1

Re-reading Diotima: Resources for a Relational Pedagogy

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My starting point in this chapter is one of the earliest texts in the Western tradition to explore the relations between philosophy and pedagogy, Plato’s *Symposium*. In this text, love (or more properly, *eros*) plays the mediating role, turning a love of wisdom into a pedagogical erotics that enables a journey of enlightenment. *Symposium* thus seems a promising resource, both for reflecting on the specifically relational aspects of the educative process, and for the collective project of reimagining the ethics and practices of pedagogical relationships. As I will go on to show, however, things are not so simple. At a key moment in the text, Plato’s metaphysical trajectory pulls away from a fully relational dynamic and leads instead towards a more solipsistic journey. This journey ends by valorising the reproduction of the same rather than the generation of the new, surprising or unexpected. In many ways one thus has to read against the explicit direction of the text to recover the resources for a generative, relational pedagogy that, I will argue, are still to be found there.

To help generate such readings, I will turn to the work of more recent thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Jean-François Lyotard and Luce Irigaray as well as David Halperin, Christine Battersby, Bell Hooks, Richard Smith and Morwenna Griffiths. My suggestion is that by approaching *Symposium* through their work, this text can yield insights that are helpful for contemplating the educational process in a more contemporary context, and in particular, for thinking about the nature of pedagogical relations in ways that contribute to the specific aims of this book.1 On the one hand, *Symposium* affirms that, as the editors of this book put it, ‘being with others in relation is a primary condition of our educational life and therefore demands our serious attention, both as teachers and as theorists.’ By bringing together a group of friends to discourse about love, *Symposium* performatively confirms that education is a fundamentally *shared* engagement. This is
reinforced both by its dialogical form and by the content of a number of key passages that focus specifically on *eros*’ role in pedagogical relations (both philosophical and civic). In keeping with Plato’s suspicions about the written word (*Phaedrus* 274b-278e), *Symposium* presents this engagement as one primarily shared between living human beings (and only indirectly with us, the readers of the text). Its sustained examination of *eros* can provide insights into the kinds of dynamics that are conducive to generative encounters between students and teachers, as well as to genuinely transformative learning and teaching.

On the other hand, the shared discursive space staged by *Symposium* is constituted by a number of exclusions: most explicitly, when the flute-girl is asked to leave and withdraw to women’s quarters (*Symposium* 176e), but also implicitly because, as Athenian convention would demand, the discoursing company is formed of only free men (and not slaves). Plato’s text might thereby prompt us to ask whose exclusion is constitutive of our own discursive and educative spaces. In *Symposium*, the initial expulsion of the flute-girl is undercut by Diotima’s later inclusion as an apparently privileged female voice. As we will see, however, Diotima’s status is far from straightforward and points to a deeper issue in the text (and Plato’s philosophy more generally) concerning the place of difference and the privileging of sameness. Indeed, it is Plato’s commitment to a particular metaphysics—I will argue—that compromises the pedagogical potential of his own text. To be fully useful to the project of reimagining relationships in education, key elements of *Symposium* need to be disentangled from this metaphysical frame, as well as from the hom-(m)osociality that reflects the Platonic idealisation of sameness. The critical lens provided by the work of more recent thinkers helps us to undertake this disentangling. More specifically, Lyotard, Irigaray and the other thinkers I will draw on here help us to select those aspects of *Symposium* that are most conducive to re-thinking pedagogical relations with an attentiveness to bodies, differences, and generative dependencies. Together, these texts and thinkers point us towards a relational pedagogy that would complement the recent turn to a relational self through which feminist philosophers have sought to displace the dominant Western model of the autonomous individual subject.

Such a pedagogy has three key features. First, relations are not seen simply as a means to an end—necessary to allow a teacher to impart information effectively, for example, or the student to acquire a particular skill set—but as the constitutive and always embodied site of education understood as an ongoing and open-ended process. Second,
the multiple relations that constitute the educative process (including relations to previous educative encounters) do not rely on fixed or pre-existing roles, but simultaneously constitute its participants as ‘learners’ and ‘teachers’—or perhaps better, as ‘learning’ and ‘teach-ing’, understood as always relational (and never mutually exclusive) activities. And third, the focus of such a pedagogy is thus on the relations that constitute the educative process and the encounters that foster them, rather than on outcomes or individual participants considered as wholly independent of those relations.

I INTRODUCING DIOTIMA

The tension between the metaphysical trajectory of Symposium and the relational resources that I am suggesting are also to be found there is most dramatically evident in the section of the text with which I will be concerned here. In this section, Socrates reports the conversations in which a wise woman of Mantineia once taught him about love (eros) (Symposium 201d-212b). ‘Diotima’s speech’ (as it is often known, despite its dialogical structure) is intriguing for many reasons, not least because it is the only place in Plato’s known oeuvre where a woman takes on the part of the philosopher.4 This leads to the obvious question: ‘Why is Diotima a Woman?’—though as David Halperin shows, there is far from an obvious answer.

