

Impudent Practices

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Native speakers of English, at least those of a certain age, are most likely first to have heard the word “impudent” from a school-teacher: “How dare you be so impudent!”, “I have never heard such impudence”, and other similar expressions of outrage. If this is the intimidating context in which the word was learned, where it was difficult to ask what it actually meant, it was not hard to imagine that it referred to something inappropriate in behaviour, perhaps through incorrectly addressing a teacher or by doing something that could in some way or another be counted as “rude”, and rudeness is a thing about which children were and are encouraged to be preoccupied. In fact, “rude” is itself an interesting site of lexical tension for the child: originally meaning “plain” or “simple”, as in “a peasant’s rude dwelling”, its primary connotations for the school child were of impoliteness or of sexual explicitness or impropriety – as in rude words and rude jokes, or even rude parts of the body. “Impudent” is one of a strange class of words in English that are used only with a negative prefix or suffix, such as “unkempt”, “feckless”, “inept”, and “gormless”: none of these words exists in its positive form. Richard Rorty had some fun with the philosophically favoured word “ineffable”, which is one of this group, by wondering about how far the supposedly ineffable could be “effed”.ⁱ

But the meaning of “impudent” can be rendered rather more precisely than the child’s understanding of “rude”, and in understanding this the sense of the negative will be important. The root of the word is *pudendum*, which the results of a quick Google search explain as follows:

pudendum:

The external genitals of either sex , though many limit the meaning to apply only to the female mons pubis , labia-majora , labia-minora , clitoris , and introitus vaginae. To avoid confusion a qualifier is sometimes used: male-pudendum , female-pudendum . See vagina for synonyms.

ETYMOLOGY: In Latin it means ' that of which one should be ashamed a derivion [*sic* - i.e., derivation] of pudere, to be ashamed.ⁱⁱ

The invocation of shame here is important, but also potentially misleading. The obvious implication of a definition such as this is that the genitals are inherently shameful, and hence they should be covered up: to be covered up is to show appropriate *modesty* in one’s behaviour. But there are other currents of meaning here, which these explanations and contrasts fail to realise.

We saw that “impudent” is a word in English that does not have a positive form. In French, by contrast, it does. *Pudeur* is a term that is peculiarly difficult to translate, and it is important that “modesty” partly misses the point. Certainly *pudeur* involves a kind of restraint, but the relation between this and shame is rather different: *pudeur* can involve the

intensification of the attraction, and the sense of value, of what is hidden. Hence, what is hidden is not inherently shameful: rather the shame would consist in revealing something inappropriately. It involves then, and implies the desirability of, an indirect relationship to what is hidden, where indirectness is crucial to its proper appreciation: directness or immediacy would constitute a distortion or violation or obliteration of that thing. If we were talking of religious matters, the inappropriateness might be cast in terms of profanation. But the contrast can be evoked in terms of music and art. Let me risk some examples, though perhaps all of these will be controversial in some way. One might think then of the qualities of restraint and understatement in Schubert's piano music or songs in contrast with the full-blown expression of Wagner's operas; or of Cole Porter (or The Smiths or Lily Allen?) in relation to punk rock. And perhaps it is instructive to think of the way that punk rock was soon followed in the 1980s and 90s by a new style of comedy that was blatantly "in your face" – that is, explicit, loud, crude. In art you might contrast the gentle suggestiveness of French painters such as Fragonard or, later, Renoir with the shock directness of Brit Art over the last twenty years or so, "full frontal" and sexually explicit. In each of these pairings the former orientation or style realises and preserves something that the latter obscures or destroys.ⁱⁱⁱ

Impudent education

I want to play out this contrast by identifying a number of ways in which impudent practices – that is, practices characterised by an insistent and inappropriate explicitness - are currently found in education. Here are some examples. I present these assertively because the point of the present discussion is elsewhere. They are included not in order, as it were, to take up the argument once again but rather as orientations for what is to follow. The first two involve matters that are obviously educational; the latter pair relate to broader cultural, even metaphysical matters, though still with acute importance for education.

