

The waves of education: swelling as a metaphor in the work of Walter Benjamin

Le onde dell'educazione: l'espandersi come metafora nell'opera di Walter Benjamin

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This paper draws upon the recent turn toward the early writings of Walter Benjamin on education to make two interventions. First, it suggests that understanding education as awakening in the existing Benjaminian scholarship is only partially correct. A more basic phenomenon that acts as the condition for the possibility of awakening is the movement of swelling. The paper then charts the various ways in which Benjamin discusses education and youth in relation to swellings and exaggerations. Second, the paper uses this insight to reevaluate several discussions within current educational philosophy including the taken-for-granted primacy of the relationship between student and teacher and the fraught relationship between education and politics.

Keywords

Benjamin, educational philosophy, anti-fascist education, politics of education, youth

L'articolo prende in considerazione la recente attenzione ricevuta dagli scritti giovanili di Walter Benjamin dedicati all'educazione, al fine di realizzare due operazioni. In primo luogo, avanza l'ipotesi che l'interpretazione dell'educazione come "risveglio", presente nella letteratura benjaminiana, sia solo parzialmente corretta. Un fenomeno più essenziale agisce come condizione di possibilità del risveglio, e consiste nel movimento dell'espansione. Si dà conto in seguito delle differenti modalità impiegate da Benjamin per esaminare l'educazione e la gioventù in relazione alle "espansioni" e alle "esagerazioni". In secondo luogo, l'articolo sviluppa queste intuizioni per riconsiderare il dibattito presente nella filosofia dell'educazione attuale, incluso il primato, dato per acquisito, della relazione tra studente e insegnante, e la travagliata relazione tra educazione e politiche educative.

Parole-chiave

Benjamin, filosofia dell'educazione, educazione antifascista, politiche educative, gioventù

Recently there has been an increasing interest in Walter Benjamin's concept of instruction (Charles, 2016; Leslie, 2016; Lewis, 2017; Martel, 2018; Derroitte, 2018). Much of this work is to be lauded for a much needed reprisal of Benjamin's early reflections on education while he was a university student and member of the German Youth Movement. Authors emphasize the importance of thinking through questions of instruction and education, and how this problematic remains active throughout Benjamin's life, appearing in various engagements with technologies, media, and reflections on modern life. Underlying this work is an emphasis on learning as awakening (Eiland, 2018). There is no doubt about the importance of this connection, as it draws together Benjamin's interest in surrealism, education, and critical theory. Yet in this short paper, I would like to propose that the essential nature of teaching and learning for Benjamin is not completely captured by awakening alone. Indeed, awakening itself is predicated on a more basic kind of movement of which awakening is but merely a symptom. The quintessential educational movement is swelling. Karin Burk (2015) has highlighted the educational significance of this notion of swelling for Benjamin's reflections on children's theater, but I want to make it a *hallmark* of Benjamin's theory of education as a whole.

Recognizing education as a process or movement of various swells is important for clarifying Benjamin's own theory, but perhaps more importantly, it grants us a unique perspective on several contemporary problems within educational philosophy. These include the centrality of the teacher-student relationship for defining education as well as the role of politics in education. As such, this paper will attempt to make a small contribution to Benjaminian scholarship, and in the process, make a contribution to current discussions in educational philosophy as such.

1. Learning as Swelling

As was suggested above, Benjamin's notion of learning is akin to a kind of perceptual awakening from inside a dream. Concerning the relationship between dreaming and awakening, Benjamin writes, "The dream waits secretly for the awakening" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 390). He also observes, "The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 464). It is crucial that Benjamin frequently talks about *awakening* rather than being awake. For instance, Benjamin argues, "the Now of recognizability is the moment of awakening (Jung would like to distance awakening from the dream)" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 486). This subtle displacement enables the dreamer to be distracted from the immanence of the dream. Such distraction induces a weakening of the powers of the enchantment of the dreamscape without leaving the dream behind (indeed, Benjamin's criticism of Jung is precisely his undialectical understanding of awakening and dreaming). Said differently, the state of awakening is *of* the dream but not *in* the dream. Awakening makes it possible that the dream can become *visible* as a

dream (while still dreaming), and through a displacement of rapt attention to the content of the dream as it unfolds, the dream can become *free* to be otherwise than a mere tool for maintaining sleep. As Margaret Cohen (1993) usefully summarizes, Benjamin understands awakening in a post-Enlightenment (surrealist) way: he refuses the binary between waking and sleeping. This is why Benjamin can argue that “The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 13). On my reading, awakening is neither the abandonment of the dream nor its negation but rather the realization or the *making visible* of the elements of the dream for new use (dialectical thinking). Notice that in this case, the primary educational moment is in the perceptual and affective reorientation toward the dream (and away from it) via awakening. Learning is first and foremost a sensorial-phenomenal shift in what is visible rather than a detached, reflective, analytic analysis of the meaning of a dream from the perspective of being fully awake.