Halperin’s extended essay on this topic (1990) aids my suggestion that Symposium may contain resources for a relational pedagogy. In its original Athenian context, Halperin argues, Diotima’s speech was already transgressive due to its portrayal of the erotic relations that should characterise properly philosophical encounters. Diotima conforms to Athenian convention by aligning the most ideal erotic relations with those between male lovers. However, Halperin shows how Plato’s presentation of Diotima appropriates key elements of what was culturally constructed as ‘feminine’ in ways that depart from the traditional Athenian model of male erotic relations (which still recognisably informs some of the earlier speeches in Symposium). Such relations were carefully structured to support what was considered the proper transition from boy to man, and hence, active citizenship. The standard model of the lover (erastes) / beloved (eromenos) relation was strongly hierarchical. The older, male lover actively took pleasure in his younger beloved, who could accept but crucially should not take pleasure in his passive, receptive position: the male citizen-to-be should not learn to like the feminine, submissive role (Halperin 1990, pp. 30–36).
Halperin argues that Plato subverts this hierarchical norm in two ways. First, in both *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Plato develops a model in which the beloved feels a kind of active counter-er**o**s. While at odds with Athenian convention, philosophically this is crucial, as it means the beloved actively participates in the journey towards wisdom that (for Plato) ought to be the shared goal of both lover and beloved (pp. 129–37). Second, Diotima’s ‘correct pederasty’ (p. 113, quoting *Symposium* 211b) involves shifting the conception of erotic desire from acquisitive to procreative. As Halperin notes, this shift is reflected directly in the text as Diotima rejects Socrates’ initial view that er**o**s is a desire to possess the beautiful and instead teaches that er**o**s is a desire ‘for birth and procreation in the beautiful’ (p. 137, quoting *Symposium* 204d and 206e), in a generative encounter that releases the creative energies of both participants, as emphasised by the multiple metaphors of birth and begetting that infuse Diotima’s teaching (including, most notably, the image of male pregnancy).5

Halperin is suspicious of just how ‘feminine’ these features of reciprocity and generation really are (as reflected in the fact that, in Plato’s text, the part of Diotima is voiced by Socrates and written by Plato). He argues that the identification of the feminine with a reciprocity that undoes the active/passive binary, as well as in terms of procreation, is a construction of female ‘difference’ that already takes both the physiology and the cultural representation of male bodies and desires as the norm.6 The feminine is aligned with a lack of masculinity (i.e. the desire to dominate in hierarchical relations) or with what masculinity lacks (i.e. the capacity to give birth) (pp. 143–5). Even more importantly, these ‘feminine’ (i.e. non-masculine) qualities of reciprocity and birth are figured via Diotima in ways that allow them to be re-appropriated as intrinsic to the male philosopher’s erotic journey, while holding their femininity at a protective distance through the mask of a female speaker: ‘The essential element in Plato’s staging of “femininity” . . . is a mimetic transvestitism’ (p. 146).7

I am sympathetic to Halperin’s claim that ‘when Diotima speaks, she does not speak for women: she silences them’ (p. 145). But I am also concerned that to read *Symposium’s* references to female generative powers as only a masculine textual construction risks silencing women in another way.8 Feminist thinkers have argued that the generative capacities manifest in pregnancy and birth provide us with potential models of self and relation that contest the dominant modern ideal of the autonomous individual. Such an individual is both archetypally male and characterised by its constitutive independence from others. In contrast, Battersby has argued, to be positioned as female in
Western modernity has been to be aligned with ‘a body that births’. Such a body makes relations of dependency the norm and allows otherness to be sustained within a (thoroughly fleshy and bodily) self (Battersby, 1998, pp. 38–9). Insofar as it entails deviating from the modern ideal of autonomous selfhood, ‘being female’ has meant being ‘allocated to a non-privileged position in a social and conceptual nexus of power’ (Battersby, 1994, p. 137). But reflecting on the female body understood specifically as a ‘body that births’ can also provide resources for re-conceptualising the self, as well as its relations to otherness (Battersby, 1998, 2007). Thus, despite Halperin’s (justified) suspicions about the ways in which Symposium appropriates the feminine to serve the male philosopher’s ends, we can also read Diotima’s emphasis on reciprocity and generation as pointing to a different philosophical perspective. This perspective comes into view once the figures of pregnancy and birth are seen not just as reflecting appropriative male fantasies about reproduction, but also as offering alternative ways of thinking about bodies, desires, and relations that open up if (like Battersby) we take a different (distinctively female) body as the norm.

I will return to the pedagogical implications of Battersby’s position in the final section of this chapter. First, however, I will explore a series of responses to Diotima by drawing on Arendt, Lyotard, and Irigaray. Through their work, I hope to tease out the transformative pedagogical potential contained in Diotima’s teachings. Each of the responses I trace can be seen as developing key aspects of Halperin’s reading. Thus, I will argue that the model of pedagogical eros as generative rather than possessive can be extended and deepened through Arendt’s reflections on natality and Lyotard’s on infancy. In turn, both reciprocity and generative becoming are privileged in Irigaray’s subversive re-appropriation of Plato’s original text. As shown by Marit Hoveid and Arnhild Finne, Sharon Todd, and Caroline Wilson (Chapters 5, 4, and 2 of this book, respectively), Irigaray’s philosophy of sexuate difference is a fruitful source for a relational approach to education.9 Like Battersby, Irigaray also returns us to pregnancy and birth as belonging to a specifically female body.10 However, if Irigaray’s refiguring of the erotic encounter generates an image of pedagogical relations as reciprocally transformative and open to difference, Battersby’s reflections on a ‘body that births’ are more helpful for thinking about the asymmetrical dependencies and unequal power relations that typically characterise the pedagogical scene. As both Griffiths and Amy Shuffelton show (Chapters 11 and 3, respectively), the devaluation of dependencies remains a critical issue in education, in both historical and contemporary contexts, and
particularly in relation to gender. Thus, in the final section I conjoin Battersby with Smith, Griffiths and Hooks to resituate Diotima’s teaching in relation to pedagogical issues of autonomy and dependency.

II DIOTIMA, ARENDT AND NATALITY

Diotima’s teaching of Socrates begins by emphasising love’s intermediary nature: if love desires what it lacks, and love loves the beautiful and good, love cannot itself be beautiful and good. Instead, love is in between the beautiful and good and the bad and ugly; hence the pedagogical role of eros, as the mediating force which carries those who lack, yet still desire wisdom, along the difficult path between ignorance and understanding.