(i) Outcomes-based learning

Criticism of outcomes-based learning, both in research and amongst practitioners themselves, is now so extensive as not to need coverage here. It is important that this criticism is not in general directed at the fact that there are outcomes to educational practices (how could it reasonably be?), nor a denial that it is appropriate to assess these. The target is rather the ideology of outcomes-based education, expressible in the reductive idea that nothing is taught or learned unless it is tested and that performance in tests is the sole indicator that learning has taken place. Modern versions of this are derivative in some ways from earlier forms of behaviourism in education. Of course, in contemporary circumstances in many countries, the context for educational practice is a culture of accountability and transparency – both of which look like good democratic virtues but that succumb to a behaviourist anthropology and metaphysics.^{iv}

(ii) *Research methods and evidence*

The broad research culture in which many readers of this article will be working is currently dominated by an ideology of empiricism. Empiricism in this sense – where the suffix carries a pejorative force - is the view that the only way in which enquiry into education can be advanced is through empirical testing. It can embrace quantitative and qualitative methods. Empiricism typically hides from itself the reflective and speculative aspects to its own practices, specifically in the indentifying of a site for research and a research question, before the empirical research is carried out, and the similarly speculative elements in the interpretation of data. It is significant that “research ethics” is typically understood to relate to the procedural aspects of the research and not to the questions of value inherent in the stages of research I have mentioned. Questions of value are questions of ethics, and in many respects these are in effect repressed.^v

It is important to emphasise that to identify this ideology is in no way to criticise empirical research *per se*. There is every reason to engage in empirical research of quantitative and qualitative kinds, but there can be no reason for limiting research in the manner characteristic of empiricism. Empiricism - in the grip of the idea that there must be evidence open to view, whose confidence is currently bolstered by the vogue for evidence-based policy and practice - is in some respects a latter-day manifestation of the logical positivism of the early 20th century. Central to logical positivism was the doctrine of *verificationism*, the idea that the meaning of a proposition is to be understood in terms of its method of verification, with the corollary that statements that cannot be verified are held to be meaningless. This is echoed in the contemporary nostrum that in the absence of evidence of learning outcomes, no learning teaching and learning are taking place.^{vi}

(iii) *Identity and subjectivity*

The politics of identity and certain aspects of the culture of therapy have encouraged the view that differences are to be recognised in processes of explicit identification. This can encourage a self-consciousness about and a reification of identity, both of which are likely to have distorting or obliterating effects, in the manner described above.^{vii} A problem now widely acknowledged in relation to this is the practice of the labelling of children, where the label is likely at the very least to involve a kind of reductivism: not only the complexity of the child’s character and circumstances but the very nature, the existential dynamics, of what it is to be a human being are in danger of being *explained away*.

Once again, this is not to deny the importance of the political recognition of different groups or the benefits of therapies directed in one way or another towards self-knowledge. But it does throw light on what self-knowledge might involve, dispelling any sense that this can be fully understood in terms of the uncovering of a set of truths about oneself. “Know thyself” remains an imperative of (self-)education, vulnerable though this can be to degenerate forms of understanding.^{viii}

(iv) *History and remembrance*

Uncovering sets of truths about oneself runs into the problem that we all come from origins we cannot fully know, cannot fathom. This is more the simple empirical point that there is more to our past that we can retrieve – that is, that there is too much data to be collected. The point is closer to the charge of anthropomorphism: that our attempts to recall our childhood are always inevitably refracted through our mature understanding and refashioned with the benefit of hindsight, however much we may try to compensate for these factors. Furthermore, there is the logical point that remembering necessarily involves highlighting some features of experience to the neglect of others, and the selection will inevitably be affected by the nature of one's mature perception of the world and of one's place in it.

While this is also generally true in relation to the broader reconstruction that is history, the point acquires particular sharpness when it is related to the experience of trauma^x – hence, the familiar failure of Holocaust films, which attempt to present unspeakable horrors to the audience but do this in circumstances already governed by the practices of production and consumption of the cinema industry. This reveals sharply a more general truth to the effect that history is simplified and tamed in the telling: there is a danger that the clarity and vividness of the account that is offered may create an illusion of understanding that blocks the relation to what is necessarily immemorial. Given that the memorial risks fossilising the past, the term “immemorial” has come to be used to refer precisely to what cannot be recaptured in memory, what must be forgotten. But this does not leave us in a position where we can complacently forget: it is incumbent upon us not to forget the forgetting, to retain a sense of the immemorial.

