Conclusion

At the beginning of our excursion into the philosophy of the teacher in Part II we separated the identity of the teacher into master and servant. Now, at the end of our study, we are coming to see the relation of master and servant itself as the whole of the teacher’s difficult experience of the relation of authority and freedom in her work. In many ways, the separation of these elements is itself an abstraction from their coexistence in experience as contradiction, and as difficulty. But it is in their abstraction from each other that we experience most powerfully their return to each other, and it is this that has brought us now to begin to understand the complexities of their relationship within teachers’ experiences. Equally, we started with a model of education as enlightenment taken from Plato’s analogy of the Cave in *The Republic*. If, now, the teacher can be seen as necessarily both master and servant, and if the living out of this contradiction is the reality of her work, what does this mean for that model of enlightenment? Is it still a relevant model for the teacher?

It is, but only as a model re-formed in and by the real experiences and difficulties with freedom and authority that teachers face. We shall illustrate this in two ways: by returning to the Cave and by returning to the teacher who prefaced our study in Part II, Gillian Rose.

In Chapter 3 we observed teachers as masters who taught in the Cave but not, in general, about the Cave. In Chapter 4 we described two groups of theorists who promoted the idea of teachers criticising the Cave from within it, and trying to overcome or deal with the contradictions that this posed for them. For critical pedagogues, mastery was overcome in and by *praxis*, and for post-enlightenment pedagogues mastery was avoided by, for want of a better term, the difference that is respected in pluralism. However, we saw how, in both cases, the totality of the Cave returned to upset these plans, forcing both attempts into contradictions and aporias of abstraction and domination that teachers could experience repeatedly but seemingly never overcome. It was to these experiences of the self-defeating nature of teaching for freedom in the Cave that our spiritual educators in Chapter 5 looked in order to understand the deeper truths within the difficulties of theory and practice. The result is that, whilst our spiritual teachers have not freed themselves from the Cave, they have changed their relationship to it considerably. Their enlightenment about the shadows, about the reality that was uncritically taken for granted, and about the oppositions that reproduced themselves in attempts to reform the Cave, has made them aware that more is at stake here for the teacher than was realised in critical pedagogy or post-enlightenment theorising. These
spiritual teachers know that relations inside the Cave imply or commend something also apart from the Cave, something that is not immediately ‘present’. What is commended is a universal perspective, something that offers meaning and significance to their particular situations. But, equally, they know that such a total perspective is only present negatively, for universality can never be known by the individual except in some kind of spiritual way, as between, perhaps beyond, individuals. This is how the teacher-prisoner has appeared to us in the contradiction of both master and servant. She must serve an idea of truth and freedom that negates her ever being master of it, yet she must also be sufficiently master of it in order, therein, to serve it through the education of others.

From all our educators we recognise that life in the Cave is hard. We know that it does not immediately encourage its residents to think too much about the big questions or the truths that might offer universality over and above the illusions of the Cave. Our dreams and our hopes for justice, for peace, and for a fairer and more equitable world are often based on intuitions or feelings or concepts of this universality, but they are fleeting and retreat as quickly as they come. They are as likely to be overcome by the demands of everyday survival as they are by the distractions, abstractions and escapes from these demands that the entertainment industries of the Cave provide. And yet, at certain times in our lives, we may feel that we are in contact with these bigger feelings and ideas. It may be around death or at times of great fear, it may be in quiet moments when we suddenly feel the enormity of nature and its landscape, it may be when we look up at the stars and feel smaller and more insignificant than a grain of sand in the whole universe. Or it may be when, failing at school, we sit before the ocean and write poetry.

There is no reason to think, however, that we cannot also learn something very important about enlightenment from these difficult experiences. There is no reason to reject out of hand the idea that these difficult experiences might actually be enlightenment. As such, we could say that enlightenment is not a result, a positive and definite something that, like a newly minted coin, we can simply pick up and put in our pocket. Education is not a ‘thing’. Education is both experience and our relation to the experience that recognises it as learning. It is not enough to say that we learn from experience. We also have to learn about learning from experience. And what we learn about learning, from experience, is that it is difficult, elusive, essentially negative and unceasingly contradictory. Even this definition of learning, directly communicated, is not itself learning until, in your experience, it too is negated. Hence, we do not need to reject the big thoughts, the big ideas, because they are difficult and hard to understand. On the contrary, difficulty and its brethren might be the very stuff of such big ideas.