Diotima proceeds to describe love as a ‘begetting in beauty, in respect to both the body and the soul’ (Symposium 206b). Human beings are pregnant or fecund, she explains, full of potentiality which they long to release; love of another’s beauty allows them to bring forth what they bear (206c–d). Such engendering is initially presented as ‘an immortal element’ in mortal human creatures. However, as Diotima’s speech progresses, a crucial division occurs. Eros is divided into love of physical beauty, which engenders merely physical (hence mortal) offspring, and love of beautiful souls, which generates offspring that come closer to immortality in the form of beautiful discourse or ideas (208e–209e). This hierarchy is reinforced by Diotima’s concluding lesson, where she explains how one who is pregnant in soul—providing they are properly educated—will pass from love of a particular body, to love of appearances in general, to the higher beauty of souls, and then of laws and knowledge, until finally they are turned towards an encounter with Beauty itself (210a–212a). Unlike the transient beauty of the flesh, Beauty itself neither comes to be nor perishes, neither grows nor diminishes. Only in encountering such transcendent and eternal beauty is the loving soul inspired to give birth to true virtue, the closest a human being can come to immortality.

Approached through the work of Arendt, Diotima’s speech can be seen as embodying a crucial shift in perspective. According to Arendt, the Western philosophical tradition turns away from an originary Greek concern with immortality, and reorients itself towards the eternal in ways that devalue the plurality of singular lives that take shape in the transient earthly realm (Arendt, 1958, pp. 17–21). Insofar as Diotima’s speech begins with a celebration of immortality generated through erotic encounters involving both body and soul, and
moves towards a hierarchy in which the highest form of love leads away from particular bodies and towards the eternal form of Beauty itself, it can be seen as dramatising this shift.

Arendt’s concern is with the way this orientation towards the eternal turns politics into a question of law and order, of how best to rule the unruly realm of appearances. The political is thereby removed from its proper domain, which is characterised by action: the capacity to initiate new and unpredictable chains of events through words and deeds in the public realm (Arendt, 1958, pp. 175–247). Such a capacity is rooted in the fact that, while human beings may be destined to die, they begin in birth, and are hence characterised not only by mortality, but also by natality, as a capacity for new beginnings (pp. 176–8, 246–7). It is natality whose value is displaced in the final part of Diotima’s teaching, despite the metaphors of birth that pervade the text. This displacement has pedagogical as well as political implications, for according to Diotima’s final words, true virtue is produced not through the birth of new thoughts, but only to the extent that the lover is able to replicate a vision of eternal beauty. The questioning journey of the Platonic student of eros turns out not to be genuinely open and unpredictable; instead, its pre-determined end is located in an eternal ideality where beginnings would be neither possible nor necessary.

Nonetheless, reading Diotima through Arendt generates not only a critical response but also a productive one. Her emphasis on natality points us back to the earlier part of Diotima’s speech where all humans are described as pregnant ‘both in body and in soul’, and where eros animates an encounter that allows those who are ‘bursting with life’ to give birth in a state of ‘great excitement’ (Symposium, 206c–e). Such aspects of the text might helpfully return us to a conception of the educative process as involving both bodies and minds, as well as to a model of pedagogical encounters as generative and ‘natal’, able to initiate new beginnings—new ways of thinking and being—in all their ‘startling unexpectedness’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 178).11

Arendt also provides two helpful counterparts to the educative process understood as generative and natal, for as she shows, such processes are always fragile and risky, and their full effects are irreversible without being entirely predictable. These unavoidable risks are mitigated, first, by a capacity to make (and keep) promises, which offsets the uncertainty of the future by setting up ‘islands of security’ that allow for continuity in human relations; and second, by forgiveness, which releases us ‘from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done’, even though one can never fully know or predict the consequences of one’s actions (p. 237).
Translated into a pedagogical context, these capacities speak to the trust that must be cultivated and the forgiveness that must be promised for real (risky, natal) learning to begin: the promise (implicit or explicit) that each will engage in the process constructively, that mistakes will be an occasion for learning not punishment or humiliation, and that unexpected and unintended harm will be forgiven. Promising and forgiving are essentially relational capacities, belonging to the plural site of human existence and action. They find their home in the educative process as an always-relational site of exposure and care. Thus understood, education might not only be natal, but a privileged site for the cultivation of natality, that capacity for new beginnings which reminds us that ‘men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin’ (p. 246).

III DIOTIMA, LYOTARD AND INFANCY

Arendt’s concern with the reduction of politics and philosophy to regimes of law and mastery is shared by Lyotard, who uses Diotima’s speech to suggest that Plato’s metaphysics scapegoats women by making them the representatives of the unruly realm of appearances. Through her alignment with corporeal desire and (merely) physical reproduction, woman is identified with the ‘poverty’ of the transient realm of becoming ‘through which, people say, we must pass to attain timeless truth.’ (Lyotard, 1993b, p. 71) Against this ‘timeless truth’ that denies the value of becoming and difference, Lyotard sides with the poverty of the feminine (p. 70, p. 114). Such poverty engenders a resourceful inventiveness that escapes the (metaphysical) law of the masters and allows thinking to emerge in the midst of life.

Despite Lyotard’s positive re-valorisation of the phenomenal world of (unmasterable) becoming, we might well suspect that his alliance with the feminine constitutes another example of the appropriative logic Halperin critiques, whereby the feminine is constructed to serve the interests of the male subject (here, in escaping metaphysical mastery), especially as Lyotard explicitly assimilates the feminine to his own concept of the pagan (p. 114). Happily, as we will see, Lyotard’s engagement with Diotima’s presentation of Eros is linked to another, less problematic figure in his work, one that will also be aligned with the inventiveness poverty demands: namely, that of infancy. On Lyotard’s approach, Diotima becomes a figure divided against herself. In the later part of her teaching, she seems to become one of those ‘people’ who advocate passing through appearances
to attain timeless beauty and truth. But in an earlier passage, she dramatises the alliance of poverty and resourcefulness that Lyotard himself values. In Diotima’s account of the birth of Eros, Plenty (Poros) partakes in too much wine on Aphrodite’s birthday and is discovered in a drunken stupor by Poverty (Penia) (Symposium, 203b–e). Here their roles switch, for poverty shows considerable resourcefulness in taking advantage of Plenty’s defenceless state to conceive Eros, who inherits qualities from both parents. Thanks to his mother, he is poor, unkempt, shoeless and homeless, a wanderer who sleeps under the stars; thanks to his father, he is inventive, bold, always weaving some stratagem, a sophist and a sorcerer.

