

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Peter Roberts & Herner Saeverot, *Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018). ISBN: 978-0-415-83414-8 (hbk); ISBN: 978-0-203-48596-5 (ebk). 143 pp.

Reading with the Spine

In *Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov*, Roberts and Saeverot (2018) point out that the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov urged us to read with our spine. The authors explain this directive as a commitment to reading that engages both the heart and the brain so that neither objective nor subjective interpretations come to dominate our experience of texts. As Roberts and Saeverot beautifully put it, “it’s about being touched between the shoulder blades” (p. 89). In its meticulous entirety, this book demonstrates reading-with-the-spine and the reader is brought into new ways of thinking about this literature and what it may teach us about education.

The book is a slow and thoughtful engagement with six texts (two each) by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov that binds literature, philosophy and education in sustained and fascinating ways. Each text challenges current education orthodoxies as well as the rationalities that render them true. Roberts and Saeverot’s disturbance of reason is daring and important given education’s deep association with reason. After all, a liberal democracy depends on an education system to produce rational and autonomous individuals. However, the book’s strength lies in this very unsettling of reason by opening up ways of speaking back to normative understandings – not just by unsettling reason but by offering new ways to reimagine education.

Roberts and Saeverot’s central thesis is that literature is a source of worthwhile knowledge for understanding education. They draw our attention to education’s place in the humanities, noting that education as a function of culture, is as much a cultural phenomenon as literature. In this sense, stories become a kind of science that advance our pedagogical understandings. Roberts and Saeverot see the value in literature as emerging from its complexities. They argue for openness as an epistemological and ethical value, allowing for a broad range of sources, including literature, to think about education. In the context of this book, literature offers insights into the meaning and significance of reason; specifically, how neoliberal rationalities come to shape education in ways that are associated with individualism, self-interest, outcomes-based education, and commodified knowledge.

In as much as the analyses in the book work to unsettle reason, the possibilities for further insights into education are fruitful. The book opens with a critique of rational egoism by using Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. Roberts and Saeverot define rational egoism, a prevailing philosophy during Dostoevsky’s life, as a psychological egoism in which people are primarily motivated by individual need and interest. Significantly, rational egoism imbues a normative quality, making it a natural and desirable aspect of society. In contrast to this view, Roberts and Saeverot argue that *Notes from the Underground* suggests a more collective view of individuality – a social individual. Dostoevsky’s text, they suggest, calls for a much more self-sacrificing selfhood in which our attention is turned towards others. It’s as though Dostoevsky is saying that choosing against our own interests is the ultimate act of individuality. In which case, an argument can be made that the resulting discomfort or even pain from this sort of action suggests that education should involve some level of discomfort, or, that suffering itself is educative.

Roberts and Saeverot use Dostoevsky’s critique to then draw links between rational egoism and neoliberal educational thought. In doing so, the authors use the texts to offer

alternative imperatives for education. Roberts and Saeverot reject aspects of neoliberalism connected to self-interest. They argue, for example, that rational egoism, like neoliberalism, creates certain versions of social cohesion and inclusion that are rooted in individualistic rather than collective ends. In contemporary education policy, collaboration and participation prevail as education outcomes. However, participation is often framed as the need to produce certain kinds of *individuals* who are self-managing, self-reliant and enterprising. Moreover, the increased flexibility and choice built into curricula maximises personalised (and personally relevant) content. Both of these features undermine the social individual and self-sacrificing existence that Dostoevsky calls for.

In chapter 2, the focus shifts to teaching as an act of love, with Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* providing the focal point for this discussion. In their careful reading of Father Zosima's character, Roberts and Saeverot claim that love can be seen as a teacher. Drawing on the work of Iris Murdoch, they suggest that attention sits at the centre of active love. Murdoch's notion of a "just and loving gaze upon an individual reality" places attention at the centre of the teacher student relationship. It is attention itself that forms a central part of the educative process. However, with the important qualifier of a "just and loving gaze", this is a vastly different conception from the kind of attention that teachers are encouraged to give their students in contemporary classrooms. Teachers' work is increasingly defined in terms of standards and measurable behaviours; an almost 'scientification' of teaching, in which meta-analyses set out best practice. As Roberts and Saeverot point out, the privileging of "what works" can be a barrier to "what is there" (p. 42) – and possibly remain unseen without a just and loving gaze. As the authors note, the fixation on evidence-based practice means that teachers may miss out on aspects of teaching and learning that defy evidence, or, human experiences that lie outside of what counts as evidence.

