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# Catherine Homan, "A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between"

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**Catherine Homan.** *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between.* Rowan & Littlefield 2020. 218 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781498594448).

In this very impressive first book, Catherine Homan surveys the concept of education in classical German philosophy. In focus is the question of how ‘poetic’ education differs from the notions of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘moral’ education. As such, the book is perhaps best understood as a study in the genesis of the concept of education from the eighteenth century through post-Heideggerian thought in the 20th century. Homan proposes that education is poetic when it originates in recognition of the ungrounded or ‘liminal’ dimensions of experience, what the book’s title refers to as the ‘in-between.’ The four principal chapters of the book attempt to motivate an outlook in which poetic experience is integral to human intellectual development.

Homan engages the concept of education through the classical German auspice of ‘formation’ or ‘cultivation.’ To this end, the book is not a study of pedagogy. The starting premise of Homan’s study, outlined in the first chapter, posits that the notion of education as proposed by Immanuel Kant, and later Friedrich Schiller, erroneously separates the rational from the aesthetic (2). Cueing on the etymological relation between the German terms *Bild* (image, form), *Bildung* (education), and *Bildungstrieb* (formative or cultivating impulse) Homan summarizes, ‘[w]e are made for art, for images, and possess the impulse to create and form, so education would be cultivation of that impulse’ (3). Turning to Friedrich Hölderlin, Homan invokes the romantic-era notion that poetry comprises such a medium for cultivating the human creative impulse. Hölderlin is noteworthy in this light because he regards poetry as an especial vehicle for articulating the distinct but harmonized spheres of human and nature, subjective and objective (2-3). Whereas Kant and Schiller maintain that aesthetic education merely serves to prepare the intellect for moral enlightenment, Hölderlin views poetry as opening up the totality of experience for development of the human individual (3, 5). Citing Hölderlin’s personal letters and his novel *Hyperion*, Homan defends Hölderlin’s view on the educational potential of poetry as the more attractive one insofar as it is predicated on an existential recognition of the ‘groundless grounding’ inherent to intellectual development; in other words, Hölderlin better appreciates that the human being possesses a formative, educational impulse whose features are knowable, but whose origins are unknowable. Poetry is a creative art that brings this groundlessness to expression, not attempting to conquer it or overturn it, but rather, affirming it, letting it be. Homan writes on this note: ‘poetry requires our attunement to this ambiguous revealing, a holding open both of what is said and what is not. Education, then, requires a cultivation of this preservation of what is other to us’ (5).

The book’s second chapter focuses on the poetry of Paul Celan, providing a reading of Celan’s way of articulating what Homan terms the ‘in-between’ or ‘liminal.’ Homan in effect engages Celan’s work as an instance of poetry that both exemplifies and acknowledges the groundlessness of human insight into the boundaries of what can be expressed and what is beyond expression. Homan summarizes: ‘[t]he poetic word speaks, and continues to speak, precisely because it is aware of its own limitations’ (60). Poetry fosters an attunement to self and other (61). The chapter also includes some engagement with the writings of Martin Heidegger and Hans-



Georg Gadamer, on their ways of describing poetry's potential for contrasting the homely with the foreign, or the familiar with the unfamiliar.

In a secondary line of inquiry to the book's primary topic, Homan places particular focus on the role of play (*Spiel*) in poetic education. This theme drives the third and fourth chapters of the book. Play is a concept that figures into accounts of the aesthetic ranging from Kant, Schiller, and Hölderlin up through the 20th century with Gadamer and Eugen Fink. For instance, readers of Kant's third *Critique* would be familiar with his claim that aesthetic judgment involves 'free play' of the faculties. Unique to the concept of play in the writings of these philosophers, however, are the various ways play is juxtaposed alongside rationality and relegated to relatively minor status as a component of aesthetic experience. In this auspice, a central task Homan sets is to adduce reasons for including play as an essential component in poetic education. Drawing on Gadamer and Fink, Homan describes play as central to the arenas of human development that involve education. The author writes: 'Play provides ... a significant way of understanding the incalculable and relational nature of education as well as the groundlessness of development' (10-11). In this light, 'play' does not specifically mean games or sports, but instead refers to any kind of self-contained, imaginative activity that is performed by absorption in a world. Play resists firm definition because its ultimate purpose is itself. It transpires in its own space and time, both of which disappear when play stops (100). Homan draws a connection to the theme of poetic education by suggesting that poetry exemplifies a primordial kind of play. Play and poetry each involve an engagement with the world, and typically, other persons (the composition of poetry supposing intersubjective communication). Both activities likewise require an implicit recognition of the activity's very groundlessness. Both play and poetry cue on recognizing the liminal, unfixed horizons of their spheres. This is to say, play and poetry are both modes of being that do not possess strict formulae for what is performable or achievable. Yet, play and poetry also operate with a grounded character, where certain limits nonetheless exist. Of particular note here, and central to the account, is Homan's substantial discussion of Eugen Fink's account of play. Fink develops the concept of play in a distinctively Heideggerian, world-centric guise. To date, most of Fink's work has still not been translated into English, and much less has there been extensive engagement with Fink in English-language scholarship. The book's third and fourth chapters are very valuable in this regard.

A third core topic Homan examines in the later stages of her study is the relation of education to language. The role of language relative to play and poetic education is of central focus in the book's fourth chapter and in its substantial concluding section. Homan adopts a principally Gadamerian position regarding language. Gadamer's account of language regards the human being as situated in the between-space between infinity and finitude. As Homan summarizes, '[t]he world presents us with the greatest task, namely, to seek an answer to this riddle of our existence.... We respond to this task not through domination over the world, but through dialogue with other world beings' (143). Moreover, Gadamer also envisions language of a piece with education, because language enables others to communicate their experiences to us (144); similarly, it is a primary means by which one appropriates tradition and engages the unknown and futural (151ff.). Echoing Fink's conception of play, language's affordance of dialogue is essentially playful (149). The

concluding section of the book, which provides something of an appendix, extends the Gadamerian view of language by invoking contemporary positions on the relationship between language, personal formation, and intersubjectivity. Among the figures cited, Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, and bell hooks figure prominently. A question at the forefront of these final passages concerns how the preceding discussions of education's fostering of tradition can responsibly recognize and safeguard the truly foreign. Homan's aim here is to address the objection of many scholars that Gadamer's conception of education is overly predicated on realizing tradition, as if self-formation is solely a product of appropriating one's historical identity (165). To this end, I find Homan's engagement with the selected contemporary thinkers to be quite effective; indeed, Homan finishes the book by rendering her topic a vital one.

This text has many strengths, from its wide-lens study of education, poetry, and play in German philosophy, to its very focused line of inquiry into the meaning and significance of the 'poetic' in human development. Homan juggles many texts, philosophers, and schools of thought very gracefully. Overall, the book's breadth of vision is impressive, admirable, and inspiring. On the flipside, these features are also the ground of my only real criticism. The book suffers just a bit from the attempt to synthesize so many ideas and strands of thought in a space consisting of less than 200 pages. The reader must be able to keep track of many related but divergent concepts and questions in order to follow Homan's account. For related reasons, upon reading the book's final chapter and its lengthy concluding section, I found myself wondering whether by this point in the analysis, poetic education does not fall off the radar somewhat, in favor of a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity. I suspect that Homan's interest in this final turn is to widen the impact of the study's primary topic and illustrate its broader relevance. If this is the case, the material is quite successful, but perhaps strained in its connection to the starting premise of the book.

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