In his essay, ‘On the Strength of the Weak’, Lyotard draws explicitly on Diotima’s mythic tale to counter metaphysics with the sophistic metamorphoses of Eros, who he sees as ‘the opposite of a master’ (1993b, p. 71). However, despite the way he also associates the subversive ‘strength of the weak’ with the feminine (ibid., pp. 70, 93, 108–114), Lyotard emphasises that the qualities of Eros that elude the logic of the masters are inherited from his father (p. 70). Rather than reading this as a simple dismissal of Eros’ mother (it is the philosopher-masters who are guilty of identifying women with lack, according to Lyotard), we might instead see this double alignment of Eros—with the feminine power of dissimulation as well as the resourcefulness of Poros—as recalling Diotima’s original description, in which Eros inherits qualities from both his father and his mother.12 Eros thereby subverts the philosophical project of mastery by crossing between the qualities (masculinity and femininity, plenitude and lack, even life and death) on whose opposition and mutual exclusion the mastery of truth depends.13

Rather than being aligned with the feminine, the subversive combination of powerless vulnerability and obstinate inventiveness that characterises the infant Eros comes to be associated in Lyotard’s writings with infancy per se (see 1993b, p. 149), understood not as a chronological stage of life but an existential condition that can be renewed at any age (1993b, p. 149; 1993a, pp. 99–107). For Lyotard, infancy is the state of exposure that results when the certainties of the subject are undone, when we are returned to an indeterminacy for which we are unprepared, and when a searching curiosity is all that is left to us, prompting a questioning that has to proceed without ready-made criteria. Infancy is the impoverishment that demands we judge in the absence of the law, and the inventiveness that makes it possible to do so.14 Thus, infancy is the condition of genuine learning and—because it allows the search for wisdom to be indefinitely renewed—the condition of philosophy.
In contrast to the Platonic model, the philosophical education made possible by infancy does not lead to a vision of timeless ideals that govern the proper path of thought. Rather, infancy makes it possible to begin to think again, to initiate thought, without knowing in advance where it will lead. Infancy sustains the ‘work of recommencement’ (Lyotard, 1993a, p. 102): it makes possible the judgements without criteria that break open accepted truths and call into question past values and future destinations, setting our thoughts and our imaginations in motion. Infancy is thus also the condition of teaching philosophy, which cannot be reduced to the application of a method or technique. Instead, it means showing someone what is involved in exposing oneself to the vagaries of thought: ‘You cannot open up a question without leaving yourself open to it. You cannot scrutinize a “subject” . . . without being scrutinized by it. You cannot do any of these things without renewing ties with the season of childhood, the season of the mind’s possibilities’ (p. 100). Lyotard, like Christine Winter (Chapter 7), values the time spent on sideroads that throw one off the accepted course; like Aislinn O’Donnell (Chapter 6), his work calls for a re-evaluation of failure. For one can learn nothing from others ‘unless they themselves learn to unlearn’ (Lyotard, 1993a, p. 101): unless they enter the classroom without having made up their minds in advance—unless they are willing to be cast adrift, and allow themselves to be returned to infancy.

Just as Arendt aligns the capacity for beginnings with natality, so for Lyotard, infancy’s questioning inventiveness repays a debt to birth by re-affirming the possibility of beginning anew. Yet in both Arendt’s reflections on natality, and Lyotard’s on infancy, the figure of the mother is for the most part curiously absent. In Arendt’s case, this is because of the way she distinguishes natality as a power for beginning manifest in action from physical birth, which—in a troubling echo of Diotima’s hierarchical teaching—is relegated to the sphere of labour and biological necessity. For his part, Lyotard insists that birth is ‘not merely the biological fact of parturition’, but ‘the event of a possible radical alteration in the course compelling things to repeat the same’: it is birth as event which is ontologically significant, rather than actual birth, in which the radicality of the event is both revealed and concealed (1993b, p. 151). This abstraction of birth from the body of the mother into the figure of the event also finds echoes in Plato’s philosophy, where birth and pregnancy are metaphorically appropriated to affirm the generative power (and hence, the ontological significance) of the non-corporeal life of the soul and (above all) the Forms. Thus, in displacing the role of the mother, both Lyotard and Arendt inadvertently reinscribe traces of
the very metaphysical tradition they seek to challenge. In this regard, it is telling that both thinkers continue to invoke the Greek figure that presents human existence as a coming from and returning to nothingness (see for example Lyotard, 1993b, p. 146; Arendt, 1978, p. 19). In contrast, Irigaray will insist that birth is not a ‘coming from nothing’, but a passage into the world through the body of a woman.

IV DIOTIMA, IRIGARAY AND THE GENERATIVE ENCOUNTER

Making birth the starting point for an account of human existence means beginning with the relation of each singular being to the flesh and blood m/other from whom he or she comes. Human existence is thereby seen as both constitutively sexuate, and constitutively relational. Again, this ontological reorientation has significant pedagogical implications (as Todd and Wilson also explore). For Lyotard, philosophy is ‘an exercise in discomposure’ which is ‘first and foremost an autodidactic activity’ (1993a, pp. 100–1; my emphasis). In ways that reflect his distancing of infancy as event from the originary corporeal relation to the mother, the real work of philosophy takes place when thought unravels and the thinking subject becomes other to itself, rather than in relations between ourselves and actual others (whether those others are encountered as textual voices, or flesh and blood interlocutors).15 By contrast, Irigaray’s emphasis on the ontological primacy of the maternal relation holds open the promise of a more thoroughly relational model of the self, and hence, the pedagogical process. This is not to deny that learning and growth involve becoming other to ourselves in the unsettling ways Lyotard describes. Rather, it is to remember that the condition of such processes of becoming other to ourselves are the relations with those actual others that allow us to come into being (and into language) in the first place, just as it is our ongoing encounters with others that will unsettle us and make us think again.

