various forms of (pedagogical) documentation offer new possibilities for our encounters with children’s thoughts and new possibilities to reflect with children. Such pedagogies can enable attentive waiting, but they can also inhibit it by capturing what we do in the grip of theoretical culture. Hillevi Lenz Taguchi has shown how pedagogical documentation can interrupt pedagogies that presume a



linear view of time. Through documentation, children, educators, and others can together return and reconnect with past events and make them present again, deepening what has been done and broadening it through new questions and discernments. Thus, we don't return to the exact same event; rather, the event is allowed to transform through the new encounters that emerge from the documentation of the event. Every moment contains possible interruptions of the meanings previously established, a kind of horizon of momentary possibilities that can lead us in indeterminable directions (Lenz Taguchi 2010, pp. 91-101). A spiraling rhizomatic time.

Often though the theoretically-informed uses of such documentation risk losing, even hiding, the immediate possibilities of the children's thinking and doing. We need philosophical exercises that confront, disclose, and dissolve such theorizing tendencies. Thus, if we try to cultivate attentive waiting as a pedagogical practice, the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogical documentation practices may be problematic. Let's look at a concrete example:

hannah and amos

The educator, Hannah, observes Amos, a 6-year-old boy, who has created a space to play on a mat under a table. Hannah makes notes and takes a couple of pictures of Amos playing. The pictures show how Amos is sorting buttons, toothpicks, dominoes, and playing cards into different patterns. These are Hannah's notes:

Amos is putting objects in different patterns while he is speaking to himself and making sounds. When one pattern is set he begins to move the objects. He moves some objects away and does not touch them anymore; others seem to have deep significance to him. All the while he is speaking quietly to himself and making soft sounds.

Everyday routines interrupt his play. Hannah begins to pick up Amos' things and tells him that it is time for lunch. Amos looks aghast at how his things are slowly disappearing. He runs off with his eyes full of tears. Hannah acknowledges that he is upset, tries to comfort him, and invites him to sit at the table. Amos sits down, but when lunch is served, he refuses to eat. With crossed arms, lips tightly closed, and an intense look, he closes himself off.

The following day Hannah looks through her notes and pictures. She contemplates Amos' play in relation to the aims and mission of the pre-school. She can see that he is developing his language, and practicing his ability to sort objects into patterns. She can relate these abilities to different ideas about language development and children's emerging mathematical ability in the Swedish national curriculum (Skolverket 2018). She relates Amos' making patterns to goals set in the national curriculum for the pre-school to provide conditions for the child to develop "an understanding of space, time and form, and the basic properties of sets, patterns, quantities, order, numbers, measurement and change, and to reason mathematically about this" (Skolverket, 2018, p. 15). She also considers how important this play seems to have been to Amos and understands that Amos was upset when she began to pick up his things. She thinks that as this form of play was deeply intriguing to Amos, they could share it with the other children.

The next day Hanna asks Amos if he wants to tell the others what he did with the buttons, dominoes, and toothpicks, but he is not interested.

What happened here? The educator Hannah is attentive to Amos. She acknowledges that he is upset, she sees his play. She waits and reserves her judgement of what happens until she has had time to reflect on her documentation, which helps her see further dimensions of Amos' play. She takes advantage of the possibilities of documentation, and uses it to listen to Amos. However, her waiting stops short in her reflection on the documentation, which clouds her attention. She lets theoretical presumptions determine what she sees. She sees language development, she sees the ability to create patterns, from the perspective of codified policy aims. That is, of course, important for an educator, but it is not sufficient. She forgets Amos's view of what he is doing and is left with what can be documented.

We can see how Hannah's judgement is already pre-formed when she begins to document Amos' activities. She has already limited what she can listen to by what she chooses to document. Her reflection proceeds, but only on the basis of what she has documented. So, what did she document? What is impossible for her to document? The act of documenting makes possible a certain type of attention, but it



can also filter out other, philosophical possibilities. Attention is focused on creating a picture, a note, a document, on what fits that framework, and whatever it takes to be important, in this case ideas set out by a national curriculum.