As seen through Father Zosima, active love requires a commitment to the particulars and nuances of students and classroom life. In an education context where the human aspects of teaching are increasingly edged out by behaviourist and evidence-based approaches to teaching, affirming a place for a teachers' loving gaze is wholly radical. A loving gaze also reconstitutes the classroom as a place of slowed-down wonder as opposed to pre-specified tick-boxing. As though mirroring this impetus for slowness, Roberts and Saeverot's own attention to the particular over the general in their reading of this text serves to remind us that this is what literature offers us. Following through on their claim that openness is an ethical virtue, in their own slowed-down reading of the novels, they have focused on the "rich, nuanced, detailed portraits of people, places, and events" (p. 118). This stance is evocative of Greene's call to "pay full attention to life", in which case, how might we encourage teachers to pay full attention in their classrooms, seeing their students as rich texts deserving of such slow wonder?

The Death of Ivan Ilyich and *Confession* by Tolstoy provide insights for thinking about curriculum. Roberts and Saeverot use these texts to argue for a curriculum that engages with existential questions. Focusing on Ilyich's reckoning with his own death, Roberts and Saeverot say this reckoning allows Ilyich to consider the lives of those around him. This contemplation affords Ilyich the ability to experience life beyond his own needs. Importantly, his life of passion allows him to experience the suffering of others. In this view, passion becomes an important education aim.

In *Confession*, Tolstoy wrestles with his own existential crisis and the effects of living a critically orientated life. Tolstoy's inexorable drive to make life more complicated than before is evidence a critical education leaves us marked in permanent ways. Roberts and Saeverot recognise that this means that education outcomes can never be fully controlled. As they argue, both happiness and despair are possible education outcomes. This is a risk, that neither Tolstoy nor Roberts and Saeverot shy away from. Indeed, the arguments in *Education and the Limits of Reason* are an emphatic affirmation of the place of risk in education.

A curriculum that encompasses existential pedagogical intentions stands in direct contrast to contemporary curricula characterised by utilitarian and technical instrumentalist edges. Justified against notions of a knowledge economy and competitiveness, curricula pursue knowledge that leads to economic growth and competitiveness. For that reason, skills, competences, attitudes and flexibilities required to compete in a precarious labour market take centre stage in curriculum design. Roberts and Saeverot's readings of Tolstoy, then, are an uncompromising challenge to current curricula; competition will also be the opposite of cooperation and/or the compassion needed to identify with the needs and suffering of others.

Roberts and Saeverot's readings of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Confession* raise important questions about curriculum. If passion, identification with the other, and criticality are worthy education pursuits then what sorts of knowledge and experiences should schools offer? How might we shift the educated ideal inherent in knowledge economy curricula to a new vision of the individual who is turned towards the world with care and compassion?

Education and the Limits of Reason is a serious contribution to an enduring conversation about what education is, and what it means to teach and learn. The book uses Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Nabokov to contest some of the rationalities that dominate education's current discursive field. In doing this work, the authors offer new meanings and justifications that have both ontological and epistemological implications for the classroom -- implications that unravel the sanities of neoliberal reason. Although the authors do not claim to offer definitive alternatives or solutions, their analyses offer us a compelling starting point for thinking in other ways.

The need to think in other ways is a worthy pursuit given the ways in which neoliberal framings have captured our broader cultural spaces. In fact, neoliberalism's power comes precisely from its ability to grip culture in such a way that we internalise its corresponding social ontologies as natural states, much like rational egoism would have done in Dostoevsky's time. This cultural power includes seductive ideas that feel progressive and democratic. Here, the book is particularly useful because it dismantles some of the contradictory impulses in neoliberal reason: for example, the push for more individualised learning while advocating for more participatory social spaces, or, the student-centred teacher who is nevertheless bound by predetermined outcomes.