Jean-François Lyotard explores these themes of childhood and the immemorial in a number of works, perhaps most prominently in his books *Lectures d'Enfance* (1991) and *Heidegger and “the jews”* (1990). His work in these respects is a facet of what might be thought of as the theme of negativity that runs through aspects of poststructuralist thought. Negativity here should not be understood as impoverishment or deficiency but rather as a proper recognition of the limits of human knowing and the limits of language – that is, of human finitude. It is not the ground for frustration or despair but rather the very condition of human being, in the absence of recognition of which the possibilities and depths of being in the world are inevitably obscured.^x

Impudent knowingness

Well over a century before Lyotard was writing, Ralph Waldo Emerson made some remarks that are pertinent to our theme. Himself no stranger to the problems of remembrance, he begins his essay “Experience” with the haunting and strangely contemporary question “Where shall we find ourselves?” The essay is in part an oblique meditation on the recent death of his five-year old son Waldo, but its tone is unexpected and defiant, in some

ways anticipating Nietzsche: “I grieve,” he writes, “that grief can teach me nothing.”

Emerson is critical of practitioners of the then fashionable “science” of phrenology, which would explain everything, and calls them “theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers” (Emerson, 1983, p. 475). The kidnappers are stealing, we can imagine, the possibility of responsible thought under the guise of spurious theorisations; they are slave-drivers in the sense that they force the operation of the intelligence into scientific templates and protocols of procedure, which – if we can exercise some licence with the vocabulary – simultaneously dehumanises the researcher and the researched. It would surely be too cynical to imagine that educational research today is as confused and ill-conceived as phrenology, but there is reason to revisit some of its presuppositions, as manifested most clearly perhaps in the assumptions and orthodoxies of research methods training.^{xi} In this respect it is worth remembering the tenor of Emerson’s response. “The grossest ignorance,” he writes, “does not disgust like this impudent knowingness” (*ibid.*). The somewhat awkward word “knowingness” refers, for example, to that familiar response of “the expert” who is immediately ready on hearing a new thought to arrest it into his already-worked-out conceptual armoury and theoretical taxonomy. He knows exactly where you are coming from, and before you have finished your paper or your sentence, he has “placed” your words: “So you are just saying that. . . What you are saying amounts to this. . . You are saying the same thing as. . .” For him it all comes down to this, and reductively so.^{xii} And the consequence of this is that now that he has your ideas taped, his own position is buttressed and effectively secured against further thought – at least against any thought that does not run along the railway tracks of his own “theoretical perspective”. Richard Poirier explains this further:

“Impudent knowingness” is knowingness that, resentful of anything it cannot explain, presumes to expose the mysterious sources of creation, whether of human offspring like Waldo or human offspring like literature; it exposes the genitalia, as if, by pointing to this or that or any other single organ, it could explain desire or the productivity of mind. That Emerson fully intends this sense of “impudent” becomes evident several pages further on when he remarks that “the art of life has a pudency that will not be exposed” (Poirier, 1992, p. 53).

It is worth attending to the passage that leads up to the expression Poirier cites, for here Emerson praises and celebrates forms of indirectness in relation to beauty and truth, but with implications for our interaction with one another. In a different and more contemporary vocabulary, these might be referred to as “epistemic virtues”. And when he speaks of “genius”, a key term for Emerson, he is referring not to the exceptional individual so much as to that capacity for what is new within each of ourselves:

The most attractive class of people are those who are powerful obliquely, and not by the direct stroke: men of genius, but not yet accredited: one gets the cheer of their light, without paying too great a

tax. Theirs is the beauty of the bird, or the morning light, and not of art. In the thought of genius there is always a surprise; and the moral sentiment is well called “the newness,” for it is never other; as new to the oldest intelligence as to the young child – “the kingdom that cometh without observation.” In like manner, for practical success, there must not be too much design. . . The art of life has a pudency, and will not be exposed (Emerson, 1983, p. 483).