What would Hannah see if she stepped back from the will to document? To bring such a question to life, let me disclose something. Hannah is not real. She is a fiction created to shed light on the limitations of pedagogical documentation. Amos is real. Or there once was a child like Amos. Amos is the Israeli author Amos Oz. My portrayal of Hannah and Amos is an attempt to translate a scene from Oz's autobiographical novel *A Tale About Love and Darkness* into a contemporary Swedish early childhood education context. Or it could be many contexts in contemporary Sweden, where adults with the smartphone camera in their hands document and comment on their children to share with each other. Oz's own words are interesting to reflect on in light of the story of Hannah. As Cora Diamond reminds us, it is of moral importance to remember that we were all once children (Diamond, 1991, p. 42). As with Beauvoir and much autobiographical writing, Oz does that by writing about the child, himself, in the first person.

While World War II rages on, Amos helps his father, the librarian, to put the many books of their household in order. This awakens Amos' interest in putting things in order. Hannah, the educator, observes this interest, but notices, too, what she cannot see. Oz writes:

Between the rush mat, the legs of furniture, and the space under my bed I sometimes discovered not only unknown islands but new stars, solar systems, entire galaxies. If I'm ever put in prison no doubt, I'll miss my freedom and one or two other things, but I'll never suffer from boredom so long as I'm allowed to have a box of dominoes, a pack of cards, a couple of boxes of matches or a handful buttons. I'll spend my days arranging them, moving them apart and together, forming little compositions.

(Oz 2004, p. 26)

Hannah does not see how Amos orders all these objects. Amos has seen how his father, while listening to the war reports on the radio, moves pins on maps to see the changes in the war. Amos' patterns become a way to play out the war. A way to explore the horrors of the war and make the dreadful exciting. Responding to his father's war reports.

And I constructed a private, parallel reality: I spread out on the rush mat my own theater of war, my virtual reality, and I moved armies around, executed pincer movements and distractions, captured bridgeheads, outflanked the enemy, resigned myself to tactical withdrawals that I later turned into strategic breakthroughs. (Oz 2004, p. 25)

This depiction of play can problematize the epistemology of documentation. Can we really determine what it is that we see? Does the photography or the notes show what is happening?

It seems as if the tool for reflection can become unreflective. When the limitations of documentation are clear, we can see the limits of theory, which in turn shows the limits of our culture. To Amos this is not only a limit to his interaction with adults, but also with many of his peers.

Sometimes I would start a new game on Monday, then spend the whole of Tuesday morning at school thinking out the next move, make one or two moves that afternoon, and leave the rest for Wednesday or Thursday. My friends hated it, they went outside and played at chasing one another around the backyards, while I went on pursuing my own game of history on the floor day after day, moving troops, besieging a castle or a city, routing, taking by storm, starting a resistance movement in the mountains, attacking fortresses and defense works, liberating and then reconquering, extending or contracting frontiers marked out by matchsticks. If a grown-up accidentally trod on my little world, I would declare hunger strike or a moratorium on teeth brushing. But eventually doomsday would come, and my mother, unable to stand the accumulation of dust, would sweep away, ships, armies, cities, mountains, coasts, entire continents, like a nuclear holocaust. (Oz, 2004, pp. 26-27)

Encountering our culture's theoretical tendencies in practices of pedagogical documentation reveals, too, a propensity for forgetfulness: forgetting what it meant to be a child, what one can see and create with a mat, furniture legs, buttons, matches and dominoes. We forget Amos's perspective on his patterns, that ordering things can be a continuation of the newly discovered ability to sort things by playfully exploring the movements of the war. What happened to the poetical pedagogical practice that emerged in Reggio Emilia once it got into the hands of academic theoreticians and policy makers? It is a cultural irony that our very tools for remembering, documentation, also may cause our forgetting. The theoretical culture of documentation can cover the child's perspective and resist our attempts to wait attentively, in at least two ways.