In disentangling some of the hooks that inhabit neoliberal reason, the richest potential in *Education and the Limits of Reason* lies in the authors' cogent attempts to forge a new language and create its own cultural powers through the gateway of literature. Roberts and Saeverot do this boldly. Their use of language such as *the tender teacher*, *teaching as an act of love*, *passion*, and *wakefulness* offers new ways to make sense of, and make meaning about, education.

In their careful reading of these texts, Roberts and Saeverot have read with their spines. They have been touched between the shoulder blades and they have responded in defence of literature without blinking.

Reference

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Realities Transcending the Logical

Two authors of the quality of Peter Roberts and Herner Saeverot writing together is an event which should provide original, enjoyable and innovative reading but I was concerned that they might have produced something which might flatter to deceive. Their recent book, *Education and the Limits of Reason* (2018), does nothing like that and provides an important, scholarly-written book which engages, stimulates, questions and perplexes in ways that only really established scholars of their standing can create. It is written with the passion, care and *agape* they advocate we use, illustrated in the selected texts and from their analysis to existentially review our educational practice.

The book presents incisive observations and accessible critiques, which cumulatively serve to target the standardising bureaucracies of pedagogy and the theorisation of teaching which tend to strip away the nature of being-in-the world for teachers, students and others, leaving less room for emotional, moral and considered involvement. In reading one of their chosen texts again, Tolstoy's *Confessions*, I find his central dilemma of, "in reality I was still confronted with the same insoluble problems of how to teach without knowing what I was teaching" (1987, p. 23) core to my reading of Roberts and Saeverot's own book. These authors existentially probe us to answer this question throughout this book and do so with a distinctive approach which is illuminating, if a little selective. Indeed, not much more could be expected from a book of limited pages and a corpus of the work of three (all male) major authors of modern times which they explore. Their analysis is thought-provoking and emotionally unsettling in places and the intersection of their interpretation of educational themes in their chosen texts is stimulating and disruptive in equal measure. It is a book of laminated realities and one which seems to desire for one to take one's own time to let emerge, with reflection and pondering, a critique of one's own practice. Indeed to do this and enact what one finds, to take this step, requires courage as exemplified in the texts. This courage is evoked through passion alongside a moral and spiritual discourse which is refreshing and reminiscent of the univocity of the transcendental of the Medieval philosophers, of trust, oneness, and beauty. The notion of the particular and individual explored in chapter 2 does this very well.

The structure of the book is usefully set out and constructs a coherence of thematic expositions, and an array of proposals for pedagogical engagement, pregnant with potential and in today's climate, danger, real danger to one's self-esteem, career and self-image. I say this until of course a metric can be found for active love, compassion and kindness! The main content of the book is divided into six chapters and a conclusion which draws many of the ideas together. The six chapters are developed in couplets with Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* and *The Brothers Karamazov* the focus of the first two chapters, Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Confessions* the second, and Nabokov's *Lolita* and a discussion of his work woven within a particularly interesting discussion of temporality as the third. The short conclusion poses a number of pedagogical possibilities for practitioners to creatively adapt as models for alternative practice.

All the themes developed through the work of each of the texts are developed in two chapters each which adequately summarise the authors' works, their meaning in context and then their application in the practice of education. The authors' understanding of the texts they work with is impressive and their approach to a notion of education which seeks flourishing and freedom for their students is expertly done. In helping us to face the potential despair in taking such a stance on our being the authors employ philosophical interpretation from the likes of Heidegger, Bergeson and Murdoch. Of course there are gaps in the extent to which they are able to reflect on the work of their nominated authors and some of the chapters flow more readily than others but each may offer a change to practice to be considered in our ready-at-hand use of the skills and knowledge we have been taught but which may, over time, lead our

practice rather than our passion for education and for others. The authors ask from us time to reflect on and evaluate our own intentions and a review of how the contextual process of education might have deflected us from a telos of cherishing students' flourishing and our roles in helping individuals; finding themselves by helping others achieve and the goals through kindness, passion, compassion and love in our professional and personal endeavours. I found the audacity of wonder and awe in our world evoked by these values grounded in a spirituality which runs throughout the book, liberating and articulating in a truly skilful way one of the most significant take aways from the book, together with the need for us to be, and to recognise others as individuals, fragile and fallible as we are but able to change, to become more resilient in order to function through the struggle of potential desire: a mantra for student-centred learning.