One can scarcely think of virtues such as these in the absence of the human capacity for learning, and for teaching. But they are not virtues contained in the individual: they have to do with how the world and how it allowed to appear. The paraphrasing and expropriation of the Lord’s Prayer (“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. . .”) in “the kingdom that cometh without observation” underlines the seriousness – that is, the religious moment - with which Emerson takes these matters:

“Experience”, we have seen, is an essay about loss, but it is important that it is not mournful about that loss. The baby gradually discovers that the world is not just an extension of her own body, not immediately within her grasp, and this may be the beginning of that continual lesson that the human condition is *unheimlich*^{xiii}: to understand the world is to understand it as a place where she cannot be fully at home. And sometimes the adult has *not* discovered, or has declined to learn, that the objects of her understanding are *not* to be grasped and gripped, or clutched and controlled, not to be contained in concepts.^{xiv} Then she is impudent, and a threat to our lives and world and education. Painful lessons, but they had better be learned! “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects,” Emerson writes, “which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (p. 473). So the contrived and somewhat awkward negative form “unhandsome” might suggest that our condition is unbeautiful, which might be to say at the same time that we are something other than gods. But the embedding of “hand” in the expression also shows how our lives might be better – if, that is, we follow a thought, implicit here, that will be expressed over a century later by Heidegger to the effect that thinking is a handicraft. The craftsman works *with* the materials, feeling the resistances in the grain of the wood and releasing its possibilities (see Heidegger, 1976; also Cavell, 1990). The thinker, receptive, even reticent in some ways, is attuned to the possibilities of things, understanding that impudence here will allow things to slip away or crush them in its grasp.

But to speak of receptivity or reticence here is not just to endorse passivity. Emerson’s work is suggestive throughout of a superfluity of energy, and this is evident in the functioning of language itself. The sense of what the world is, or of what we are to make of it or of ourselves, is forever opening to new possibilities. We find ourselves on a stair. Around every circle another can be drawn. Our finding is a founding, and at every step, every word, every thought there is the possibility of finding or founding something new. It is incumbent upon us to seek no less. It is through phrases and thoughts such as these that this excess energy surfaces. But this is an energy that will be dissipated if it is discharged without measure

or engaged with blunt instrumentality. It depends upon a certain indirectness or sublimation, which will refine it and intensify its charge. It requires not impudence but *pudeur*.

The examples of art images mentioned above divide in ways that are less clear-cut, less convenient, than might at first have been thought. There is a complicity, we might say, between modesty and seductiveness, and this is a signal characteristic of *eros* as classically conceived – and it is important that, in its classical conception, *eros* extends well beyond its contemporary confinement to the sexual. To understand this better it will be helpful, in the next section, to follow some thoughts regarding the erotic intensification of desire in education as expressed classically in Plato's *Symposium*.

But before this let us pause to acknowledge the place of thoughts such as these in Nietzsche, a philosopher, as has been intimated above, influenced so much by Emerson. Such thoughts are drawn out with particular subtlety by Jacques Derrida in his *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. In phrasing that interweaves with this present discussion, Derrida refers to the "barely allegorical figure" of woman in Nietzsche's writings on truth. For Nietzsche, Derrida writes,

truth is like a woman. It resembles the veiled movement of feminine modesty [*pudeur feminine*]. Their complicity, the complicity (rather than the unity) between woman, life, seduction, modesty – all the veiled and veiling effects (*Schleier, Enthüllung, Verhüllung*) – is developed in a barely quoted fragment of Nietzsche's. It is a deadly problem: that which reveals itself but once (*das enthüllt sich uns einmal*). Thus the final lines: ". . . for ungodly activity does not furnish us with the beautiful at all, or only does so once! I mean to say that the world is overfull of beautiful things, but it is nevertheless poor, very poor, in beautiful things. But perhaps this is the greatest charm (*Zauber*) of life: it puts a golden-embroidered veil (*golddurch-wirkter Schleier*) of lovely potentialities over itself, promising, resisting, modest [*pudique*], mocking, sympathetic, seductive. Yes, life is a woman!" (Derrida, 1979, pp. 50-53).