First, we can see how theoretical forgetfulness limits our ability to be in the immediate moment of ongoing situations. It is difficult to be attentive to what happens if at the same time we need to focus on documenting, or on other specific practices. We can see this clearly in the mother's and educator's tidying of Amos's things. To them this prepares the way for other activities, other important things, lunch, the next activity, just tidyness. To Amos, his world has been destroyed, a bomb not seen by the adults has hit his world. Though they see that the pattern he has made is important to him, the educator and the mother are not fully present in his world. They see what can be documented, what can be tidied, or what counts as evidence of progress through the curriculum. A world that can be picked up, documented, and brought out again. The buttons and dominoes can be brought out again, but the pattern and the buttons are only half of Amos' world. While the mother and the educator may see meaning there, they do not see the meaning these have in his play world, in the stories he creates. Theoretical ambitions run the risk of forgetting the story and putting limits on our attention in the moment of play. When it is precisely the story in the moment that is important to Amos.

Second, our theoretical culture opposes attentive waiting by letting theory determine what we see, hear, and feel. It is not necessarily an unhappy reliance on a deliberately chosen theory, but rather that certain theoretically motivated practices, such as pedagogical documentation, turn our attention towards what the theoretical framework can grasp. If our practice is grounded in the importance of pedagogical documentation, this will also direct our attention to what can be documented. The emphasis on a certain practice and the theoretical grasp of that practice will thus privilege specific epistemologies. Of course, we may document Amos's wargames, but Amos's stories, as in so much play, is not directly expressed in a way that is visible to the documentation of the educator. Instead, we can read the story from a first-person perspective, or an adult's memory of the story, in Oz's autobiographical novel. If we only focus on documenting what Amos does, we will miss how his sorting into patterns is a continuation of sorting his father's books and listening to war reports on the radio. The problem is that, although we can return to events through documentation, and although we allow both the event and the documentation to be transformed in the process, what we return to will be imprinted

by the presumptions and explanations that are established in the first encounter. Theories create the illusion of things being known and understood, whereas waiting attention can help us to be in the immediacy of the unknown and awake to the infinite possibilities of the imagination.

These problems do not always necessarily accompany documentation practices and other theoretically informed practices. But such practices can never stand by themselves. They need to be complemented by fully *being-in* the moment and *co-being with* the child, by a pedagogy of immediacy in which we are not only by the children, but also with the children, attentively waiting for their stories, reflections, and actions. The importance of the moment will not be grasped by the documentation, or our theories. The importance will rather reveal itself in our *co-being* with children. By our exploring, playing, and questioning with children we open our attention to the (imaginary) worlds that emerge in the moment. As Weil puts it: “Stars and blossoming fruit-trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give an equal sense of eternity” (Weil 2002, p. 108). Eternity, insight, and beauty lay in the transformations in the moment, in immediate encounter. She goes on: “The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence” (Ibid.). Beauty lays in seeing the fragility of events and things: “The destruction of Troy. The fall of the petals from fruit trees in blossom. To know that what is most precious is not rooted in existence – that is beautiful. Why? It projects the soul beyond time” (Ibid.). In encountering fragility, vulnerability, and attention to the transient, we are led out of time. The core of philosophical pedagogies lays in such immediacy. To be in the moment of the question.

pedagogical immediacy in the emperor's hands

The use of documentation introduced by the pedagogical practices of Reggio Emilia, and others inspired by such movements, interrupt linear presumptions of time in order to practice a circular returning. Such non-linear views of time may in turn be interrupted by the pedagogical view of immediacy, waiting, and attention that I have sketched out. Walter Kohan has reintroduced Heraclitus' notion of aionic time as a further conception of non-chronological time that has a particular connection to childhood and the experience of the child playing. Kohan describes the



ancient notion of aion as “the intensity of time in human life – a destiny, a duration, an un-numbered movement, not successive, but intensive” (Kohan, 2015, p. 57). He calls aionic time a child-like form of being.

Although we may use documentation as a form of pedagogy we must not forget the pedagogical possibilities of fully participating both in the moment of documentation and in the new moment when the documentation is brought back to the children, in child-like aion. We should not let the past blind us to what is happening now. Such forgetting risks that we do not allow the child’s first-person perspectives to be present in our imagination. As Diamond has argued, forgetting our own childhood perspectives makes us moral cripples (Diamond, 1991, p. 42); or to take this further, overlooking the child’s first-person perspectives makes us blind to children’s stories and thoughts, pedagogically paralyzed, incapable of co-being with children. This is the forgetting that makes it impossible for us to see, to imaginatively engage with, the existential agony in Simone’s tantrums or the existential explorations of war in Amos’ play with patterns. What I am suggesting is that theory and theoretically informed practices should not take the place of the pedagogical imagination called for by children’s aionic being in the moment. What I have said about pedagogical documentation as a practice in early childhood education does not apply only to documentation practices; rather these are an example of the existential problem of how our theoretical culture has made an imprint on contemporary child-rearing and early childhood pedagogies and policies.

The philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot has emphasized that philosophy in antiquity, especially in the doctrinally diverse schools associated with stoicism and epicureanism, was practiced as sets of pedagogical and therapeutic exercises aimed at training the philosopher to bring forth the immediacy of the present moment in a life that is otherwise characterized by engaging in the past, worrying about the future, and anguish towards the unavoidable reality of dying (Hadot 1995, pp. 221-22). Unsurprisingly, living in modern and post-modern theoretical cultures, we face the same kinds of challenge.

Among others, Hadot turns to Marcus Aurelius’ writings as an exemplar of a philosopher’s pedagogical and therapeutic work. Inspired by both Epicureans and Stoics Marcus Aurelius writes his *Meditations* as an exercise of self-improvement in

living in the moment. Despite his role as emperor and military commander he endeavored to be fully immediately present in the moment. For Marcus Aurelius the immediacy of the present moment was sufficient in itself (Marcus Aurelius 3:12; 12:1). Hadot explains this sufficiency has at least two senses:

1. It is enough to keep you busy; you have no need to think about anything else; and
2. It is enough to make you happy; there is no need to seek for anything else. (Hadot 1995, p. 227)

Immediate attention to the present moment thus transpires as both the means and the end for Marcus Aurelius' philosophy. In encounters with children's philosophizing, this form of attention can be seen as both a pedagogy and an aim. The type of attention we found Weil to be looking for is a religious and mystic form of attention. We wait for the immediate experience of the divine without seeking it (Rhees, 2000, s. 147). But it is not only about waiting for God. According to Weil, God is an experience of the Good, as in the aim of philosophical exercises in Plato. Waiting for God thus becomes a pedagogical attitude: to wait, and to wait without seeking, is an exercise in waiting and as such an exercise and cultivation of attention. In philosophical pedagogy the exercise becomes the end, we exercise in order to train our ability to exercise, to acknowledge that we have no need to think or search for anything other than what is offered to us through attention in the immediate present moment.

Although Hadot finds specific emphasis on immediate presence in Stoicism and Epicureanism, they are in other areas diametrically opposed. Epicureanism emphasizes the immediacy of the sensual, making attention into a sensibility, while Stoicism focuses on the immediate duty to a world that is sufficient in how it presents itself to us in the present moment, making attention into a duty (Hadot 1995, p. 228). Despite these contradictory doctrines (themselves a kind of exercise), the schools can be drawn together to the same pedagogical end. I find such an enmeshment realized in Hadot's reading of Goethe's *Faust*. When Faust has fallen hopelessly in love with Helen and expresses his love for her, both to her and to himself, she is dazzled by his expressions and filled with wonder at the beauty of his words. Faust responds to her wonder as follows:



FAUST. If you already like the way our peoples speak,
I'm sure their singing will delight you too,
will fully satisfy both ear and mind.
Delay is dangerous – let's practice it at once;
responses are what tempt us to employ it.
(von Goethe, 1984 In 9370-75)

This brings us back to the question of the educator's practice space. I suggested that literature can be such a practice space. *Faust* might be the kind of literature through which we can exercise our attention to the immediacies of life's variations. In addition, Goethe, like Plato, also indicates that dialogue can be such a space for practice. Conversation and co-being exercise our attention and in turn open up to deeper co-being and attention. Literature becomes an exercise on the way towards the dialogues that bring out our philosophical song and contemplative dance. Helen asks: "Then tell me how I too can learn the art?" (von Goethe 1984, In 9375). She once again opens with a question and will not let her wonder be blocked by an answer; she keeps the dialogue open. "It's simple", Faust replies, "let the words well from your heart. And when your soul is filled with yearning's flame, you look around and ask" (von Goethe 1984, In 9376-79). Their questioning continues, and now they share the question, in dialogue. It becomes an exercise of being in the question (Kohan, 2021), and that is where beauty become discernable.