The authors' selection of texts and frames of reference allows only certain interpretations to shine on the texts. The discussion themes the authors provide are not new to the literature and perhaps a bibliography might have been helpful. Also a wider discussion within the conclusion about that which had not been said on the disposition and values and those which they had decided not to pursue would be helpful. The book might also more directly deal with the epistemological fallacy that rationality and being are implicit in the worth of human identity which, I might claim, is implicitly embedded in current teaching practice. We perhaps need to teach informed vision in the use of literature and art rather than disciplinary analysis to escape it becoming one more resource standing ready to be used rather than enjoyed. I am not suggesting the authors have done this, only that such a warning is warranted: perhaps only echoing what the authors say, on page 120 that "[L]iterature may instruct, but it need not say anything directly about education to be educational."

Notwithstanding this, the book encourages a pedagogical use of reading texts which in itself would integrate well into a course on education philosophy but also bridge theory and practice. They claim in the opening sentence of their conclusion that they sought to show "that literature can be of considerable value in addressing important philosophical and educational questions" (2018, p. 117). I would agree with them that this has been skilfully accomplished and their success for me is not restricted to their use of the texts but an implicit encouragement to re-read these texts so as to explore the truths they reveal. (I was rewarded by a return to Murdoch's collection of papers in *The Sovereignty of the Good*.) Moreover, their argument that the poetic can reveal the inconspicuous is well made and their use of literature can provide that but we need to be aware that we don't enframe literature as a resource for philosophical debate and so potentially lose its inherent goodness, beauty and wholeness with our being.

The practical and demanding insights contained in this book should not be simply and passively read: if any constructive and positive education of the future is to be rescued, *ontological* pedagogy as everyday practices advocated in this book ought to emerge as part of a collective consciousness of what education is and for what purpose we engage in being involved. The exposition is framed in the works of some of the giants of literature and supported by a web of philosophical insights, encouraging practitioners to engage in critical reflection and the development of new and innovative practice.

This timely book deserves wide and careful reading: it responds to the distancing of humanity as the rationality for education and advocates the being of being a teaching as a beautiful and loving activity. It seeks a way to understand one's own self-deception in the form of adherence to the falsehood of care enshrined in processes rather than the liberty of emotional engagement in a profession which is special and should be conducted with passion and love. It is a manifesto for vocation in its widest and older sense and for teaching to be a becoming, not a being. It is a book of existential change not for progression and a very worthwhile engagement. Make time for it!

References

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Unacknowledged Sovereigns

In their book, Peter Roberts and Hener Saeverot argue for the importance of literary fiction in addressing philosophical and educational questions pertaining not only to reason, but to the conceptual apparatus with which our field addresses time, space and writing. Their comprehensive and nuanced examination of selected Russian literary texts by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov, provides a strong framework for a renewed appreciation of deep reading and learning as distinctive habits of educational life. Taking the importance of this question seriously, they look to the foundational position that literary fiction can play in the formation of students as rounded beings. That is, the authors bring forth the problematic being of the question of reason in connection to one of the declared goals of education, namely that of supporting students in becoming self-actualised beings who lead a good life. Focusing on the Russian literary canon, they show how Western schooling does not fulfil this goal; rather, it privileges the productive and harmonious aspects of reason over and above the lived and interconnected existential forces of irrationality, anguish, love, passion, doubt, jealousy, death, destruction, duration and decomposition. The underlying argument the authors make is that despite increased receptiveness toward diversity of educational discourses, the dominant assumptions about what counts as learning, when and how much, have narrowed. Thus, the authors ask “not whether education can be justified but what *kind* of education is worthy of our support” (p. 84). Theirs is an existentialist intervention.

