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Article abstract

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An Apprenticeship in Failure: Self-Cultivation and the Question of What to Do With Our Desires

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Taking Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time (À la recherche du temps perdu) as a literary vehicle, this article uses a psychoanalytic lens to examine the problem of what to do with our desires in the philosophy of education. The article describes an apprenticeship, a personal process of learning in which an ethical rapport with desire can be established. Apprenticeship entails a temporal relationship called "afterwardsness" (Nachträglichkeit), in which the subject constructs the truth of its desires in hindsight. This result can only be achieved by first failing to see the possibility of attaining the object of desire and then eventually coming to understand the nature of desire in general. While others have framed the relationship between desire and education in terms of either fulfilling one's desires or questioning their desirability, we argue that a more lasting ethical attunement to desire can be found via an apprenticeship in failure.

What to Do With Our Desires?

There is something about desire that throws us out of ourselves. Unlike our basic needs (such as sleep, food, water, shelter), which can at least be temporarily fulfilled, desire throws us into pursuits of a more elusive nature – for love, fame, happiness, or a career. Permanent contentment in these endeavours is rarely achieved, as there is always a “not yet” written into the recipe of our desire.

Desire is thus an existential question that cannot be avoided in one's relationship with oneself: What am I to do with my desires? This is a first-person ethical question par excellence which is also an educational one; it implies there is (pedagogical) work to be done by the self on the self. The question posed by our desires requires a process of self-cultivation that may even become a lifelong apprenticeship.

But what exactly would a pedagogical relationship with our desires look like? In contemporary educational discourses, the relationship is often seen as being one of affirmation. It has become widely accepted that learning should be fulfilling in itself – fun, entertaining, and immediately useful (Saari, 2022). Moreover, as shown for example by the ubiquity of the principle of choice in contemporary education policies, it is perceived that one should only have to learn what one really wants to learn (Peters, Marshall & Fitzsimons, 2013). These tendencies reflect wider cultural trajectories in which the degree to which we fulfil our desires becomes a measure of our freedom and autonomy as individuals (de Beistegui, 2018). We are encouraged to see our desires as forces to be cultivated through education and learning.

Interpreting the relationship between pedagogy and desire as affirmation has informed not only policy discourse, but also educational theory. For example, Michalinos Zembylas (2007) proposes a pedagogy of desire to “mobilise creative, transgressive and pleasurable forces within teaching and learning environments” (p. 331). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization, Zembylas sees desire as

a necessary ingredient if learning and creativity are to be productive (2007, p. 338). As a consequence, any pedagogy which limits rather than pursues the flows of desire is considered to be vulnerable to instrumentalization (p. 340). Following this line of reasoning, the response to the existential question of what to do with our desires would be to affirm the creative energies they offer.

Despite the prevalence of discourses which emphasise the emancipatory potential of affirming our desires, they have also been criticized. For example, Stiegler (2010; see also Forrest, 2020; Joldersma, 2020) has argued that in today's capitalist education the paradigmatic subject is a consumer who, by focusing on the ever-changing kaleidoscope of their desires, is being sidelined from many of the more democratic and communitarian aims of education. Furthermore, the Earth's ecosystems simply cannot satisfy all of our desires (Värri, 2018). This suggests that committing entirely to the affirmation of desire carries dangers to democratic values and indeed the environment despite the evident potential for creativity and fulfilment.

As a result, a reconfiguration of the relationship between pedagogy and desire has also been suggested. Gert Biesta (2017; 2020) in particular has sought a pedagogical alternative to contemporary (Western) society's reliance on the swift and sure satisfaction of desires. He argues that education should interrupt our desires rather than just affirm them. When one is faced with resistance, one's desires receive a "reality check." This triggers an awakening, or "fracturing of our immanence," so that we can ponder "the question of whether what we desire is desirable for our own lives and the lives we live with others" (Biesta, 2017, p. 16). For Biesta, educational work consists in providing such interruptions as well as supporting the student in their efforts to face the difficult question of just how desirable their own desires are.