HELEN. Who feels the same?
FAUST. There is no past or future in an hour like this,
the present moment only
HELEN. is our bliss.
FAUST. It is all things we ever could demand.
What confirmation does it need?
HELEN. My hand.
(von Goethe, 1984, In 9380-85)

Their continual being in the question is a co-being, being together. Helen even finishes Faust's sentences and thoughts. Their common thoughts and thinking are presented in and fashioned by their content, what they are thinking about. They are searching for a co-being, in the question and the dialogue, in the immediacy of the present.

HELEN. I feel so far away and yet so near,
and only want to say: I'm here! I'm here!
FAUST. I tremble, faint of breath, can hardly speak;
all is a dream, and time and space have fled.
HELEN. My life seems past, and yet is somehow new;
I know you not, a stranger, but I live in you.

FAUST. Do not be puzzled by a fate uniquely yours!
Though life be but a moment, our duty is to be.
(von Goethe, 1984, In 9410-18)

The duty to live is valid and expressed in this moment between lovers. Helen expresses a desire for complete presence - "I'm here!" - and Faust the non-theoretical dimension of our immediate experience. *We* may practice such a duty by devoting *our* attention to how Goethe's text pulls us into an immediate experience of what Helen and Faust describe. It is a stoic pedagogical exercise in devoting attention to the obligation of the moment, the duty to attentively await the other and enjoy how we, when we allow ourselves to get lost in the immediate, shape our own happiness.

For Hadot, any philosophical life will involve such exercises: "the immediate transformation of our ways of thinking, acting, and of accepting events" (Hadot, 1995, p. 229). And they are required too in our encounters with children's philosophizing. Thus, reading literature may be a practice space, not only for actual encounters with children's philosophizing but also as a form of philosophizing in and of itself, by touching the very foundations of our existence. Reading literature can prepare us to be open to encounters with children's thinking. It can prepare us for a co-being with them in and as a philosophical exercise.

immediate silence: an exercise of listening when nothing is heard

To develop an attitude of waiting attention, with literature offering space to exercise such an attitude, we need to seek further forms of resistance to our theoretical culture. Like the multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks and policies that govern us, Faust and Helen's love as an emblem of attentive immediacy may itself be a picture that holds us captive (Wittgenstein 1953, § 115). For our exercises to break out of such captivity, we need to vary our diet (where engagement with literature and art can create such variation). We have seen the example of Simone's explosions of anger, of Amos's imagined worlds, of Faust's and Helen's struggle to find their way to a happy co-being in the moment. Now let us imagine a child, living a life abundant with meaning, but who refuses to share that meaning. In the novel *Welcome to America* (2019) Linda Boström Knausgård uses autobiographical material to imagine the life of a girl, Ellen, who decides to stop speaking. Reading the novel becomes an interesting exercise because the refusal to speak is such a



strong aversion to the expectations of adults, educators, and educational institutions. Rather than seeking to understand and explain, however, it can take our imagination elsewhere by pointing to the uncertainty we feel when we clearly do not know what a child thinks or what they mean. The meanings of acts of silence seems so difficult to discern, as if discernment is where our attention should lie. Rather than seeking to determine meaning we can simply pay attention to what is there in the gap between the words not uttered. When Boström Knausgård takes us into the world of thought of Ellen, who is so full of feelings, senses, and meaning, we are confronted with questions: what can I know about this child? What is this child? What does our relationship consist in?