I have been reading *Crime and Punishment* for some time now. As a grade ten student, living in a post-socialist and post-war Slovenia, I was drawn to the sweet and terrifying darkness leaking out of the book, reaching for my innermost depths. In those memories, I immerse myself fully in Raskolnikov’s guilt through the strange and unfamiliar feelings this book arouses, absorbing me, soliciting a response. My teacher expects us to write an essay about the anguish and ethics of class struggle Raskolnikov embodies. My peers, not lucky enough to partake in the Bildungsroman, and the humanistic curriculum of the Gymnasium, study their future vocational skills, removed from Raskolnikov’s existential dilemmas, as if questions of class struggle ought not to concern them. I live the book; I dream the book; the book dreams me. The sheer volume of this work swallows up many of my teenage sleepless nights, I dream about the dead body of the old lady, but I feel close to Raskolnikov, his fears, risks, and regrets. I do not understand. I do understand. I think I know what he knows but do not know how to feel about it. I am developing strange and intimate feelings for Raskolnikov and I ponder what he might be feeling about my thoughts, judgements, passions. Fascinated and haunted by power, possession, privilege, and self-discovery, Raskolnikov lures me into the almost erotic world of struggle, by ‘teaching’ me about destructiveness, jealousy, darkness, despair and self-doubt. I feel empowered by both his class consciousness and the oppressed history of my people, the Slav underdogs. And yet, I hear a voice: “I wished that that woman

would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts?" (Cixous, 1976, p. 876).

Reading Kafka, Camus, Molière, Beckett, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Nabokov, Gogol and other writers in the predominantly French and Russian tradition during my high school years in the Balkans, filled with existential angst and anguish, meant I was becoming intellectually versed in *the canon*. But more importantly, it necessitated living, learning, thinking, and feeling *with* some of the greatest literary minds and their passions for the dark yet affectionate weight of life and death, good and evil. Further, reading these texts felt like being invited into an adult world of intricate literary labyrinths, unwoven together by the myriad of mysterious, strange, and utterly fascinating emotions. Roberts and Saeverot argue that the existential task of education would be to “awaken feelings of passion, almost pulling the person out of a blunted indifference and further into an existential state of being” (p. 58), because “passion can be a quality for education when students become internally connected to themselves and to the world” (p. 62). I could not agree more with the authors that such early, formative practice of slow and deep reading/staying/living/breathing with the literary characters undergoing “irrational” existential transformations leaves a long-lasting impact on how a student might approach knowledge, teaching and learning. As the authors point out, to read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Nabokov is a challenging process and this is precisely why their works are to be engaged with pedagogically: “they educate us by creating a sense of restless, reflective discomfort, without which worthwhile change could not occur” (p.7). A lingering question for me, reading Roberts and Saeverot’s detailed take on the selected literary works, is more of a desire to learn how the authors position and situate themselves with regard to their choice of texts, and more importantly, what was in their question of the limits of reason such that it lured them in, invited or called to them, to turn to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov?

The two significant aspects of this book that distinguish it from much contemporary philosophical work in education are its potential to affirm the ‘irrational’ aspects of learning and second, its narrative structure. *Education and The Limits of Reason* is a rare example in philosophy of education that takes a stand for those existential, epistemological, and ontological aspects of institutional learning that are operationalized as negative, pessimistic, disorienting, passive, destructive and oppressive, but which are being actualized in every learning process that takes place internally and externally, and within the patriarchal and colonial framework of schooling. The authors suggest that much of the current quest for self-interested happiness corresponds with the goal of maximising neoliberal utility. The educational values of learning for progress, productiveness and optimism reduce all other forms of learning to ‘irrational’ acts of failed pedagogy. But from a Dostoevskian perspective, “a good life is not the same as a happy life. Our humanity, for Dostoevsky, emerges through selfless love, and this does not ‘make sense’ under neoliberalism or rational egoism: it is ‘irrational’ – at odds with our natural tendency to satisfy ourselves, and inconsistent with the goal of always seeking happiness over unhappiness” (p. 14).