Benjamin also calls awakening a threshold experience. He comments, “We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us. (But together with this, there is also waking up)” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 494). A threshold, counter to what we might think, is not a linear passage from one state to another so much as a “swell” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 494) within a given state. Benjamin writes, “The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* [threshold] is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*...” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 494). A swelling is the outermost, extreme contour of something where it becomes most *visible*. Yet, at the same time, this exaggerated intensification and extension of something presses it beyond itself. Thus, there is a strange tension in the notion of swelling. It is a state that exposes something in its most acute form, yet in this acute form, something becomes different, almost unrecognizable as the kind of thing it is supposed to be. In short, swelling thrust the identical or self-same into a relationship with difference and alterity. This is why Benjamin states that a swell is *not* a boundary that separates and divides. Rather, it is a zone of experimental becoming. On my reading, we can think of *awakening as the swelling of a dream to its most extreme point* – or the point in the dream where the dream becomes visible, but in that visibility begins to pass beyond itself within leaving itself behind. Awakening, in this sense, is an innervation of the dream to such a degree that its internal logic begins to falter or stutter, revealing itself as an image. The innervation might come from the inside of the dream – provoked by a dream element – or might be the result of an external stimulus that is momentarily folded into the dreamwork only to dislodge it. In either case, the psychical energies enchanted by the dream are suddenly exposed to a surge that produces a swelling capable of pressing the dream to its maximal point of overflow.

To summarize, awakening as a swelling is Benjamin’s definition of learning. On the shoreline between sleeping and being awake *is the place of educational movement* – a movement that deactivates the dream world just enough so that

something (tradition, for instance) can become visible and thus knowable through a learning process. As Benjamin summarizes, awakening is a “synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)” in such a way that the “now of recognizability” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 494) reveals itself. Recognizability of the dream as a dream swells to the surface during awakenings, making itself available for learning. Here it is important to connect the notion of abilities in Benjamin’s work up with the theme of learning. In the book *Benjamin’s – abilities* (2008), Samuel Weber argues that an ability, for Benjamin, is a virtual potentiality that always ensures that what is actual is unfinished. As a potentiality, an ability means that there is always something indeterminate in every being that cannot be measured. Awakening, for instance, it is not that something is known but rather that something is felt as having *knowability* (*Erkennbarkeit*) – that its knowableness is suddenly on view. Knowability – or recognizability – is a potentiality to be known. As such, knowability is the swelling from within the enchantment of the dream that marks a threshold between not knowing and knowing. Before cognitive reflection on what is known, there is a more basic, affective, and perceptual sense of knowability that swells to the surface in moments of learning. Learning is therefore a dynamic state, wherein a subject is exposed to a potentiality for difference. This does not mean that all learning is simply relative. To learn about the Holocaust, for instance, is not to open the door to Holocaust denial (something that *cannot* be known for certain and thus must be exposed as a fabrication), but rather to take up the Holocaust in its knowability as an event that must be continually returned to and contemplated over and over again as its indeterminacy continually swells with new layers of knowability.

Already in Benjamin’s earliest writings, he defined education in terms of tradition becoming “visible and free” like a wave that swells and then crashes because “it is full of life” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383). A wave is the swelling of the sea. It emerges from an abundance within the sea itself and is therefore a part of that which it separates itself from. The wave, as a swelling, makes visible the sea, but also opens the sea up to a dynamic state of crashing. Waves that do not quite break are referred to as swells. In this sense, a swell is like an awakening: it is not sleeping or being awake so much as a point of extension that indicates the arrival of a threshold. Such a state is undecided and indeterminate as the swelling contains in itself both a capacity to crest and break or to subside into calmness.