Further resources for a relational pedagogy emerge in Irigaray’s own re-reading of Diotima’s speech, ‘Sorcerer Love’ (Irigaray, 1994).16 Like Arendt, Irigaray is uneasy about the final trajectory of Diotima’s teaching. To counter this, she directs us back to the earlier passage in Symposium where Diotima tells Socrates that:

All men [human beings] are pregnant in respect to both the body and the soul, [. . .] and when they reach a certain age, our nature desires to beget. It cannot beget in ugliness, but only in beauty. The intercourse [sunousia, lit. being with] of man and woman is
a begetting [or giving birth]. This is a divine thing, and pregnancy and procreation are an immortal element in the mortal living creature (206c).¹⁷

For Irigaray, this passage (206c–e) reinforces love’s role as intermediary: it is love that brings lovers together, in such a way that their being with one another allows them to release what they bear in a joyful engendering. It also helps Irigaray develop an account of the erotic encounter based on a model of birth and gestation as generative rather than merely reproductive. Whereas later, Diotima will emphasise the desire to secure immortality via one’s offspring (i.e. via reproduction), in this earlier passage, the erotic encounter simply is a bearing or begetting: intercourse, or more literally, being with another in love, is generative in and of itself. Whether or not a child is born, love engenders a being-with one another which is a rebirth of the lovers themselves, in a continual process of regeneration and growth.¹⁸ In turn, this mutual re-engendering constitutes a ‘passage to immortality’: not because it turns mortals into immortal beings, but because it manifests immortality as a perpetual becoming, and thus a ‘perpetual becoming-immortal’ that takes place within mortal life (Irigaray, 1994, pp. 187–9).

Despite the ways in which, for Diotima, eros animates the ideal pedagogical relation, Irigaray does not unpack the specifically pedagogical implications of her re-reading of this text. However, if we map the dynamics of her rendering of the erotic encounter back onto a pedagogical context, several key points emerge. First, and most obviously, the pedagogical encounter is also a site for releasing the potential for growth in processes of becoming and change; thus, the pedagogical encounter can also be a way of affirming the possibilities for perpetual becoming harboured within mortal life, and hence reaffirming the promise of birth. Here again it is vital that Irigaray conceives of birth as generative rather than merely reproductive: likewise, the educative encounters capable of renewing the promise of birth will consist not in the passive reproduction of received ideas, but the generation of thought and the imagining of possibilities, as well as new capacities and connections. Second, because on Irigaray’s reading, the natal promise that Diotima discerns in all human beings is reaffirmed in a thoroughly relational scene, so the pedagogical process can also be resituated within a fully relational context: not in the auto-affective unravelling of the subject, but in the space between singular beings who encounter one another in their difference(s) (see also Todd and Hoveid and Finne, Chapters 4 and 5, respectively).
Third, in recovering the explicitly relational nature of Diotima’s original teaching (in contrast to the final solitary encounter with Beauty itself), Irigaray displaces another well-known Platonic image for the pedagogical process: that of the Socratic midwife. This image presents the teacher as one who helps others give birth to ideas while being barren and past child-bearing age themselves (Theaetetus, 149a–151d). Irigaray’s reading of Diotima’s erotic pedagogy, like Halperin’s, offers a more reciprocal model of the educative process as an encounter in which both student and teacher are transformed. Here the good teacher would be a pregnant midwife, ready to learn as they teach. However, because Irigaray argues that it is only in the later sections of Diotima’s speech that the lovers’ encounter is mediated by a third, external goal (the production of a child, the attainment of truth), and that, in earlier passages, love needs no external outcome but is expressed in the generative becomings of the encounter itself, her reading allows for greater emphasis on the way that each of those engaged in the encounter are differently transformed. In this way, she reminds us that reciprocity does not have to entail sameness or even equivalence: it can involve the return of one gesture (a smile) with another quite different (a welcoming wave), and can occur between those of a different sex, race, age or ethnicity, where what might be reciprocated is an attentiveness to one another’s differences without the desire to assimilate or appropriate. On this model, fertile pedagogical relations would be those allowing differing potentials to be realised in differing ways.

Fourth, on Irigaray’s reading, the erotic encounter becomes a process of giving birth (un enfantement) in which what is reborn is the lovers themselves, who are thereby returned to infancy (l’enfance). Love therefore creates the conditions for its own renewal: those returned to infancy can begin all over again. Similarly, a pedagogical encounter that allows latent potential to be released and new capacities to develop simultaneously regenerates the conditions for future learning and growth. Positive learning experiences also renew our openness to others, reminding us that such openness can lead to pleasurable and exciting journeys of transformation. Thus one might say that infancy itself is what is engendered anew in the pedagogical encounter: not as a lack of adult capacities, but as new beginnings and renewed potentialities. This means that ‘infancy’ is not here understood as a state of immaturity equated with deficiency, but rather as Dewey conceives it: as ‘a force positively present—the ability to develop... the power to grow.’ (Dewey, 2004, pp. 40–1) It is this positive power that makes adults mourn the loss of immaturity (ibid), and that is re-affirmed in both Lyotard’s notion of infancy and Irigaray’s re-reading of the erotic
encounter. On this model, learning is not a matter of passively absorbing knowledge to fill a gap or lack, but an active, ongoing, relational process of exploring diverse powers and capacities.

