

## **Book Review**

### ***A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education:***

### ***The Play of the In-Between***

**by Catherine Homan**

**(London: Lexington Books, 2020), 218 pages**

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In a world dominated by technology and effectiveness measured by what can be calculated and applied only technically (that is to say, without a genuine, profound relationship with lived experience, which includes also imponderable aspects of the world), the reviewed book by Catherine Homan seems to be like water to a desert, wind to a face burned by the sun, air to breath, a glimpse of sense for education and its philosophy. In the book, issues of poetry, education, play, as well as the categories of the “in-between” and experience—of such vital importance for contemporary hermeneutics—are interwoven into a voice that calls us and teaches us to listen, just like a genuine piece of art can do. Due to my fascination with the experience and the phenomenon of listening, I particularly appreciate the passages or—to be more precise—the sentences that highlight the significance of art, which can teach us to listen. Homan takes the hermeneutic account seriously, and shows us how she listens to particular authors (Gadamer, Celan, Hölderlin, Fink, Nietzsche, Kant, Schiller, Plato, Aristotle, Shaftesbury, Anzaldúa, Alcoff, and others), while at the same time trying to shed light on the issue of poetic education.

In the “Introduction,” Homan demonstrates how poetry as a teacher of humanity—Homer’s standpoint, often repeated by ancient and modern thinkers—makes our ears more perceptive to what poets say or whisper to us through and thanks to poems. Contemporary poets, as Gadamer put it, must speak more quietly and our

ears must become more acute to hear what they say. Stemming from such a legacy of Gadamer, one could easily point out the issue of poetic education. However, Catherine Homan takes a bit different route, and goes a little further: she invites us to get closer to Hölderlin's poetry (as a teacher of Heidegger and Gadamer, among others) to make us look for the hidden aspects of the scenery for poetic education. Homan is convincing in her invitation to re-read, with her, classic thoughts through the poetry of, first, Hölderlin and, subsequently, Celan: in such a conversational fashion, she creates the expectation (projection) that, after a time of being a participant in the event of conversation, the sense of poetic education is going to be revealed.

The book consists of four chapters, preceded by "Introduction" and followed by "Conclusion: The Play of the In-Between" with the addition of "Bibliography" and "Index." Those who are interested in the note on the Author can easily find it at the very end of the book. Although I do not mind getting some spoilers while watching films, it does seem to me somewhat cruel to reveal the contents of a book, when it comes to reading. Reading is the art of being in the time and the inner space of speaking from within language and thus thinking itself. That is why I do not deem it necessary to summarize the content of each part of the book (if someone is interested in a quick overview, a summary can be found in the "Introduction," pp. 16–17; moreover, at the beginning of each chapter the Author delivers a short presentation of what is to be expected in it). I am certain that it will be quite an adventure for the reader to reach for the book, and see what subject matter will catch their attention and move their heart. In order to keep in touch with the reader of this review, I will share some aspects, questions, and matters I have gathered from my reading, and outline a couple of selected, more or less general, impressions of the book. For the potential reader who does not like spoilers or does not want to be poisoned by my comprehension, I can warmly recommend the book as a poetic text—"poetic" because it requires patience and an attuned pace of reading; "text" because it is constructed as a colorful fabric: by the joining and the intertwining of different voices to express the need for education (as conversation) *as a poetic experience*. I value this latter message the most.

Homan highlights the importance of play, openness, listening, difference, alterity, "in-betweenness," groundlessness, spontaneity, freedom, transformation, self-education (recognition of familiarity and strangeness), recognition of the truth that an artwork may reveal, harmony between the self and the world, conversation, language and hermeneutically understood tradition, poetical thinking, imagination, *Bildung*, the unsaid, dialogue, sense, and the like. Such notions and such categories are characteristic for the contemporary hermeneutics and the experience of the poetical. In the sense of

play that her book appreciates and values as being truly educative, the Author plays with all of them. Homan uses selected thoughts of classical (meaning, originally: those worth listening to) authors (including poets) in such a fashion that allows us to see the main points of her hermeneutics of poetic education. By doing so, Homan proves herself as a humanistic (modern hermeneutic) thinker immersed in the continuity of conversation—the continuity, which Gadamer used to call “philosophy.”