Illustrating the diffuse knowability that swells throughout the abundance of life, Benjamin aptly titled a series of anecdotes about children found in the book *One-Way Street* “Enlargements.” This title speaks to the connections between children and dynamic zones wherein life touches its potentiality for change through a swelling up of knowability. In each of the anecdotes, Benjamin highlights a particular threshold moment – not as a moment of developmental change but as a moment of knowability as an awakening. In “child on the carousel,” Benjamin focuses on how the carousel makes manifest the knowability of the child’s wisdom of the “eternal recurrence of all things” (Ben-

jamin, 2004, p. 463). By riding the carousel, the child confronts an excessive, exaggerated dimension in his experience which is present yet unthematized. The thematization of a truth from within the dreamscape of the carousel offers a moment of awakening, but only because the child “moves away from his mother with a jerk” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 463) as the carousel takes off. The turning of a distance back into a closeness through the spinning of the circle encircles and demarks an insight that is contained within the dreamy world of flying animals, music, and orientalist jungle. A very particular and contingent experience (riding a frivolous carnival attraction in a moment of cheap distraction) becomes enlarged, engorged with cosmic meaning. A certain knowability inflates and is made visible and free precisely at the point where such reflection was meant to dissolve into simple entertainment. The distractions of the carnivalesque dream that exaggerate the tempos of life suddenly enlarge with the density of latent truth content. The child does not change per se, and the carousel ultimately stops, but the return to mother becomes an “uncertain ground” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 463). The child is awakening to the knowability of the world, but this has indeterminate effects. If the cosmos is supported by an eternal return, what returns remains in potential.

Perhaps we can push this even further and suggest that *youth* is the category of childhood swollen to the point of its dissolve, touching its otherness without losing itself completely. It is the most exaggerated tip of childhood as it both rises toward and withdraws from adulthood (and is therefore an indeterminate state of being). In an early piece titled “Romanticism: An Undelivered Address to Students,” Benjamin describes youth as follows: “Youth is surrounded by hope, love, and admiration – coming from those who are not yet young, from the children, and from those who are no longer able to be young because they have lost their faith in something better” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 101). In this quotation, youth are no longer children and not yet adults. They are not not-children, and as such, occupy a kind of liminal zone of indistinction between the binary couple of child and adult. Because of this precarious, exaggerated position, they are *most susceptible* to educational waves. Adults, as Benjamin continually emphasized, devalue youth. “The adult,” as Benjamin sarcastically writes, “has already experienced everything: youth, ideals, hopes, woman” and as such “devalues” the experience of youth. Teachers, in particular, miss the unique opportunities of youth, opting instead to “push” youth directly into life’s drudgery” with “serious and grim” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 116) resolve. The dream of youth is a swelling of childhood to the point of an awakening. For Benjamin, the particular exaggerated state that defines the threshold separating and conjoining adulthood to childhood is a youthful “struggle of the very possibility of values” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 123) – a struggle for the potentiality of history to be made visible and free to everyone. Hence the repeated emphasis Benjamin places on youth, not only in his early, school reform essays, but throughout his many writings.

2. The Origins of Instruction

Instruction begins with the question of tradition, of making tradition “visible and free” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383), as Benjamin suggests. But how does this happen? How does tradition become visible and free in the form of teaching? To answer these questions, we have to begin to reconsider the relationship between one’s teaching and one’s learning. This is not to enslave teaching to learning outputs (Biesta, 2017), but rather to enable our understanding of teaching in relation to its learning-inputs (or what I will describe below as teaching’s origins). Drawing on the notion of awakening as a kind of wave that swells, a teaching emerges through the internal swelling of learning to a point where a certain potential for transmissibility within learning starts to manifest itself. Benjamin observes, a teacher’s “learning has evolved into teaching, in part gradually but wholly from within” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383). Stated differently, teaching is the *awakening of learning to its potentiality for transmission* (its *transmissibility*). One becomes a teacher when transmissibility becomes thematized as a constitutive feature of one’s learning. Teachers are those who are swollen with this transmissibility to the point where their learning reaches a maximal point of dispersal, becoming visible *and* free. The teacher abandons him or herself to the swell (to what has been made visible through learning) “in such a way that it grows up to its crest and crashes down in a foam” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383) becoming free in its dispersal. The wave of education swells through learning into the crash of teaching which sends the wave outward in a million directions.

In a strange sense, teaching is actually the making visible and free its own *origin*. The word origin is important in this context. For Benjamin, an origin is not a point in the past but rather a dynamic rhythm within the present. He writes, “The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance” (Benjamin, 2009, p. 45). The origin persists within that which it gives birth to even if the resulting phenomenon is in constant, indeterminate change. Learning is always present in teaching (as its origin), and in turn, this origin is never lost even as it crashes and disperses. Through the dispersal of a teaching, the process starts all over in the form of new waves that themselves contain potentiality for new forms of knowability.