In an era in which self-cultivation is too often understood as helping one acquire what one desires as efficiently as possible – we are thinking here of the way popular literature on self-cultivation is marketed through promises of increased productivity, for example – Biesta's work offers a welcome return to a more complex conversation about the nature of self-cultivation and the role of desire therein. Noteworthy from this point of view is that the question of the desirability of our desires is, for Biesta, "a radical first-person question" (Biesta 2020, p. 1020; cf. Aldridge & Lewin 2019, p. 458) and a "lifelong challenge" (Biesta 2022, p. 100). Thus, although Biesta himself mainly focuses on teacher–student relationships, the question about the desirability of our desires is very much a question that concerns the self's relationship with itself: no one else can tell us which of our desires are desirable; we must engage with the question for ourselves, and do so throughout our lives.

However, Biesta has less to offer on the precise nature of the work required for questioning the desirability of our desires. The lack of detail here is perhaps at least partly intentional – what is at stake is, after all, a personal matter that each of us must individually encounter and decide upon. Nevertheless, we suspect the lack of detail might also be because the concept of desire is almost completely atheoretical for Biesta: he provides no references, definitions, or descriptions of what he means by desire. This is surprising given the extent of twentieth-century philosophical and psychoanalytic literature on the subject.

This is where we would like to intervene in the ongoing discussion about the desirability of our desires. We propose a more theoretically robust understanding of desire based on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. The key insight we draw from Lacan is that desire springs from a constitutive lack at the very heart of our being. In this respect, we focus less on "whether what one desires ... is what one should desire" (Biesta, 2020, p. 1020, *our italics*) and more on the very dynamics of desire. We suggest that this shift opens up an understanding of self-cultivation as a lifelong apprenticeship in which one gradually develops an ethical relationship to one's desires.

We illustrate such an apprenticeship with the help of Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*). We especially draw on the interpretations of Proust's work by Gilles Deleuze (2000) and Miguel de Beistegui (2012). These interpretations foreground from Proust's rich work a narrative arc in which the protagonist learns about the inexhaustible nature of his own desire. Building on and connecting these interpretations to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, we depict the novel as an

apprenticeship of work on oneself, in which the protagonist finds a new, more ethical attunement to desire.

This brings us to a second contribution we hope to make. In spite of differences in their views to limiting desires, Biesta and Zembylas surprisingly agree on the proper temporal locus of pedagogy, situating it somewhere between the present and the future. Both emphasize the necessity of focusing on the present rather than some preconceived future to which the educational process is supposed to be directed (Biesta, 2017; Zembylas, 2007). However, both also suggest that attention should be directed to a specific instance of this present. For Biesta (2017, p. 98), it is that which “cannot be foreseen,” while for Zembylas, it is the point at which creativity, novelty, and change are produced (2007, p. 338). In other words, both understand the relationship between pedagogical work and our desires as taking place at a temporal scission between the past and the future.

Instead, we wish to emphasise desire’s complex imbuelement with one’s past. This is very much on display in Proust’s novel (its other title in English is *Remembrance of Things Past*), which allows us to illustrate how the past can play an essential role in helping people establish an ethical relationship to their desires. Here we employ the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness), which refers to a retroactive temporality and causality in understanding oneself: desires can only be understood after they have been experienced and worked through. While Biesta and Zembylas would hardly disagree with the importance of one’s past for understanding desire, our exploration foregrounds this complex temporal dimension, which is somewhat marginal in their work.

Through afterwardsness, the apprenticeship of self-cultivation takes on a structure based on error: 1) The protagonist is first fully invested in the fantasy of obtaining fulfillment by possessing the object they desire. 2) This inevitably leads to disappointments or a deeper collapse of the protagonist’s ideals and worldview. 3) Finally the protagonist acquires a mature way of relating to the ephemerality of desire and draws more conscious pleasure from this new understanding. We thus call the process an apprenticeship in failure, as it involves an initial error about the attainability of the object(s) of desire, which can then lead to a more ethical and mature understanding of the insatiability of desire.

We seek to equate neither education with psychoanalytic treatment, nor educational theory with psychoanalytic theory – as Zembylas (2013, p. 334) warns. We rather see critical applications of psychoanalytic theory as tools for unpacking the dynamics of desire regardless of the specific context. We use these tools to ask educational questions about the pedagogical relationship a person has with their desires. Literary fiction, on the other hand, enables one to unearth those complex, lifelong processes of personal growth which often go unnoticed in mainstream educational theorizing focused on phenomena in institutional environments of education (Samiei, 2018). The role of Proust’s novel series is to make visible how these concepts connect with the kind of self-reflective work that self-cultivation entails. Applying psychoanalytic theory with some help from Proust therefore expands on Zembylas’s and Biesta’s work on how to understand desire as an ethical and educational challenge of living in contemporary consumerist society.