Further, the structure of this book exemplifies pedagogically how one can engage with both literature and philosophy without falling back onto the either/or standpoint, a standpoint, as the authors show, present in much of the international conversation on what counts as philosophical inquiry in education. Each of the six chapters explores one philosophical concept and one literary affect, side by side and one through the other. For example, in chapter 1, the

authors work through Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* to explore the concept of *rational egoism* and the affective need for *harmony*. The second chapter focuses on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, specifically the concept of *attention* and 'love' as literary affect. Chapter 3 juxtaposes Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Heidegger's concept of *being-towards-death* and *passion*. Chapter 4 considers Tolstoy's *despair* and *fear of death* alongside Unamuno's concept of *reflective consciousness*. Chapters 5 and 6 draw attention to how Nabokov's *Lolita* constructs pedagogical concepts of *gaze* and *time*, alongside the affective components of *weeping* and *tenderness*. Thus, Roberts and Saeverot provide an educational and pedagogical perspective on reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov by approaching their literary texts differently, respecting the distinct conceptual, existential and ethical responses the selected texts elucidate. This narrative approach sets the book apart from some of the other attempts at bridging literary fiction and philosophy in education, because the distinct concepts and affects explored in each chapter retain their positive or qualitative difference. That is, the authors avoid reproducing the either/or discursive structure by not privileging concepts over affects and vice versa. Philosophy and literary fiction are taken to be distinct educational forces, both demanding their due attention.

I fully agree with their identification of the problematic relationship between philosophy and literature in education as "unnecessary", particularly in a time of accelerated, oppressive and unsustainable living, a problematic that calls for slowing down by qualitatively intensifying an open, diverse, and subversive take on educational epistemology, axiology and ontology. Roberts and Saeverot suggest that "[W]e may be unable to see some of the limits to reason precisely because the sources from which we draw tacitly privilege certain forms of rational activity over other modes of human expression. As philosophers of education, we implicitly affirm the value of reason, of one kind or another, every time we mount an argument, publish an academic article or book, or participate in thoughtful debate at conferences and seminars" (p.118). I believe this to be potentially the most radical, but somewhat unfulfilled aspect of their book. For example, because Nabokov's narrative style disturbs, confuses and "throws us of balance as readers, disrupting familiar patterns of thinking" (p.6), so too, I found myself rather lost in chapter 5, disoriented and in the middle of things. It demanded that I do my readerly work and look elsewhere into the Nabokov's corpus to understand more deeply the nature of the plot, characters, and critical reception of his novel *Lolita*. I believe this approach, limited to chapter 5, holds great potential for disturbing the analytical and critical styles of writing as the preferred modes of expression in the field of educational philosophy.

In other words, if indeed there is a desire for educational inquiry to affirm the value of "irrational" affects and concepts as qualitatively different modes of "rational activity", would philosophers of education not need to "mount their arguments," write and present in a mode or manner that respects such difference? Postcolonial, Black, feminist, and Indigenous scholars understand that the political power of resistance and refusal of reason begins with writing: "Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women-female-sexed texts. That kind scares them." (Cixous, 1976, p. 877). The subversive power of literature to account for and resist the dark, destructive, passionate, and violent experiences and modes of existence deemed 'irrational' by the oppressive regimes of knowledge has long been recognized by students, writers and teachers in the fields of Indigenous, Black, queer, and feminist studies. Thus, many write their theory and philosophy in a manner akin to poetry, science fiction, even surrealist paintings, breaking with the Western philosophical need for a sustained argument, integrated into a dialectically and didactically meaningful whole.

In the field of educational inquiry, a few different approaches to writing are beginning to emerge, such as diffraction and stratigraphy which problematise the humanist, colonial and modernist tendencies in philosophy and theory of education, but we are yet to see such resistance on a bigger scale. Slowing down institutionalised time by deeply engaging with reading novels can help us reconsider our understanding of the educational process. I would hope to see Roberts and Saeverot's next writing project similarly engage with the potential that literary fiction holds for disturbing and making strange the analytical writing practices in our field. With these thoughts in mind, *Education and the Limits of Reason* is a thought provoking and destabilising book and a major contribution to the field of philosophy of education. As a readerly text, it should serve as a foundational text for those seeking to incorporate literary fiction as a mode of philosophical address. I would highly recommend the book for all who have an interest in resisting the limited and unsustainable notions of what counts as reason, learning, teaching and education. And for those who wish to endorse the affirmative pedagogical force of reflective discomfort, this book is a requisite.