Derrida goes on to quote the opening passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*. The quoted words are interspersed with Derrida's parentheses:

Supposing truth to be a woman – what? Is the suspicion not well-founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women (*sich schlecht auf Weiber verstanden*, have been misunderstanding as to women?) that the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper means (*ungeschickte und unschickliche Mittel*) for winning a wench (*Frauenzimmer* is a term of contempt: an easy woman)? (pp. 54-55)

Truth will not let itself be *won*, Nietzsche claims; nor will truth be pinned down. "That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth – *feminine*," Derrida explains. "This should not, however, be hastily mistaken for a

woman's femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes which might still tantalize the dogmatizing philosopher, the impotent artist or the inexperienced seducer who has not yet escaped his foolish hopes of capture" (*ibid.*). Truth, as we sometimes say with a capital T, the "Truth" writ large, which is the earnest, dogmatic philosopher's quest, is an illusory so-called truth; it deserves its scare-quotes. By contrast,

the blushing movement of that truth which is not suspended in quotation marks casts a modest veil over such a surface. And only through such a veil which thus falls over it could "truth" become truth, profound, indecent, desirable. But should that veil be suspended, or even fall a bit differently, there would no longer be any truth, only "truth" – written in quotation marks. *Le voile/tombe* (pp. 58-59).

Whereas nakedness is a condition we might be said to share with the animals, the possibilities of nudity and *pudeur* are alike necessarily understood in relation to clothing, or, to be more precise, to a kind of veiling; the history of sexual difference, whether revealed or dissimulated, be could scarcely be understood without this. The senses of arrangement and disarrangement, the lines of decency and indecency running like fissures through the tremors of desire, are plainly not static or timeless but dynamic. The proximity of *le voile* (veil) to *la voile* (sail) prompts Derrida, here and in various texts, to point towards truth not as towards something static but as necessitating a movement of turning and indirect journeying, by turns metaphorical and metonymic. How then are we to read the drama of *eros* in the *Symposium*?

Eros dishevelled

A symposium is originally a drinking party, and Plato's dialogue depicts an occasion when each of the men around the table takes his turn in presenting a speech on the nature of love. The speeches are at once humorous and serious, and replete with both mythological reference and teasing banter between friends. Speech supersedes speech, and argument trumps argument, but it is in Socrates' lengthy recounting of words he has heard from Diotima, the priestess of Mantinea, that the dialogue reaches its climax. And here there is an iteration of that idea of the refinement of desire and its redirection towards higher things that characteristically is taken to epitomise the presence of *eros* in education:

"And the true order of going or being led by another to the things of love, is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upward for the sake of that other beauty, going from one to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair actions, and from fair actions to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is. This, my dear Socrates," said the stranger of Mantinea, "is

that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute; a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold, and garments, and fair boys and youths, which when you now behold you are in fond amazement, and you and many a one are content to live seeing only and conversing with them without meat or drink, if that were possible – you only want to be with them and to look at them. But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty – the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollution of mortality, and all the colors and vanities of human life – thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty divine and simple, and bringing into being and educating true creations of virtue and not idols only? Do you not see that in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities; for he has not of an image but of a reality, and bringing forth and educating true virtue to become the friend of god and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?” (Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 211-212).

This appears to be the heart of the Platonic rationale for education, where natural desires are refined through their direction towards objects of beauty and then towards beauty itself, in steps towards the higher, where goodness and truth are one.

In another dialogue, the *Cratylus*, which treats questions concerning the nature of language, we find Socrates speculating on etymology in such a way as to connect the figure of the hero with *eros* and with the asking of questions. All the heroes, he claims,

sprang either from the love of a God for a mortal woman, or of a mortal man for a Goddess; think of the word in the old Attic, and you will see better that the name *heros* is only a slight alteration of *Eros*, from whom the heroes sprang: either this is the meaning, or, if not this, then they have been skilful as rhetoricians and dialecticians, and able to put the question (*erotan*), for *eirein* is equivalent to *legein*. And therefore, as I was saying, in the Attic dialect the heroes turn out to be rhetoricians and questioners. All this is easy enough; the noble breed of heroes are a tribe of sophists and rhetors (Plato, *Cratylus*, pp. 398).^{xv}