Apprenticeship: Proust’s Way

Desire is a deeply existential matter. The advanced capitalist world provides very few coordinates regarding what to desire – apart from the imperative to enjoy; that is, to regard one’s life as one of endless possibilities to fulfil one’s desires without restrictions (Žižek, 1999). However, it is obvious that our desires are not always satisfied: others may desire the same things as us, or their desires may conflict with ours. In both cases we face resistance that forces us to confront the world we inhabit and its other inhabitants. As Biesta (2022, p. 100) argues, we face the lifelong challenge of continually assessing whether our desires are desirable in terms of the lives we lead with others. Given the ubiquity of desire, this challenge covers every aspect of our lives, and calls for a non-reductive type of education. Indeed, what is at stake here is the whole person.

The broad and complex nature of such an educational task might be the reason why it is rarely found in pedagogical discourse and more likely to occur in literary fiction. For instance, the Bildungsroman tradition is filled with life narratives in which the protagonist falls in love and discovers a different way of seeing the world, and in doing so inevitably encounters many disappointments along the way. It is only through these encounters that the subject is able to cultivate a *Weltanschauung* (or worldview) of their own. Such narrative arcs often also recount the challenge of learning to desire in a way that avoids unrealistic fantasies about fulfilment (Moretti, 2000).

We follow Rorty (2001) and Pippin (2005, p. 328, 336–337), among others, in reading *In Search of Lost Time* as a similar narrative of personal development. The novel is an intellectually rich depiction of the tragedies that can result from one's attachment to desire, and of the crumbs of wisdom these tragedies sometimes leave behind (Kubala, 2016). To be sure, the novel is not exactly a contemporary example of the kind of personal, societal, and ecological crises facing most people in the 21st century. Nevertheless, in terms of the cynical instrumentalization of material wealth and people to fulfil one's fickle desires, there are certain similarities between the present-day situation for a certain few and the one related in the book. The seven-volume novel focuses on members of the French elite in the late 19th century, who have the wealth and spare time to indulge in forms of excess and debauchery that would be unattainable to most people even today. The society it describes has become full of new ideologies and ambitious upstarts looking for wealth and fame, following the collapse of the former feudal elite and their ethical system. Yet there seems to be no convincing symbolic system that indicates what to desire and what to be (Pippin, 2005, pp. 319–322).

This is reflected in the grand narrative arc of the novel cycle in which Marcel, who is the main protagonist and a member of the Parisian cultural elite (much like the author himself), has trouble finding his true calling as a writer. He anxiously looks for the right way to become one by reflecting on existing writers and comparing himself to them. Yet he remains uncertain and unable to identify with any truly desirable ideal (Pippin, 2005, p. 318).

One could characterize this narrative arc as a search for recognition from the Other – a reflection on what parents, significant others, or society at large wants and desires from us (see also Smeyers, 2012, p. 183). Marcel tries on different models and identities for size, but nothing seems to fit. How to achieve recognition by the Other thereby remains an enigma. Eventually an intuition arises in Marcel that all others, even those he looks up to, might be just as lost as he is. In Lacanian terms, they too do not know the mystery of the Other's desire. "There is no Other of the Other"; no ultimate guarantee of "understanding" or making present the Other's desire (Lacan, 2019, pp. 15–17, 372).

Moreover, through a succession of failures in friendship, romance, and aesthetic fantasy, Marcel realizes that he can never attain what he desires. All objects of his desire remain elusive, whether the object is an ideal of himself, a certain profession, or a lover. However, rather than making him cynical, this realization gives Marcel an insight which releases tremendous creative and aesthetic energy and finally enables him to become an actual writer. Following in the footsteps of Deleuze (2000, pp. 26–38), we interpret the narrative arc of the novel as a lifelong apprenticeship. Following de Beistegui and Pippin, we emphasise how the apprenticeship allows Marcel to gradually gain a deeper understanding of the nature of desire.