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Reason, Reading and Pedagogy

At the heart of this symposium is a shared concern with reading. *Education and the Limits of Reason* (Roberts & Saeverot, 2018) is, in part, an attempt to demonstrate the value, for philosophers and educationists, of engaging novels, short stories, and other fictional texts. We try to show that, if we wish to take this task seriously, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov have much to offer. Claudia Rozas Gómez, Paul Gibbs and Petra Mikulan, in their generous and perceptive reviews, have also highlighted the importance of reading. They consider not just *what* we read, but also *how* and *why* we read. From their reviews, reading emerges as a personal, political and pedagogical undertaking. Rozas Gómez, Gibbs and Mikulan emphasise the significance of slow, careful, thoughtful reading, and they bring this ideal to life in the nuanced observations they make on points of theoretical detail developed in the book. Reading, they show, can be conducted both with and against reason, both within and beyond the limits imposed by educational institutions. Reading can, as Mikulan notes, become an act of resistance. In preparing this response, we have felt encouraged by our reviewers to undertake a certain re-reading of ourselves and our work, albeit in abbreviated form. We comment briefly on some of the reflections engendered by the reviews and hint at possibilities for further inquiry.

Before responding to some specific points from each of the reviewers, let us make a more general comment about reading at this moment in history. When considering works of fiction from the past, it can be instructive to ask how they might be reassessed in the light of current social, cultural and political debates. Nabokov's *Lolita* is especially interesting in this respect. Shortly after we completed our book, the #Me Too Movement took off. In the wake of this movement, questions were raised as to whether *Lolita* should be kept out of university curricula and not be discussed by teachers. The book, having always been controversial,

attracted fresh debate and there were calls in some quarters for the book to be banned. Anne Dwyer (2021), a Russian studies scholar at Pomona College in the United States, recalls that she encountered protests from students when she lectured on *Lolita* in a course on Nabokov. Students were concerned about the potentially traumatic impact of the book, particularly for those who had suffered abuse in their own lives. Dwyer offered a new lecture, explaining why she thought it was still important to teach the novel. This example highlights one of the risks of reading, particularly in classroom contexts, where the possibility of emotional harm must be weighed carefully against the literary, philosophical and educational benefits of a work. Our own view is that there is no easy ‘way out’ for students or teachers here. For students, once the process of reading and thinking and discussing has started, a leap into the unknown has already been taken; the ideas generated by such experiences, and the memories they may evoke, cannot be ‘put back’. For teachers who want the best for students, there is a heavy ethical burden in contemplating whether the risk of engaging a text is worth taking. Sometimes there may be a professional and/or personal price to pay, whatever decision is made. But these difficulties are a signal, perhaps, of why works of this kind need to be kept in our educational conversations. The fact that they raise searching ethical questions, not only for their readers but also for those who recommend them for others, is itself a matter of educational interest. We can learn something worthwhile from the debates associated with some books, as well as from the works themselves.

Helpful pedagogical questions have also been raised by our reviewers. Rozas Gómez draws some interesting contrasts between the position adopted in the book and the dominant approaches to education evident in contemporary policy and practice. She asks: ‘[H]ow might we encourage teachers to pay full attention in their classrooms, seeing their students as rich texts deserving of such slow wonder?’ On the face of it, this might seem like an impossible task. So much of formal education today runs counter to such a goal. There is a relentless rush to ‘achieve’, to ‘perform’, and to meet pre-specified curriculum objectives. The system is premised on the notion that what matters most in education must be measurable. Teaching in schools, particularly at the secondary level, has been heavily driven by assessment demands. The principle of competition remains paramount, despite occasional appeals to the contrary, and underlying this is the goal of advancing New Zealand economically on the world stage. (At an official level, we remain, as Rozas Gómez puts it, caught up in the logic of ‘knowledge economy curricula’.) Thus, comparisons are drawn not just between students within schools, or between different institutions in the country, but with other nations across the globe. In this context, the very language of ‘slow wonder’, as employed by Rozas Gómez, seems at odds with the spirit of the age. Giving ‘full attention’ to each child, especially in so-called ‘innovative’ learning environments with multiple classes crowded together into one large space, becomes extraordinarily difficult (cf. Catton, 2019). Reading books too, with the kind of care and attention implied by Rozas Gómez and the other reviewers, becomes almost a luxury; a fanciful, ‘inefficient’ use of school time, at least when it is not connected with an officially stipulated set of assessment goals.