Importantly, the learner might have acquired real knowledge about tradition, but this is not what is transmitted in the moment of teaching. Instead, teaching transmits a certain knowability of tradition (tradition’s ability to be known). Knowability rises to the point of becoming not only visible but also free through outward-facing forms of lectures, notes, transcribed dialogues, outlines, and so forth. Interestingly, this sheds new light on the nature of homework. The teacher demands students produce evidence of their learning through the production of written work. Such work cannot be considered a teaching precisely because it has not necessarily swelled from within the learn-

ing at its maximum point of saturation. Instead, it is prompted by an external command to verify a process that does not yet have the capacity to verify itself. When teaching swells forth from learning, the resulting pedagogical forms are visible expressions of knowability as it crashes and disperses outward. There is thus an intermingling of roles between learning, researching, and teaching. They cannot be separated definitively one from the others, but rather are swept up together in the rhythm of education which oscillates between swelling, cresting, crashing, and swelling up again. Simply put, the teacher is the learner who is most swollen, and his/her notes are the exaggeration or enlargement of learning to the point where it expresses transmissibility. At such a point, the traces of learning (the yield of learning) produce a yield (a crash) that continually gives itself away.

It might at first appear that this process is highly directional: waves lead to crashes as learning leads to teaching. Such linear determinacy would undo the plastic indeterminacy of the potentiality of learning at the moment when it becomes most visible and gives itself away. At the same time, there is a lack of directionality. Benjamin writes, “it [the wave as an image of education] all depends on the wave abandoning itself [literally giving itself over] to its movement [*sich seiner Bewegung so hinzugeben*]” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383). On my reading, learning is only possible when the directionality toward teaching is forgotten, and the learner gives him or herself over to the movement/rhythm of that which makes it possible to have something to teach. Stated differently, the individual has to be *completely innervated by learning*. Abandoning the self to the rhythmic movement of the wave means that there is nothing in the wave that guarantees its culmination in the form of a crashing (a teaching). Such a crash can only happen through yielding to the indeterminating process of learning that may or may not lead toward the transmission of knowability.

This notion of teaching as immanent to learning complicates the way we normally think of teaching. While there might be a tendency to think of education as *first and foremost* a relationship with students (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), Benjamin highlights how teaching is latent *within* learning as a modification of learning. Students are neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to define teaching. When students are present, the resulting teaching cannot be thought of as exemplary. The teacher’s words, lectures, notes, or outlines are not absolute knowledge, nor are his/her actions models to be emulated. Indeed, Benjamin writes, “The concept of example (to say nothing of that of ‘influence’) should be totally excluded from the theory of education” (Benjamin, 1995, pp. 382-383). Professional teachers (or professors) often ground their pedagogy in examples intended to be imitated by students. In turn, the teacher or professor is also seen as exemplary of certain practices or forms of knowledge. Yet, this approach makes teaching impossible precisely because examples do not make visible and free their origins. They mask the contingencies of learning that underlie them, thus separating examples from their own historical becoming. The academy, for Benjamin, hides the origins of examples

behind the façade of stability, permanence, self-assuredness, competency, completeness, and excellence. The results are examples as definitive models (the teacher, for instance, embodies “best practices” or “the state of the field”). The figure of the teacher is not someone to be imitated, and his or her words are not to be taken as models to be repeated. Instead, he or she makes free a tradition so that it can be inherited and cited in its knowability. If the teacher offers examples or acts as an example, then such examples are not exemplary models posited for emulation. Rather, they are the presence of a potentiality for something to be known that swells up within a learning that the teacher has not completed...only made free.

An example of the dynamism of a teaching that makes its own origins knowable can be found in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*. As Benjamin describes it, this book expresses Goethe’s unresolved struggle with the mythic and tyrannical powers of nature to destroy human freedom. Goethe’s final writings “teach” this struggle “in detail, to the extent that a struggle which was kept secret in life emerges in the last of them” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 327). *Elective Affinities*, in particular, “testif[ies] not only, and not at the deepest level, to the mythic world in [his] experience. For there is in him a struggle to free himself from its clutches, and this struggle, no less than the essence of that world, is attested to in Goethe’s novel. In the tremendous ultimate experience of the mythic powers...Goethe revolted against them” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 327). Goethe, as a learner, struggled with the forces within him subverting his freedom of decision (natural passions, death, etc.). At a certain point, this struggle swelled up and turned outward, expressing itself in the form of a teaching, the novel *Elective Affinities*. The novel did not resolve the crisis of freedom so much as made it visible and knowable at its “tremendous ultimate experience” (peak swelling point) that was, in turn, given away (made free) to its readership. The reader inherits the tradition of this struggle now made visible and free, thus beginning another round of swelling, crashing, and dispersing. The indeterminateness of this process is coupled with a continual appeal to witness the struggle and the potentiality for freedom that it contains.