Legein is the verb form of *logos*, whose sense in Greek is altogether wider than “logic” in contemporary English. It includes the senses not only of reasoning but of speaking, and also of gathering, and even of making one’s way. Socrates’ placing of the idea of questioning in relation to this connects pointedly with his own practice in thinking, which is quintessentially a practice of asking questions. His manner of enquiry and (famously) his manner of teaching alike are characterised by questioning. And if questioning is oriented towards the truth, it cannot have the brutal directness of, say, police interrogation. The interrogator, we can imagine, thinks she knows in advance the way the truth must be^{xvi}; the questioner,

by contrast, has only a provisional, revisable sense of this, and is ready to adjust the line of questioning, ready, word by word, to find new foundations for thought. The interrogator, we might add, sees the suspect as a *means* to the truth; the questioner sees the learner as someone *in whom* truth is to be realised. Moreover, if Socrates as the teacher-questioner approaches the learner often by roundabout routes, working through digressions and false turns in the conversation towards a progressive refinement and intensification of the enquiry, ready to follow, though gently to redirect, the learner's sometimes wayward responses, the interrogator has contrived her approach with brutal calculation, fixed on the predetermined end. If the former is characterised by a kind of *pudeur*, the latter is plainly impudent.

It is common in the literature to read accounts of "Plato's theory" of education or of the state, but there is something deeply misleading about this. Plato tells us very little about what he thinks. He writes dialogues, or play-scripts, if you will, that depict Socrates in conversation with various people, typically involving at least one younger man. This will be a young man in whom Socrates has an interest, but his interest is, if nothing else, in that young man's education, and this is realised in conversation. Modern versions of "Socratic pedagogy" woefully misunderstand what is at stake here when they reduce what Socrates is about to a technique, a technique of questioning - little more sometimes than a benign form of interrogation. This obscures important facets of the scene of teaching that Plato depicts, in which the fact that this is conversation is crucial. One such facet has to do with the manner in which the learner makes his progress towards the truth, not typically in a simply linear pattern but with some false steps, some meandering, and often some humour on the way: however rigorous or precise Socrates' questioning can be made to seem, this is quite unlike programmed learning. A second has to do with the importance of Socrates' exposure in this scene and his obvious emotional investment in what is happening. And, third, there is the very nature of the content of enquiry, the nature of the truth itself, of its inherent value, its worthiness of contemplation, which is poorly and too crudely understood in terms of the Forms - that is, the Forms that have come down to us in a certain "Platonism", where it can seem as if we are to imagine them ready and available on the metaphysical shelf. The content of enquiry is realised in the dynamics of conversation: it is there that truth dawns, there where it becomes real, and, if the present attempt to follow through this account of *eros* is accurate, it can only become real where it is approached with appropriate *pudeur*.

This, then, is where the dialogue reaches its climax, with the evocation of the refinement of desire and its redirection towards higher things. This, at least, is what we thought we saw. But matters do not end there, and the drama is not closed. For this high point in the ascending series of speeches, this apparent culmination, is soon undone. There is a knock at the door, and voices are heard. It is a loud knocking. Who is it? Should they be let in or politely told that the party has ended? And the person who is more or less barging his way in turns out to be none other than the beautiful Alcibiades, plainly intoxicated and visibly distressed. He is distressed because he finds himself, perhaps against his inclination,

drawn back to Socrates. He is drawn back in spite of the popularity he enjoys amongst the Athenians; and painfully so as Socrates is the only person who makes him feel ashamed, angry at the thought of his own slavish state (215e). Although he cannot exactly disagree with what Socrates says to him, he experiences the attraction neither as gentle questioning (say, the actions of a benign midwife), nor yet as something like the inspired recounting of Diotima's words: it is simply not, or not simply, elevating in that way. It is experienced rather as the flute-playing of a satyr (216-217). He insists on and demonstrates the aptness of this image of Socrates. Socrates is ugly; he is a bully; he is a possessor of souls. And philosophy itself is not exactly, or not solely, the ascent towards the higher that the quoted words of Diotima words depict, but something more like the pangs of being bitten, by the viper that Socrates is. This is not so much a steady, upward progression towards the light, but rather a wrestling with troublesome, unfulfilled desire - a desire whose satisfaction is not to be found quite as one might expect: having spent a winter night with Socrates, under Socrates' threadbare cloak, with this "wonderful monster" in his arms, he rises in the morning, rejected, "as from the couch of a father or an elder brother" (209, c-d). The covering has hidden nothing, or at least not what was expected, in this ambiguous, erotic interplay of revealing and concealing. Many are the wonders of Socrates, and yet "his words are ridiculous when you first hear them; he clothes himself in language that is the skin of the wanton satyr" (221, e). To strip away this clothing, to pierce the mask, will reveal "the only words which have a meaning in them, and also the most divine" - but this comes about only in a faltering way, as if in a movement that by turns reveals and veils (222, a). This is Alcibiades' praise but also his blaming of Socrates for the ill-treatment he has received, which should serve as a warning to others. Alcibiades exhausts himself with his impassioned speech, the drama effectively upstaging the high-point of Socrates' sublime words (though a narrowly "philosophical" reading will surely miss this): those words are not subverted so much as disarranged. Alcibiades has arrived dishevelled and unkempt, turning the symposium into disarray: his drunkenness at this drinking-party, the passion of his outburst, subverts the wit of the earlier speeches; and the truths he speaks set on the line the relationship between sobriety and intoxication, between reason and madness. All this reflects a troubled state: the birth pangs of a philosophy that is not simply clear but alloyed with "the pollution of mortality", earthy, dramatic, indecorous, and dynamic. This is the *eros* to which we are lead.