There are some rays of hope in this rather gloomy picture. Official discourse – in the form of policy statements, curriculum documents, assessment regimes, and the like – may set limits on what becomes possible in a school classroom, but the particulars of the relationship between a teacher and a student can never be fully determined or prescribed. There is still a certain unpredictability to teaching and learning – a degree of freedom that no policy or law or externally imposed set of standards can entirely circumvent. Teachers can model a commitment to slow, deep reading, beyond the confines of the classroom, in a manner that leaves an indelible mark on students. Fostering a passion among students, no matter how many or how few, to read not because the curriculum requires it but because (for example) there are pressing existential questions to address, can become a gentle act of subversion, with lifelong

and inter-generational consequences. Making this possibility a probability is, of course, no easy task, but again, the idea of slowness becomes relevant. The kind of quiet, indirect pedagogy we have in mind does not come easily and cannot be rushed or forced. Changes might be made in teacher education programmes, where those who are going on to work with children in schools are themselves encouraged to develop a love of slow, serious reading and a desire to carve out spaces for this in their crowded classrooms. But those committed to such ideals must themselves learn to slow down, recognising that substantial shifts in educational cultures and expectations can take years, sometimes decades, to enact. Patience is needed. The limits of reason in bringing about change also need to be acknowledged. Policy is seldom made on the basis on compelling arguments, and the pedagogical interventions signalled here are often enacted more *in spite* of policy than because of it.

A beautiful illustration of the integrity and distinctiveness of each reading of a given work is Gibbs's identification of an underlying 'spiritual' element to *Education and the Limits of Reason*. We did not set out to make this a 'spiritual' book (and certainly not a 'religious' one) but we find Gibbs's comments in this respect thought provoking and insightful. Several of the texts we engage – most notably *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) and Tolstoy's *Confession* (Tolstoy, 1987) – make matters of faith, and the problems they pose for reason, a central philosophical focus, and those works have no doubt imparted a certain spiritual flavour to some of the discussion in the book. It is also true that in places we make more direct references to spirituality. This is the case in chapter 3, for example, where we link spirituality with passion. But Gibbs also helps us to see how our broader shared interest in existentialist thought has shaped our writing commitments and priorities in ways that speak to deeper spiritual concerns. The existentialist tradition includes theists, atheists and agnostics, and over the years we have drawn on work reflective of each of these positions (see, for example, Roberts, 2016; Saeverot, 2013). In *Education and the Limits of Reason*, Kierkegaard, Unamuno and Heidegger all feature, in different chapters, and while these thinkers differed in their temperaments, life circumstances, and writing styles, they each have something worthwhile to say in addressing themes with spiritual significance (e.g., death and despair). These themes have also played an important part in our own recent scholarship. Gibbs has reminded us to probe our own motivations carefully: to ask ourselves why we write, how we find our way to the authors who inform our work, and what we hope to achieve through our scholarly endeavours.

This leads to a related point raised by Mikulan: the question of how we, and others, might build on the work completed here. As Mikulan observes, '[t]he subversive power of literature to account for and resist the dark, destructive, passionate, and violent experiences and modes of existence deemed "irrational" by the oppressive regimes of knowledge has long been recognized by students, writers and teachers in the fields of Indigenous, Black, queer, and feminist studies'. We too would want to commend work in these domains to educationists, and we are grateful for the opportunities we've had through our teaching and supervision to be involved with students and colleagues contributing to scholarship in these areas. This indeed is one of the great joys of academic life: the forming of strong pedagogical relationships, from which both 'teachers' and 'learners' can gain new knowledge and a deeper understanding of themselves. There is always a need for humility and openness, on the part of both a supervisor or teacher and the student or candidate, if fresh ideas, methods and modes of thought are to be explored and developed. We hope to keep such doors open in our future work, whether this is in collaboration with each other, alone, or with other colleagues. Mikulan provides an incentive to keep challenging ourselves in this respect: 'I would hope', she says, 'to see Roberts and Saeverot's next writing project similarly engage with the potential that literary fiction holds for disturbing and making strange the analytical writing practices in our field.' We are making

some inroads in pursuing such an agenda with current books under contract, and will keep Mikulan's words in mind as we move on to other projects in the future.

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