V RE-THINKING DEPENDENCIES AND POWER RELATIONS

At this point, I would like to recall the vulnerability that Lyotard reminds us is constitutive of infancy, and thus, the manifold ways in which the pedagogical relation can be distorted or abused. As Smith notes, it is in an effort to refuse or overcome our vulnerability that we seek to deny the attachments and dependencies that bind us to others, particularly through love. Smith turns to Diotima to make this point, reworking the final part of her speech as follows:

My attachment to particular things and particular people exposes me to the possibility of their loss. If I love an heirloom vase, say, for its sentimental value as well as its intrinsic beauty, then my feelings are bound up with and dependent upon its fortunes. It might be safer to become a connoisseur of vases in general, since then there are other candidates for my interest and affection if one is damaged. Safest of all is to become a connoisseur of the quality or qualities for which I loved the vases: to become a lover of beauty in general (Griffiths and Smith, 1989, p. 283).

If things are risky enough with vases, they are worse with other human beings, who ‘change, or move away, or grow up, or die. Our loved ones are hostages to fortune, as the phrase has it. Emotional dependence upon them can only end in grief’ (ibid.). Smith thus offers an implicit critique of Diotima’s climactic lesson that is different from but complementary to Irigaray’s. On Smith’s reading, the underlying motivation for loving not particular others, but beauty in general is to protect us from the vulnerability we fear will result from attachment. This means we sacrifice a love of others ‘for their otherness, their unique, irreplaceable particularity’—the kind of otherness that fecundates the encounter Irigaray describes—and instead love them ‘for their similarity to ourselves’ or to a general ideal, and thereby for a ‘repeatable quality’ which ensures that ‘substitutes can in principle be found’ (ibid.).

At one point Smith suggests that the fact that ‘independence is seen as automatically a more desirable state than dependence has much to do with the natural human dislike of risk and vulnerability’ (ibid.). However, in the fuller discussion to which his reference to Diotima is
a prelude, he and Griffiths show how this dislike is dramatically intensified by the Western Enlightenment tradition, whose emphasis on a distinctive and highly individualistic conception of autonomy starkly devalues both dependencies and attachments along with the vulnerabilities that accompany them. Rather than seeing a fear of vulnerability as entirely natural, I would suggest that this tradition thereby contributes to the naturalisation of such fears (not least through the sublime; see Griffiths, Chapter 11). At the same time, its insistence on the value of entirely self-determining individuals (at least as an ideal) represses the fact that, if vulnerability is indeed natural to human beings, it is natural to us as constitutively *relational* beings. As Judith Butler movingly writes, ‘We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something’ (2004, p. 23): what we are missing are the very relations that make us who we are.

If dependencies are constitutive of identities as intrinsically relational, then as Griffiths and Smith emphasise, ‘dependence is not something we ought to accept *for the sake of* autonomy, as if it were a stage to go through and pass beyond to proper adult independence or as if dependence were a continual but sometimes inconvenient need’ (1989, p. 291). Rather, we urgently need ways of thinking—and educating—that cease to devalue the dependencies, attachments and vulnerabilities that are not just unavoidable, but a generative and constitutive part of what Griffiths elsewhere calls the ‘web of identity’ (1995).21 One starting point for redressing the balance might be to strategically reverse the image of attachments and dependencies as weakening an otherwise invulnerable self, and instead to imagine a self that becomes ever thinner, more brittle and fragile as well as more impoverished, as the net of relations that constitute it are withdrawn. However, as Smith and Griffiths also note, in a Western context informed by the ideal of the modern liberal individual, ‘The rhetoric of independence and autonomy is so powerful that it sounds paradoxical to assert the value of dependence’. Thus, ‘Perhaps, in the end, we must simply accept that some things can no longer be said’ (p. 292).

Griffiths and Smith turn to art to *show* ‘what it has become virtually impossible to *say*’ (p. 292). Literature can provide counter-narratives of the self that show how dependencies might be valued while complicating and expanding our understandings of what might be meant by ‘autonomy’ or ‘independence’. We could also turn to the theoretical resources developed by some feminist philosophers, including Griffiths’ own discussion of women’s often paradoxical relations to the modern, individualist concept of autonomy. As she shows, these apparent paradoxes tend to dissolve if we learn to listen to the different notions of independence and autonomy—as woven through with
dependencies and emerging within webs of relations—that women’s stories have to offer (Griffiths, 1995).

Battersby reinforces Griffiths’ view that in Western modernity, women tend to find themselves in a paradoxical position, caught between conflicting ideals of autonomy and care (Battersby, 2007, pp. 136–7). She also agrees that this position need not be seen as wholly negative—a trap women are powerless to resist—but can become a site from which alternative conceptions of self and identity can be worked out (Battersby, 1998, 2007). In her development of an account of the self that takes the female body that births as the norm, Battersby emphasises that one of the features of such an account will be that unequal power relations and dependencies—such as exist between a mother and a foetus or infant—will also be seen as the norm (1998, pp. 8, 38). This approach to the self provides a distinct alternative to the modern conception of ideally equal, fully self-determining individuals. It puts us in a better position to deal with the fact that in the classroom, as in the wider social contexts within which classrooms are always situated, ‘the dependencies that we have are not an interdependency of equals, of a free association of equal people, who will stand by each other in mutual support. They are the mutual dependencies of non-equals’ (Griffiths, 1995, p. 30; see also Shuffelton, Chapter 3).

By re-conceptualising dependencies and unequal power relations as a normal and constitutive part of relational identities, Battersby enables us to enquire into their role in shaping educational relations without assuming that they are necessarily a bad thing, to be eliminated wherever possible. Instead, we might investigate the ways in which inequalities can be productive differences that hold open the space for generative encounters, while dependencies can be embodied in relations that not only enable flourishing, but that can also become the site of an embodied ethical education in how to relate to otherness and difference.