How interesting to note then that "dishevelled" and "unkempt" are words, once again, that exist only in this negative form. What does this say of the disarrangements of appearance they imply? The art of education has a pudency that will not be exposed.

Conclusions prudent and impudent

This is really where I would like to end, but can we stop like this? Let me end then with a confession. I presented an earlier version of this paper at the annual Oxford Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of

Great Britain. On that occasion I was torn between, on the one hand, leaving the text as it is above, with implications, so it seemed to me, that unfolded subtly perhaps but naturally enough, and, on the other, setting out a little more explicitly the practical significance I had in mind. In the end, and with some misgivings on the grounds that this might seem too literal, I opted for the latter. What I said went roughly along the following lines.

The account I had developed could fruitfully be interpreted, I suggested, in relation to the so-called sacred triangle of education, which brings together teacher, learner, and content (whatever it is that is to be learned). I presented this diagrammatically, stressing that it was *the relation between the three points* that was crucial to education. Each of these points on its own was subject to a kind of inflammation – to an over-emphasis that would draw energy away from the others, in a manner that could involve a distortion of education and a diminishment of its dynamism. This would be so especially where a cause was being championed – a change of emphasis, a new approach – and where, in the course of policy-making, of expounding a new theory, or writing a new book, the case for one or the other needed to be set out loud and clear. I sketched the forms such inflammation might take, roughly as follows:

1. Overemphasis on the teacher

A characteristic vice here would be to see the teacher as the repository of knowledge, the one with all the answers, in a manner that would stifle humility in relation to the engagement of education, stifling this both in the teacher and in her students. Where a teacher was prized especially for her charisma, Hollywood-fashion, this would be an educational version of the cult of personality, leading the attention of learners too much towards the person, insufficiently towards what it was that was to be learned.

2. Overemphasis on what was to be learned

The danger here would be that the response of the student was overwhelmed by a kind of deference to content, whether this was to the bodies of knowledge of a traditional curriculum or to the skills and competences that have generally become more prominent in contemporary education.

3. Overemphasis on the learner

The problem here arose where the understandable concern with individual learners and existing interests and motivation deflected attention from the *matter* of education, from the need to ensure that what was to be studied was indeed something worthy of attention and might be something the students could not yet understand.

Each of these forms of inflammation^{xvii}, I claimed, took the life-blood away from what we might think of as the conversation of education, to reappropriate Michael Oakeshott's celebrated phrase^{xviii} and to echo the account developed above: "The content of enquiry is realised," I repeated, "in the dynamics of conversation: it is there that truth dawns, there where it becomes real, and, if the present attempt to follow through this account of *eros* is accurate, it can only become real where it is approached with appropriate *pudeur*." A conversation must be between people and about something, I continued, but what exactly would make for a good conversation was rather more difficult to define. Overemphasis on the relationship between people would lose sight of the significance of sharing a topic of concern. Preoccupation with that topic could deaden the relationship to the other person. There was something elusive, then, at the heart of this, something that, given too explicit a formulation, could easily be destroyed. To do so would be a form of impudence. To show restraint here, appreciative of this web of relationships, would be to think and respond with the pudency that education needed.