"Object Small a," or Why We Become Invested in Desire

In the Lacanian tradition, desire is constituted by an unconscious longing for an unattainable full enjoyment. In developmental terms, desire is an effect of the ego's psychic birth as a separate entity whereupon it loses its immediate, undifferentiated contact with its primary caregiver (Žižek, 1999, pp. 18–19). As one learns how to speak, and to express one's own thoughts and desires via language, the subject becomes differentiated from the Other. This loss of immediacy and fulfilment haunts the subject's existence, as this former state of undifferentiation assumes the guise of an ultimate lost Thing, the reappropriation of which would provide full satisfaction. The Thing (and its lure) are elements of a

fantasy that fundamentally structures the way we perceive reality and teaches us how to desire (Lacan, 2001, pp. 197, 213–214; Žižek, 1999, p. 7). In reality, however, nothing is actually lost, because the sense of loss is established retroactively when the ego is formed. In other words, although the sense of loss is very real and plays a constitutive role, the thing lost is illusory (Fink, 1995, pp. 93–94).

In Lacanian parlance, the lost thing is marked with “object small a” (*objet petit a*). “Object small a” is an index standing for the Thing that was felt to have been lost. However, because nothing was lost in the first place, this object remains unattainable (Žižek, 1989, 104–106). Therefore, if someone does acquire what they think they desire, it will soon cease to be the object of desire – in which case the spectral “object small a” would shift to reside elsewhere (Žižek, 2006, pp. 66–68; 2005, pp. 139–140; McGowan, 2013, p. 69). This shows how desire, as opposed to a biological need (like hunger), does not seek satisfaction but its own prolongation (Fink, 1995, pp. 90–91). This also explains why Lacanian psychoanalytic and social theory does not advocate basing someone’s personal and societal existence on the satisfaction of desire, but on cultivating a certain rapport with it (see, e.g., McGowan, 2016).

Many aspects of Proust’s novel exemplify the self-perpetuating and rootless nature of desire. Like other characters in the book, Marcel repeatedly falls in love, only to find that possessing the beloved does not bring contentment. He also fantasizes feverishly about visiting breathtaking artistic and architectural landmarks in distant cities, and about meeting with old noble families, only to be then disappointed that they never correspond to his expectations.

Yet the effects of “object small a” appear not only in such forlorn ways but also as moments of joy and exaltation. Marcel frequently has aesthetic experiences which leave him breathless. In one famous passage in which he suddenly becomes fixated on a hawthorn hedge growing by the side of the road, a wealth of metaphors and associations are unleashed in long, labyrinthine sentences which evoke the plenitude of such an experience:

[The hawthorn hedge] resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars; while beneath them the sun cast a chequered light upon the ground, as though it had just passed through a stained-glass window; and their scent swept over me, as unctuous, as circumscribed in its range, as though I had been standing before the Lady-altar, and the flowers, themselves adorned also, held out each its little bunch of glittering stamens with an absent-minded air, delicate radiating veins in the flamboyant style like those which, in the church, framed the stairway to the rood-loft or the mullions of the windows and blossomed out into the fleshy whiteness of strawberry-flowers. (251)

The passage manifests an attempt to establish a vertical movement into the heart of some hidden realm through rich, poetic depictions (see also Bersani, 2015, pp. 8–9; de Beistegui, 2012, pp. 50–56). This testifies to the way desire relates to language as a system of signifiers: language secretes this desired Thing as its ultimate referent, and at the same time, prohibits immediate access to it (Fink, 1995 pp. 24–25). This is also why the quest for the desired Thing will only result in an endless series of signifiers (Lacan, 2019, pp. 370–372). Throughout the novel this is discernible in the operation of analogies and metaphors (cf. Fink 1995). There are descriptions (primarily aesthetic) of people and things that are juxtaposed with experiences and impressions from elsewhere (de Beistegui, 2012; Bersani, 2015 pp. 201–202, 221–224). For instance, the physical appearance of someone brings to a protagonist’s mind Zipporah in Botticelli’s fresco in the Sistine Chapel (Proust, 2003, pp. 385–389), while each encounter with a lover is accompanied in his mind by a beautiful piece of music (Proust, 2003, pp. 407–410). And yet, in spite of all this poetic language, Marcel is prevented from getting to the mysterious object of this desire:

But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns – breathing in their invisible and unchanging odour, trying to fix it in my mind (which did not know what to do with it), losing it, recapturing it, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed the flowers here and there with a youthful light-heartedness and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in music – they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more

deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secret. (Proust, 2003, p. 252)

To sum up, the reality of objects is enchanting only to the extent that they imply an absence or deferral: their appearance seems to hide something deeper – a realm waiting to be discovered by the intellect, language, and the senses (cf. Deleuze, 2000). If this promise of something more were to be removed, it would be because the bare reality of the object no longer elicited desire (de Beistegui, 2012, pp. 55–58).

Going Through the Fantasy, or Forming a New Relationship With What We Desire

The challenge for the apprentice is to establish a reflexive distance to these workings of desire. In Proust's novel, this is already indicated in the very first chapters. In the sensitive soul of the protagonist there are, at a very young age, precocious premonitions about the fact that satisfaction does not really lie in getting what you want – quite the opposite. There might be some unknown pleasure drawn from the very fact of not getting what you desire. For example, as a child, Marcel is anxiously waiting and trying to get his mother to come upstairs and give him a goodnight kiss before going to sleep. It is absolutely imperative, a matter of life and death, that this expression of motherly love be given. Yet, even before his wish is fulfilled, Marcel falls into foreboding and despair – he is somehow aware that once his insistent desire is at the point of being fulfilled, the object is irretrievably lost and there is no longer anything to be anticipated. Perhaps the very moment of awaiting must therefore be prolonged:

But this good night lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon, that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, ... was for me a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again. So much so that I reached the point of hoping that this good night which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared. (Proust, 2003, pp. 52–53)

In another passage, as Marcel's passionate teenage love for the young girl Gilberte starts to recede, he intuits that he will eventually become indifferent to the girl's whole existence, and ultimately, she will be forgotten. An uncomfortable taste of symbolic death follows such a realization; a part of oneself disintegrates irretrievably with the loss of that love. This is an uncanny intuition into how fantasy supports reality; once something ceases to be what you desire, it is no longer within the sights of your fantasy, and those sights must be set on something else.

The novel repeatedly shows that the attachment to vain pursuits of getting what you desire is difficult to unravel. But eventually something happens – a sudden, symbolic displacement of how the subject apprehends reality. In the final volume of the book those characters still alive come together at a costume party with their faces painted white. After a long absence from high society, Marcel now barely recognizes these figures who have all grown old and weary behind the makeup. He also comes to the bitter realization that he too, who had thought himself still young, with the fulfilment of his fantasies and desires still ahead of him, has now grown old as well. This wistful moment shows the disjunct between our desires and mortality: flesh will wither away and die, but desire, it seems, is not limited by time; it remains “ek-static,” ever hurdling into the future, penetrating bodies and individual lives:

it seemed to me now that throughout the whole duration of time great cataclysmic waves lift up from the depths of the ages the same rages, the same sadnesses, the same heroisms, the same obsessions, through one superimposed generation after another, and that each geological section

cut through several individuals of the same series offers the repetition, as of shadows thrown upon a succession of screens. (Proust, 2003, p. 4802)

The coordinates for sustaining desire start to crumble as the vanity of pursuing ephemeral goals becomes painfully apparent to Marcel. The Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition recognizes the point at which this futility becomes undeniable as “going through the fantasy” (Lacan, 1977, p. 273). While it may cause anxiety and sorrow, it also indicates the possibility of liberation from the tyranny of desire – desire becomes “liquidated” (Lacan, 1977, p. 267) so that the subject becomes less fixated on and attached to certain objects (Lacan, 2019, p. 431) and can mourn this loss properly. Though the subject continues to have desires, it is now possible to maintain some critical distance from them and to find pleasure in moments of partial fulfilment. There is no longer the neurotic compulsion to seek permanent satisfaction (Johnston, 2005, p. 338; Ruti, 2009).

In the novel this is apparent in the way Marcel learns to find conscious pleasure in the spatiotemporal tension between himself and the object of his desire (cf. de Beistegui, 2012; Kubala, 2016). He now profoundly understands that his objects of desire will evaporate after their fleeting moment in time and will only retain their allure if he maintains a certain tension and distance from them. Herein lies the possibility of enjoying objects at a distance instead of trying to possess them (Proust, 2003, p. 4804).