After finishing the book, I had the impression that something was missing: I could not hear Homan’s own voice otherwise than in the other authors’ voices. On the one hand, one could say that this makes for a perfect hermeneutic work; but, on the other hand, it could also be said it offers a perfect (hermeneutic?) hideout, an escape from speaking from within the Author’s inner language. While I was writing my book *Listening and Acouological Education* (Warsaw: WUW, 2019), I wondered whether the conversational way of being, as postulated and described by Gadamer, does not disavow—not only if taken literally—the possibility of self-expression outside of (above? beyond?) the conversation, outside of the philosophical continuity of dialogue? Perhaps Homan’s case is different. Maybe her way of (poetic) writing gives us what it takes: the enigma of an author who—in the reader’s recognition—is and is not in the book? Perhaps it is all about the enigmatic being, which marks her presence outlining it with the light of after-images of the great figures she (as a philosopher and a poetical educator) shows us? Maybe she deliberately hides behind her friends in thinking, in order to make sure that the threads concerning the poetic education are to be composed and thus evoked in the experience of reading? As for me, Homan’s book provokes such questions.

Another issue that addresses me strongly, is the problem of freedom and education as becoming human, i.e., becoming the conversation that we are (Hölderlin’s famous saying interpreted, differently, by Heidegger and by Gadamer). If we need freedom to become who we are, namely conversation, is it not a necessity to release our thinking from the dialogical chains of (the history of) the humanities? What about poetic education as a sort of (an exemplification of?) humanistic pedagogy? In the horizon of academic pedagogy, Homan’s book would be located in the humanistic, liberal trend. Is it not its autotelic aim to get through the interaction (of a conversation) with the discussed works (of the humanities), in order to become an authentic personality, namely the individual *voice* that can *be* freely, and thus genuinely, in the multiple relationships to itself, to others, and to the world? Is in the humanistic pedagogy not such a personality at stake, who can see above their own particularity and can welcome the other’s diversity, but is at the same time also *free* to create, to think freely, even spontaneously, and thus genuinely? Homan describes this, but I have

the impression that—in tune with her great narrative gifts—her book would be even better if it would be composed in a way, which would more explicitly and responsibly (*respondeo*) show Homan’s standpoint, her (own) voice.

The last comment selected for this review touches the announced explanation of the “nature of listening and how play, especially in our experiences of art and poetry, helps us cultivate this listening” (149). Unfortunately, in the whole book, there is no such explanation, and it does not contain even a short paragraph with Homan’s interpretation of listening. Instead, the book discusses contemporary issues related to the interpretation of some of the hermeneutic notions (for example, tradition, the fusion of horizons, the transformative aspect of art). It gathers also some reflections upon feminism, racism, approaches to the other, and postmodern readings of main hermeneutic claims or notions. One of the strong features of Homan’s book is that the Author uses the grammatical third female person (“she,” “her”) instead of the usual “his or her” or the contemporary “they.” This, in a way, represents her statement in bringing balance to the history/*her*-story of thoughts: this is how she, in her writing, makes her position clear and readable. But, in the case of listening, the reader is left only with announcements. I emphasize this because listening is of vital, even crucial importance both in hermeneutics as well as in poetry. However, it is also not indifferent, how one understands listening in education, even if one comprehends it as *Bildung*. In philosophy and academic pedagogy, scholars value the idea of *Bildung* as being opposed to mere socialization (especially in the manner it has been discussed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by Anglo-Saxon thinkers, but also already earlier, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the German speaking philosophers of education to whose notions Homan refers in her interpretation). Another aspect is that the humanistic, countercultural, and critical turn in psychology and pedagogy revealed certain oppressive dimensions of traditional *Bildung*’s claims. In this context even, therefore, the way one understands listening (and attunement) or conceives its philosophical meaning (especially as and if resulting in “giving shape”) cannot be overestimated, not to mention overlooked.

Catherine Homan has written a beautiful book in both its poetic as well as its (self) educational dimension. I admire her ability to weave a variety of thought threads in writing/*thinking*. Since I learned of the title of the book, I was moved and interested by the promise of its content. After reading it, I wondered, for a while, whether the title should not rather be: “A hermeneutic of *the poetic of/in* education.” But, exactly as in the case of my own book, the title is only an invitation, a “liminal gesture.” The rest is at the hands of the reader. Despite some of my critical comments, and precisely because of the evoked questions that the book promoted, I can utter nothing but

sincere words of appreciation for the Author wishing her further success in her poetic and thus philosophical way of being/thinking.