This roughly was how I ended my presentation. But then, to my surprise, the audience rounded on me. Or, to be explicit, first a couple and then several others began to slate my conclusion. My paper had been developed persuasively up to a certain point. Why was it that I needed the sacred triangle? Why spell it out, spoiling it, in this way? Surely this was at odds with the substance of what I had said, which, they seemed to think, was sufficiently articulate by itself.

I confess that I did not entirely share their view. The implications, as I have said, seemed to me to follow naturally enough, and I did not think there was a problem in being more explicit here, perhaps for those to whom this was less apparent. In any case, so I thought, these connections were there. Looking back on this, I would still hold on to the significance of the idea of the triangle as a means of indicating the dynamic field of teaching and learning, but it has come to seem to me that my attempt to be clear and reasonably explicit may have been somewhat imprudent – the imprudence of a kind of impudence. Hence, my inclination in conclusion is to recall the thought of that pudency in education that will not be exposed.

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ⁱ Which in turn, if it is not already obvious, alludes also to what is coyly referred to as the “F-word”. The lexical tensions abound.

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.sex-lexis.com/Sex-Dictionary/pudendum> (accessed on 4 October 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ The contrasts, which are being drawn too quickly here, are intended to serve partly as a heuristic, and they scarcely do justice to Brit Art. However much qualities of brashness may be apparent, there is more going on. Damien Hirst’s diamond-skull, entitled *For the Love of God* (2007), invites interpretation in multiple ways – say, as a comment on the art market or in relation to the vanity of human desire. (Online at: <http://www.damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god>. Accessed 20 July 2014.) Tracey Emin’s “tent”, entitled *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995), repudiates hasty responses when one is reminded of the different reasons why one might sleep alongside someone else (the period in question dates from the time of the artist’s birth), while the particular nature of the tent itself (a poleless igloo rather than a ridge tent) has feminine rather than masculine connotations. (Online at: http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/tracey_emin.htm. Accessed 20 July 2014.)

^{iv} For the background to these claims, see Standish, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2010, 2013.

^v For examples of the arguments behind these claims, see Hodgson and Standish, 2008, and Standish, 2001.

^{vi} The point being emphasised here is the conceptual lineage of these ways of thinking and the continuing effects of the now discredited logical positivism that was in its hey-day in philosophy some sixty to ninety years ago. For further discussion, see, for example, Standish, 2012.

^{vii} See, for example, Standish, 1995.

^{viii} See, for example, Standish, 2003, 2009.

^{ix} There is a new historiography that has developed around this - see, for example, Dominick LaCapra. See also Standish, 2008.

^x Derrida and Levinas might be seen as working with this negativity of thought, while Kierkegaard and, before him, the negative theology of Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius figure in the background. It can be contrasted with an affirmative strand in poststructuralism exemplified by Deleuze and, to some extent, Foucault, as well as by Lyotard in some phases of his writings. For a fuller account, see Standish, 2004.

^{xi} See Stone, 2006, and Hodgson and Standish, 2006.

^{xii} Knowingness of this kind has contributed to gross distortions in the reading of poststructuralist thought in educational research: to put this

briefly, the terms of poststructuralism were grafted onto the well-established growths of neo-marxist new sociology of knowledge and of identity politics in the name of something that came to be known as “postmodernist educational research”.

^{xiii} See Heidegger, 1978.

^{xiv} Note the etymological embedding of such ideas of containment and gripping in “concept” and *Begriff*, the philosopher’s stock-in-trade.

^{xv} The etymologising in Plato’s text has been criticised, but there is in contemporary research, it seems, a prevailing view that confirms the derivation of ἥρωσ (hero) either from ἐρωσ (love) or from εἶπεν (say, speak). I am grateful to Marianna Papastephanou for advice about this.

^{xvi} Of course it depends what crime series you watch. Plainly this is a caricature.

^{xvii} As also for further forms of education that could be elaborated, where, for example, one side of the triangle – say the personal relationship between teacher and student – is given prominence at the expense of attention to content, the proper focus of that relationship.

^{xviii} Oakeshott speaks of “the conversation of mankind” (Oakeshott, 1959).