Furthermore, Marcel has gained the ability to consciously “use” objects of desire even when (or perhaps especially when) they produce suffering, as they are a means for developing insights about human life (Proust, 2003, p. 4804). Even if the apprenticeship can never be completed, Marcel has made significant progress: (1) He started by being fully invested in a fantasy and anticipating its future fulfilment. (2) This was followed by a series of disappointments and ultimately a deeper collapse of his ideals and worldview. Finally, (3) he reached a sort of acceptance and understanding of the ephemerality of desire and learned how to consciously draw more pleasure from this. By understanding the unattainability of all fantasmatic objects, he has formed a more mature and ethical relationship to his desires.

Afterwardsness: The Temporal and Epistemic Structure of Apprenticeship

Although Marcel does make progress, the apprenticeship by no means proceeds in linear fashion. It rather ascribes to a peculiar temporality that Lacan (1988) calls the “time for comprehending.” Deeper comprehension of one’s desire unfolds unevenly and without a clear direction, in aporetic moments that relapse, twist, and turn in a way that is unique to each subject. Instead of a steady accumulation of knowledge about oneself and the world, learning about one’s desires requires a series of transformative experiences that challenge and disrupt one’s thoughts, feelings, and desires (Dirkx, 2012; Atay, 2013; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). The time for comprehending is very much aligned with Biesta’s idea that confronting the question about the desirability of our desires requires not only an interruption of these desires by something in the world, but also “time to encounter the experience of resistance and ... work *through it*” (2017, p. 19, italics in the original).

What this working through consists of has much more to do with the past than is apparent in Biesta’s work, however. Apprenticeship involves a radical symbolic reshuffling of one’s past, which Freud (1950) referred to as “afterwardsness” (*Nachträglichkeit*), and which in Lacanian terminology is expanded upon and referred to as the *après-coup* (Lacan, 2001, pp. 53, 339). Afterwardsness builds on the understanding that through our use of language, we are constantly addressing meaning to various objects, events, and feelings by hindsight – in the same way that sentences or musical melodies become endowed with meaning or sense once they are brought to completion (Lacan, 2001, pp. 339; Žižek, 1989, p. 103; Fink, 1995, pp. 63–64). A clinical example is helpful to show how this connects with the self’s relationship with its desires: analysands coming into psychoanalytic treatment may report vague symptoms (e.g., anxiety or compulsive repetition), expecting they have a hidden meaning that can be worked out with the

help of an analyst. However, these meanings are not already “there,” simply waiting to be uncovered. The true meaning of these symptoms is created during analysis rather than found. In other words, these symptoms are effects which precede their cause. “Their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces the truth” (Žižek, 1989, p. 58; see also Eickhoff, 2006, p. 1453). This is expressed in Lacan’s use of the future perfect: In the process of understanding the person we have developed into, we “will have become our own cause” (Lacan, 2001, pp. 47, 52–53).

As this is the way we constantly become subjects and construct meaning for ourselves, there is nothing false or artificial in such an understanding (Ruti, 2009). Marcel comes to a similar conclusion as he ponders the unity of his work of art, and, by the same token, his life. This unity, he claims, is not factitious, but “all the more real ... for being born of a moment of enthusiasm when it is discovered to exist among fragments which need only to be joined together; a unity that was unaware of itself, hence vital and not logical, that did not prohibit variety, dampen invention” (Proust, 2003, p. 3557).

Whatever progress Marcel makes during his apprenticeship thus does not come about through a linear accumulation of information but rather through a constant symbolic reworking of the person he is. In the creative unfolding of understanding qua afterwardsness, there lies an emancipatory possibility of advancing from obsessive repetition in the pursuit of our objects of desire to “creating history” in the sense of understanding something profound about ourselves (Eickhoff, 2006, p. 145; cf. Hoy, 2009; Pippin, 2005, p. 326). As such, it also involves an enactment of our freedom, but in a retroactive sense – the freedom to relegate some elements in our past and promote others and to assume responsibility over them for making us who we are (Žižek, 2012, p. 212; see also Ruti, 2009).