This is not to say that differences and unequal power relations do not also house opportunities for exploitation and abuse, particularly when they are oppositionally or hierarchically organised. When I teach Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, my familiarity with the text and philosophical training give me a power that I can certainly choose to use to belittle or silence, but that I can also deploy to help others find their way into the text, learn to navigate it, and begin to develop their own responses. Neither is it to say that all dependencies are good. For Nietzsche, it is a sign of cultural degeneration to value reason over the senses in a totalising manner, rather than being able to discriminate between the differing values of different sensible experiences for
different types of life (Nietzsche, 1990, pp. 39–45). Similarly, we might think it a sign of social and cultural weakness not to be able to discriminate between dependencies in terms of the extent to which they help or hinder different modes of flourishing. The ideal of equality (including the equalisation of all dependencies as not just ‘bad’, but bad for everyone in the same way) too often disguises an ideal of sameness that is itself oppressive, insofar as it allows no space for differences to be registered and valued. But as Bell Hooks emphasises, describing her own experiences of the feminist classroom, differences—in embodiment, experience, perspective or values—are a key site of learning, providing we do not too quickly shut them down and instead learn to live with the discomfort they may bring: ‘Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth’ (Hooks, 1994, p. 113).

Hooks is a helpful voice to put alongside Griffiths and Battersby. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), a collection that includes her own reflections on ‘Eros, Eroticism and the Pedagogical Process’, she writes:

> When I enter the classroom at the beginning of the semester the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners together. It positions me as a learner. But I’m also not suggesting that I don’t have more power. And I’m not trying to say we’re all equal here. I’m trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context (Hooks, 1994, p. 153; second emphasis mine).

Hooks’ approach points to the dependency of teachers on their students as much as the reverse. This dependency impinges on the affective life of the teacher as well as their sense of identity. If a group of students fails to read, engage, or take any responsibility for the classroom experience, this is not akin to a breach of contract that simply means the teacher will not be able to deliver the lesson they set out to give. It is a breakdown of relations and commitment that, as Hooks describes (pp. 8–9, 158–9), will often manifest in the anxiety and affective distress of the teacher. Conversely, as Hooks also notes, our interactions with our students can (and should) empower us (p. 152). When, in a class on the philosophy of art, a student who was also a sculptor wrote an essay on the active material encounters involved in working with different kinds of metals, I learnt from him
in unanticipated ways that informed my research as well as my future ability to teach the material we were discussing; though it remained the case that I got to grade his papers, not he mine.

Cultivating the dynamics in which it is possible to productively confront one another across differences as Hooks suggests is something for which teachers bear a special but never a sole responsibility. In a discussion of collecting, cultural artefacts and colonialism, one of my students spoke passionately and articulately from his perspective as one who had recently moved to the US from Iraq. His comments provided a cross-cultural perspective that was challenging for some of the students in the class, and found strong support from others. This was a galvanising teaching moment that made me deeply aware of my dependence on my students: on the courage of the Iraqi student in speaking up and being prepared to be directly critical of the US (and by implication Western colonial powers more generally); and on the readiness of my other students (who themselves embodied a range of different ethnicities and nationalities) to listen to different, and perhaps challenging, viewpoints and engage with them constructively. Our discussions were critically enriched by his intervention, which showed how the issues we were addressing were not some abstract problem cooked up by academics to make people’s heads hurt, but bear on real lives and real cultural and political struggles.

Finally, an attentiveness to the ways in which dependencies can be enabling, rather than simply constraining, also equips us better to deal with situations where power and position are abused in an educational context. Such problems arise not only where the classroom is used ‘to enact rituals of control that [are] about domination and the unjust exercise of power’ (Hooks, 1994, p. 5), but also (and perhaps more often?) where there is a refusal to recognise or take responsibility for the dependencies (and inter-dependencies) that teaching involves, and that need to be handled with care if they are not to become simply repressive or damaging. To return again to Hooks, ‘the classroom should be a space where we’re all in power in different ways.’ (p. 152) That our students empower us—by teaching us new things, as my sculptor student did, or how to be better, braver teachers, as my student from Iraq did—is another sign of the depth and complexity of our dependence on them, even as we retain power over them in certain respects.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I hope to have shown that taking a turn back through Diotima, whose teachings come to us from the beginnings of the
Western philosophical tradition, is still valuable for those of us thinking about teaching today. The differing responses to Diotima charted here—by turns both sympathetic and critical—point towards an approach attentive to the generative and mutually transformative potential of the pedagogical encounter, as well as to the importance of allowing oneself to be undone in such relations rather than seeking to master otherness and difference. Between them, the diverse thinkers considered provide us with resources for a relational pedagogy in which educational encounters require both the cultivation of differences and the possibility of failure, and whose inherent but desirable riskiness is offset via the cultivation of both trust and forgiveness. Such encounters re-affirm our natal capacity for initiation, for forging new beginnings both for ourselves and for—and with—others.

In the final section, I argued that unequal power relations and the asymmetrical patterns of dependency they imply are a constitutive and often enabling aspect of the relational context of learning. As Griffiths and Smith show in their thoughtful exploration of the very different ways in which ‘independence’ is invoked in the classroom, our choices are not only between, on the one hand, hierarchical relations of dominance versus submission, activity versus passive receptivity; and on the other, ‘flat’ structures in which all participants are supposedly equal. Rather, our models of both social and pedagogical relations can (and should) involve much more nuanced appreciations of the patterns of dependence and independence that result from power relations that are typically unequal.