3. Politics of Education

There seem to be two paradigms for thinking about the politics of education today. First, there is the instrumental approach which reduces education to a means to an externally defined political end. Certain versions of critical pedagogy might be located within this paradigm as well as all forms of fascist, proto-fascist, and neo-fascist forms of education (as I will explore in detail below). The worry with this paradigm is that education will lose its *educational* value and become nothing more than a tool for creating a political community. Second, there is the non-instrumental approach which asserts the autonomy of education from politics. While addressing the issue of instrumentalization, in fully separating education from politics, it nevertheless produces another prob-

lem: the reduction of education to a pure end in itself. Missed in both perspectives is how politics can emerge *from within the swell* of learning and teaching as they rise up.

Here is but one example. As explained in this paper, to qualify as a teaching, the movement of learning cannot be repressed but rather must be continually exposed and relived in the moment of teaching. This means that teaching can never divorce itself from its origins. Rather, the act of the teacher is (a) taking what has been made visible (a knowability of the past) and (b) making it free (through transmissibility). That which is transmitted to future generations is not knowledge so much as knowability, or the potentiality/ability of something to be known. What emerges from within the educational logic of learning and teaching as a swell is a commitment to a fundamentally *democratic* and *anti-fascist* form of life.

To illustrate this point, we can compare and contrast the Benjaminian approach to the transmission of history and the fascist approach. Alexander Garcia Düttmann (1994) argues that fascism is never truly revolutionary precisely because it fetishizes its links with tradition. Take for instance the classical attempts by Nazi educators to inculcate youth to the lie of Nordic racial purity that must be preserved against any kind of contamination. In National Socialist textbooks, Greeks and Romans were held up as examples of Nordic races that betrayed their racial inheritance causing a weakening of their cultural and political systems. The myth of blood purity had to be sustained, even if, as Gilmer W. Blackburn points out (1985), it contradicted a multitude of historical and archeological facts. In his list of key traits defining “ur-fascism,” Umberto Eco (1995) likewise highlights the “cult of tradition” that informed both the Nazi interest in occultism and a rejection of enlightenment reason as well as the Italian fascist obsession with the holy Roman and Germanic Empires. In both cases, there was an embrace of 20th century technology and industrialization, but without any respect for modernity and its standards of rational, critical, or democratic discourses. For Roger Griffin (1994), fascism is defined by an irrational mythic core that is predicated on a belief in “palingenesis” or rebirth/regeneration. This rebirth founds a radically new future on a nostalgic longing for the revitalization of pre-capitalist ritual, cultish pageantry, and spiritual values capable of unifying the masses into a racially pure, strong, and healthy people. In an American context, we can also cite Donald Trump’s recent, neo-fascist intonations of “Make America Great Again” which assumes a history that is closed and regressive. Tradition, for fascist and neo-fascist agitators, is separated from origins to become an utterly reified, utterly one-dimensional myth to manipulate the masses into accepting the leader’s prophetic power and unquestioned authority.

Missing here is the dynamism of origins and how these origins offer up potentialities for awakenings beyond the blockages, repressions, and retreats set up and enforced by fascists. Teaching, for Benjamin, is always concerned with inheriting an origin by making it *free*. In this model, what is inherited is the latent potential in the past for further awakenings in the swelling up of learning

and the giving away of teaching. This is not a return to what was nor a projection onto what ought to be *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is a return to what never was in the past as an unfulfilled origin of a possible future made free in the present: transmissibility of what yet can be known (knowability). While fascist and neo-fascist teaching presumes knowledge of the past (in the form of absolute laws, irrational conspiracies, or mythic projections), this presumed knowledge actually stands in contrast to the inherent movement of learning and teaching as a swelling up, yielding to, and giving away of a knowability for future awakenings that cannot be predicted or controlled.

Yielding to the process of learning and teaching means giving up on one's preconceived knowledge of what was or what is to come, abandoning the self to the knowability and transmissibility of a lingering potentiality found in the pregnant, swollen margins of history. Such potentiality would be lost to the neo-fascist teacher who is interested in guarding the mythic past against such swelling. Only the Benjaminian inspired teacher is alert to what remains in the margins and capable of making this excess visible and free for new uses. Stated differently, for the fascist or neo-fascist, politics presupposes the end of education. Education becomes a means to an end outside itself – a mere tool to be manipulated for a purpose conceived of in advance. To oppose such abuse of education, we need not retreat into an a-political notion of education as a pure end in itself. Instead, we can opt for reconceptualizing education as a primary movement that swells with certain political implications. Such political implications cannot be imported from outside of education but must emerge according to the internal logic of education's own ebbing and flowing. And in this way, Benjamin's theory safeguards the freedom of education while also situating such freedom within a properly educational theory of democratic anti-fascism.

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