Imbued in the complex temporality of afterwardsness, apprenticeship has a peculiar epistemic structure. We cannot know the truth about our desires by simply avoiding the kinds of mistakes Marcel repeatedly makes in his pursuit for fulfilment in art and love. In fact, the opposite is the case: it is precisely such erroneous adventures that allow us to discover their truth (Žižek, 1989, pp. 59–67). This is why an “additive” model of knowledge transmission is entirely unsuitable to describe apprenticeship (Britzman & Pitt, 1996, p. 119), and also why the relationship between truth and subjectivity is problematic in critical self-reflection. As desire and fantasy are deeply grounded in one’s own subjectivity, it is nigh impossible to have a sufficiently critical perspective of them (Lacan, 1977, pp. 130–132). This is why the subject needs the regular short-circuiting of fantasies and desires to be able to arrive at the truth of their existence (Atay, 2013).

Resistance or disavowal is a familiar theme in psychoanalytically oriented educational theory (Atay, 2013; Alcorn, 2010; Garrett, 2013). This “will not to know” the way in which our desires are imbued with fantasy not only makes it impossible to use an additive, or “banking” (as per Paulo Freire), model of knowledge to teach about desire, it can also make it very difficult to teach anything at all. Proust’s novel suggests, however, that life itself will offer plenty of opportunities to learn simply by preventing us from acquiring our objects of desire. Indeed, if we follow Lacanian theory, subjectivity itself is structured in such a way that these opportunities will arise time and again.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Desire in Self-Cultivation

“We find satisfaction in not getting what we desire”: while this adage may initially seem quite extreme, it does not describe a pessimistic or cynical philosophy of education. We concur with Sun’s (2019) suggestion that rather than striving to simply fulfil desires, pedagogies should also take an interest in the lack at the heart of our being. To us, this interest is also where Biesta’s call for pondering the desirability of our desires leads us, once desire is taken in theoretically rigorous terms. Having taken a more explicit theoretical interest in the dynamics of desire, our argument illuminates in more detail than Biesta’s analysis the specific work involved in asking which of our desires are desirable. This also suggests, with reference also to Zembylas’ pedagogy of desire, that if desire is to be affirmed, this affirmation takes on the peculiar temporality of afterwardsness, which may be more like a questioning than an affirmation. We argue that

making mistakes and being able and willing to learn from them play a key role in such a process. This is not something that can be easily taught, yet in terms of self-cultivation, an attunement to the nature of desire should become a practical objective in the art of existence.

In other words, the apprenticeship we suggest constitutes an ethics of desire. This is not a rules-based ethics of deontology or utilitarianism, requiring one to perform certain duties. Instead, it refers to a self-reflexive form of ethics related to caring for oneself (Ruti, 2009), as this properly takes into account our existential predicament of living without any universal coordinates for what we should desire. Taking ethical responsibility for how and what we desire means accepting that no one else can do this for us, and that there is no guarantee that our choices can be ethically justified. This is because the meaning and truth of one's own actions are always assigned retroactively (Green, 2017).

An ethics of desire does not presuppose that happiness is a sustained feeling of contentment. It does not reveal a hierarchy of the most desirable things in life; nor does it reveal the necessary phronesis, or practical common sense, to deal with all the various challenges life throws at us. In Proust's novel, there are examples of learning to appreciate the small pleasures in life, and of feeling love and appreciation for people and things from a distance, without the need to possess them – not that these are reducible to “life hacks” or self-help rules of thumb. Rather, and perhaps most importantly, the examples are presented in such a way that the question of how to desire remains a permanent one for each and every one of us (see also Ruti, 2009).

So instead of coming up with a “method” for teaching and learning about desire, the apprenticeship in failure we have outlined here points toward an ethical attunement to our desires with no guarantee of what that will bring forth. It entails a fearlessness of failure in the pursuit of what is most dear, and a willingness to acknowledge such failures, to examine them and to learn from them. This is always risky: It is quite possible that the mistakes or disappointments encountered in doing this will not end well, or that we will never learn from such errors – life may be too short, or we might be caught in the illusion of pursuing perfect happiness without realising this (see also Berry, 2008). Apprenticeship fundamentally depends on such moments of insight, and we must take note even if they are partial or temporary. It may also be that we learn and then forget again – but it is certainly a risk worth taking.

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