The novel imagines the life of the silent child from the child's point of view. We imagine what not speaking is by imagining what it is to not speak to our elders. This is how Ellen recalls the moment when she began her silence:

I stopped talking when growing began to take up too much space inside me. I was sure I couldn't do both, grow and talk at the same time. I think perhaps I was the sort of person who liked to take charge, and it felt good to give that up. There were so many to keep track of. So many dreams to fulfil. Wish something for me, I could say. But I could never make any wish come true. Not really. (Boström Knausgård, 2019, p. 13)

There are no question marks here, but Ellen poses an important question. A pedagogical question. Can talking, communicating, negotiating, telling and retelling, expressing and uttering, dialoguing and monologuing, all that is involved in a life woven in and through language, stand in the way of growth? Isn't language what nourishes the soil for human growth? Is Ellen suggesting perhaps that talking domesticates growth? When talking she is involved in others' dreams and wishes, taking charge of and controlling others. Not talking meant to her that she could let go of concerning herself with what she demands of others and what others demand of her. This does not mean that she has let go of all relations, but that her talking is not a part of such relations. Perhaps letting go of talking both limits her relations and opens new possibilities. For sure, it closes her off from others, leaving herself with the tragedies she is relating to in her life and creating a kind of loneliness. What is growth in such a space?

Later Ellen describes her state of mind and emotion as she began to stop talking. “The first few days had been a rush of excitement. The fact that I could. That it was so easy. Just stopping. From one moment to the next my life was changed. It was more than a refusal.” (Boström Knausgård 2019, p. 33).

To Ellen not talking seems to involve an intensity of meaning in the moment, realizing her own power, that she can have this control over her own life. It also seems to be a power of transformation. The power to do something drastic that completely changes her life and her relationships. She also expresses this rush and transformation without immediately evaluating its outcome. She goes on, explicating the intensity of what she is saying by not talking: “It wasn’t running away. It was the truth. The truth about me.” (Boström Knausgård 2019, p. 33).

This raises further challenging questions for an adult. Can the truth about the child lay in her not expressing herself in the way I expect of her, by not talking, by not having tantrums like Simone’s, but in some other way?

The novel about Ellen does not give us answers but seems to draw us into a questioning space. Indeed, although Ellen thinks of her not talking as disclosing a truth about herself, she is still asking questions about who she would be if she began to talk again. “Now and then I wondered what my voice would sound like if all of a sudden I said something. Whether it was still there inside me, waiting, or if it was gone. What would it sound like? That was the question I asked myself.” (Boström Knausgård, 2019, p. 33).

“What would it sound like?” becomes a question with a rather different meaning when expressed by a girl who has not spoken for some time, who has just stated that the truth about her is her not talking. The possible sound of her voice becomes a question of who she would be if she spoke.

The question is lived. When she contemplates the image of her mother the last time she saw her perform in a play, the urge to say something is strong. Her mother played “a fallen statue of liberty” who greets immigrants by saying “Welcome to America”.

I felt an urge to write those exact words in my notebook. But I stopped myself. You’ve got to be strict. You can’t just follow the impulses that criss-cross the mind in their little tunnels of light. I could see my thoughts. They were everywhere. They passed into my body, darting about my heart, toying with it, forcing themselves



upon it. I could do nothing about my thoughts. (Boström Knausgård, 2019, pp. 15-16)

Her thoughts are there. She embodies them, they do things to her. Her thoughts are both sensuously affective and affects in themselves. They are familiar but wild, non-domesticated, dangerous landscapes; hers, but not entirely hers. They seem to simply happen to her, in her, with her. Although she is working hard not to reveal her thoughts, she is fully aware that while she is not talking, she is still saying something. She acknowledges that she is saying something to her mother by keeping silent. After asking what she would sound like she lets her thoughts run further, considering the social context of her silence.

Was I making my mum go mad? Most often she was calm, but when she flipped it felt as if it was my fault. I wasn't so much what she said, it was more that she became small all of a sudden. I made her small. It was scary. I wondered whether I had to start talking again to stop her from disappearing. If I had to choose between her and myself, wouldn't I choose her.

Wouldn't I choose her strength over mine?

Yes. I would. That was still the way it was.

(Boström Knausgård, 2019, p. 32-33)

Ellen acknowledges the power that lays in her silence. She senses how it perplexes her mother. A perplexity that involves not only intellectual puzzlement, but also existential and mental stress and anxiety, adult helplessness. Ellen's silence opens a world of meaning through the adult's uncertainty of what the not-speaking means. For the adult this uncertainty can involve a sense of care for the child, taking the silence as an expression of a need, perhaps for comfort, for support, but with few clues as to what the child needs, or it might lead to the realization that the child refuses to communicate any needs. We – adults, educators, parents – can be helpless in our encounters with a childlike Ellen.