This does not mean simply discounting the importance of autonomy and independence. At a time when we are faced with an ever-increasing circulation and regurgitation of information, Kant’s call to have the courage to think for oneself begins to look distinctly radical at times. But it does mean paying more attention to the kinds of dependency that make independence possible: when I think about Irigaray or Kant, I also think with and thanks to them, even when I am critical of them. And as this example suggests, it also means attending to the ways in which we stand to gain more autonomy, not less, from nurturing our relations, particularly where those relations involve the kinds of encounters with difference and even conflict that Irigaray and Hooks teach us to value. If we are constitutively relational selves, welcoming difference into the relations that constitute us can increase the possibilities for weaving together differing perspectives in ways that afford new beginnings for thought and action, paths into the future that emerge from our relations to others without simply being determined by any one of them.
In the end, such an approach would necessitate a rethinking of the very concept of autonomy in ways that go beyond the scope of this chapter. But at the very least, it suggests that the goal of education should not be to cultivate individual autonomy understood on the modern (broadly Kantian) model as a capacity to govern oneself through reason alone in ways that systematically devalue dependency and make us less rather than more able to live with vulnerability and difference. Rather, the goal of a relational pedagogy should be to cultivate capacities that enable one to attend to and take responsibility for the relations that make one who one is, in ways that include critical reflection, emotional intelligence, and a willingness for action where required.

NOTES

1. In this chapter I shift quite loosely between the ‘pedagogical’ and the ‘educational’; for a helpful differentiation, see Sharon Todd (Chapter 4), whose chapter also links the pedagogical to becoming, birth and infancy.
2. I draw on translations of Symposium by both Allen (Plato, 1991) and Cobb (Plato, 1993); references use the standard Stephanus system.
3. In addition to Irigaray’s work, see for example Battersby, 1998; Cavarero, 2000; and Griffiths, 1995.
4. Though note that in Menexenus, Socrates refers to Aspasia (a real, Milesian woman and the mistress of Pericles) as his teacher in rhetoric; on Aspasia and Diotima, see Halperin, 1990.
5. For an excellent discussion of these images that assesses key previous interpretations, see Sandford, 2010.
6. Halperin argues that Plato (via Diotima) presents female desire as inextricably combining pleasure and reproduction. But as it is in fact in the male body that ‘reproductive function cannot be isolated from sexual pleasure’, Plato’s text performs a ‘double movement’: feminine pleasure is first modelled on male physiology, and then re-appropriated by male philosophical lovers via the teachings of a ‘feminine’ character (Halperin, 1990, p. 142).
7. See also Cavarero 1995, pp. 91–107. Given the importance of Halperin’s work on queering and queerness, this critique of ‘mimetic transvestitism’ might seem surprising, for such rhetorical and performative manoeuvres can trouble the alleged ‘naturalness’ of both gender and sexuality (as shown by Judith Butler). I take it that Halperin’s point here is that what is being mimed in Diotima’s speech is femininity as constructed in relation to men and male desire, in ways that echo Irigaray’s critique of the feminine as the ‘other’ of the male subject.
8. To be fair, Halperin is refreshingly self-critical about the risks of reinscribing the feminine as a male author in ways that silence women while perpetuating the concerns of men; see Halperin, 1990, p. 114, p. 149.
9. As Wilson notes, the name chosen by a group of Italian feminists inspired by Irigaray’s work was ‘Diotima’.
10. On the pedagogical potential of Irigaray’s retrieval of the maternal body see Todd on the ‘placental economy’, Chapter 4.
11. See both Todd and Greenhalgh-Spencer (Chapters 4 and 10, respectively) on pedagogies that foster the unpredictable and new.
12. See also the essay ‘The Survivor’ (Lyotard, 1993b), where Lyotard’s characterisation of infancy strongly echoes the way that Diotima’s Eros combines qualities from both his mother and his father. Elsewhere, in order to counter the role of lack in Western metaphysics, Lyotard sides firmly with ‘an Eros that is all Poros’ (1993b, p. 86), though this Eros is still aligned with the subversive humour of the pagan and the feminine.

13. Thus read as a ‘queer’ figure of ‘crossing’, Eros points to productive resonances between Lyotard and Halperin; for Lyotard, the feminine and the pagan ‘transsexualize the social body’ (1993b, p. 114).

14. On these points, see especially: ‘The Subject of the Course of Philosophy’ (Lyotard, 1993a); ‘The Survivor’ (1993b), and the volume from which it is drawn (not yet fully translated into English) Lectures d’enfance (Lyotard, 1991).

15. For Lyotard, ‘becoming other to oneself’ is not a fundamental alienation that needs to be resolved; rather it is in this undoing of the subject that thinking happens and an ethical relation with alterity can emerge. For Irigaray, emphasising the constitutive role of lived, embodied relations with actual others aids in the cultivation of a relational ontology no longer dependent on a sacrificial and matricidal logic.

16. This essay was originally published in English in An Ethics of Sexual Difference (Irigaray, 1993); unfortunately (perhaps for copyright reasons) one of the long quotations from Symposium that appeared in Irigaray’s French original is curtailed in this version; hence, I am using the alternative Kuykendall translation (Irigaray, 1994).

17. The Greek word for ‘intercourse’ here (sunousia) can signal intercourse in either a sexual or a social sense. The word for ‘begetting’, tiktein, can apply to both sexes and can also be translated as ‘giving birth’.

18. Irigaray’s project is often seen as inimical or even hostile to queer theory. But her refiguring of the erotic as a non-teleological and generative (rather than reproductive) encounter opens up the possibility of a critical alliance with Halperin and other queer theorists, who have also subjected the reproductive imperative to critique.

19. See Todd on how Irigaray’s ‘placental economy’ also figures the mediation between self and other as a ‘threshold of becoming’.

20. Love, Irigaray says, gives birth to lovers—‘enfanter des amants’—or more literally, love makes infants of lovers (Irigaray, 1984, p. 33).

21. As Griffiths notes: ‘My dependent close relationships feel as though they increase freedom more than they diminish it. I can live my life more as I would want to when I have dependent close relationships with a range of other people. . . . My freedom to do some things is increased if I do not have to consider others. But my freedom to be myself is bound by those others and our ways of leading a life together.’ (1995, p. 30)

22. For a sustained re-thinking of autonomy and independence in terms of an always relational project of self-creation, see Griffiths, 1995.

23. My thanks to the book editors and anonymous readers for their extremely helpful comments.

REFERENCES