Boström Knausgård's novel explores the question of what the silence does to the mother and the daughter. Who becomes the child here? Who is getting smaller? Who is teaching whom? The novel illustrates how easily roles and social categories can be turned around; how what it means to be a child, or an adult, can be transformed and expectations can be interrupted. As Stanley Cavell puts it when exploring the possibilities of culture through Wittgenstein's philosophy:

What is true is: in the culture depicted in the *Investigations* we are all teachers and all students – talkers, hearers, overhearers, hearsayers, believers, explainers; we learn and teach incessantly,

indiscriminately; we are all elders and all children, wanting a hearing, for our injustices, for our justices. (Cavell, 1989, p. 75)

This is a difficult vision of culture and interaction. But it gives us a different sense of what a pedagogy of listening can involve and what philosophy with children can be. Listening can mean that we are attentive to how, in certain interactions, the child, even a small child, becomes both an elder and an educator, and that we can be children and elders at the same time, or that we can lose our sense of adulthood and become small. The question of what in her thinking makes her a child or an adult is a recurring part of Ellen's reflections (Boström Knausgård 2019, pp. 37-39, 42, 45).

Ellen relates the question of her voice to her mother's performances on stage. Seeing her mother on stage or in the theatre dressing room Ellen, even before her decision to stop speaking, found it impossible to speak. She could not speak in the theatre. But she always felt that there was a stage, a black floor, for her: "Silence had always been there as a possibility. A black floor to step out on." (Boström Knausgård, 2019, p. 35).

Silence becomes her theatre, stage, and performance. Through the silence she could both make her communication minimal and create a new form of meaningful interaction, a stage where her mother became the hearer, and she the silent talker. We can imagine her as a thinker without words. Silence becomes a renegotiating of meaning and of whom is the elder who represent the community of speakers in a communicative interaction.

So, going through this exercise in reading *Welcome to America* I find myself asking whether I have the pedagogical humility to let the child make me small. Am I willing to step aside from the black floor of the stage and be the one who watches the child's silence, or any other form of expression not usually seen on the stage of pedagogical interactions in a pre-school? Am I humble enough to live with not knowing the meaning of what is performed on the stage of silence? What does it mean to imagine the world of thought and experience of the silent child? What does it mean to think with this child, to think with silence?

I have ended with an open-ended exercise of listening to what we cannot hear, an exercise that leaves us with more questions than when I began. But before we leave this exercise let's add a complication about the story of Ellen and her



silence. As the novel proceeds and we spend time in the world of Ellen's passionate thought, more reasons and causes of her silence unravel. Coming to believe that her life would be easier, lighter, "much better" without her father in it, and realizing that her father's careless way of doing things could easily lead to fatal accidents, she offers a prayer: "Dear God. Please make my father die. I want him to die and you to help me. Let's do it now. Together. You and I. Let's kill him. It's my highest wish." (Boström Knausgård, 2019, p. 61).

Spending time in the world of Ellen's silence we see how her silence becomes an existential and philosophical questioning, of who she is, of what the world she lives in can be, what it means to be a child, a daughter, a sister, what a life in her dysfunctional family can be. However, knowing of her prayer and her wish (recalling the wishes of others she has failed to fulfill) that her father should die reveals a traumatic dimension of philosophical thought that is rather different from the traumatic experience described by Socrates' interlocutors. Whereas Socratic philosophical trauma is a way to speak about the sense of being lost, of puzzlement, perplexity, and even nausea, Ellen's existential trauma is about life and death, of the power of words, her words, to express her inner wishes, to create and destroy. Philosophy is abundant with examples of exercises with Socratic trauma. *Welcome to America* takes us to the rough ground of working with children, to where philosophical perplexity is inseparable from the traumas of our lives, of children's lives.

Ellen's silence gives further meaning to Wittgenstein's words that served as an epitaph to this essay and invites them to serve as an afterword as well. Returning to them becomes part of what an essayistic exercise is. When our exercise ends, we begin again.

Anyone who listens to a child's crying and understands what he hears will know it harbours dormant psychic forces, terrible forces different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage, pain and lust for destruction.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 2e

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