So, what kind of enlightenment is this? Perhaps it can be called a philosophical enlightenment—an enlightenment that is its own self-turning wheel, having its substance in the difficult experiences that negate our certainties repeatedly and without compromise. To learn of enlightenment in this way is to change our pre-conceptions, our prejudices, about
what enlightenment and indeed what truth are. The Cave teaches us to expect truth to be something concrete when, as we have just seen, there is evidence for the teacher that it may have more spiritual import.

In fact, there is a reading of Plato’s Cave that finds strikingly similar notions of difficulty in truth and education. He argued that despite the beauty and truth of the upper world outside the Cave, the philosophical world or philosophical knowledge (sophia), part of the education that is gained in the upper world is, nevertheless, that the teacher must return to the Cave. Teachers have a duty to offer this opportunity for sophia to others. It would be wrong, he says, to leave people in a worse condition when you could help them to realise a better one. It would be wrong to leave them in ignorance. Thus, enlightenment in and out of Plato’s Cave offers no ivory towers for the enlightened to sit in, from which to watch, from above, the rest of the world. Life does not serve cognition, but rather cognition serves life.¹

Plato makes this very clear in his description of the Cave where he highlights the necessity of return.² He is clear that the enlightened former prisoner would not wish to return to live as the other prisoners still do. For one thing, if he were to return, his new understanding would not be recognised or welcomed in his old world. Indeed, his new way of seeing would be interpreted as a dangerous illusion. Plato admits that all who become enlightened would, not surprisingly, be unwilling ‘to trouble themselves with mortal affairs and that their souls [would be] eager to dwell above’ (Plato, 1992, p. 203). Plato warns that the enlightened will be refused the liberty of remaining outside the Cave, in the upper world, however, and will be made to ‘descend again to the prisoners and to share with them in toils and honours . . . ’ (p. 205). In response to questions about the justice of this compulsion, two points are made. First, the reluctance of the philosopher king to want to rule is one of the main reasons why he can be trusted to rule. Second, the duty to return and to work for the truth of return is precisely what he has become enlightened about. Plato goes further, however, and argues that the return of the teacher is related to justice. He argues that the soul of an individual contains the same characteristics as the ‘soul’ of the city or the society. The soul and the city both consist in a relationship between desire, spirit and reason. When the soul and the city balance these constituents in the same way, this is justice for all. This balance is what is worked for in the struggles for enlightenment. Desire and reason, he argues, are in opposition in both the soul and the city. Desire seeks personal satisfaction, but reason demands truth and freedom. They are held in their difficult relation by spirit, which, siding with one or the other, is the work of that relation. In the analogy of the Cave this work is the return of the philosopher to the upper world from the Cave and from the upper world to the Cave. This return is the relation of spirit and reason over personal desire. To engage in this struggle to educate the soul and the city, for Plato, is in essence to work for justice.

This philosophy of the teacher, the one based in enlightenment that began our study in Part II, and quickly fell into disrepute, retrieves now

the vocation of the teacher. It sees work as the substance of reason itself. The return to and from the Cave is really Plato’s way of saying to teachers that they must never stop thinking about what they are doing, and that the embrace of this as a personal struggle is also tantamount to working for just relations as a teacher in the world. Here, then, enlightenment is not only the eternal return of thinking, doubt, action, further thinking, and further doubt, endlessly; it is also formative of who we are and how we live.3

So, what is the teacher to make of this model of enlightenment and education as struggle? She may strive to embrace it but she is undermined by having to impose equivalence through measurement and examination. She may dislike the current forms of education, yet she is pivotal in their continuation. Her heart may wish things were different, but her job sees her caught between the dilemma of freedom and authority. What is the teacher to understand of her entwinement within this self-defeating opposition of hope and despair? Is this contradiction of working against students when trying to work for them not the very stuff of disenchantment, despair and resignation in the profession?

It is appropriate to add here that some strands of recent postmodern writing engage in a dissemblance at this most difficult and troublesome point. For example, Gert Biesta says to this teacher that her experience of this contradiction and aporia is not hers. Any claim she makes for this experience is ‘based upon a specific, individualistic definition of man’ (Vanderstraeten and Biesta, 2001, p. 10) that grounds a view of education as an interaction between subjects. Her mistake leads her to view her experience ‘either through the perspective of the educator, or through that of the child or student’ (p. 11). Instead she ought to understand that education is constituted by the interactional space between teacher and student and that it is this ‘new reality’ (p. 17) or difference ‘which educates’ (ibid.). This new reality is not a contradiction—even though ‘the possibility of [this] education is sustained by its impossibility’ (p. 16)—for it would only be a contradiction for subjects, and they are only a ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ (p. 11).4

How seductive this must seem for teachers when theorists posit a ‘new reality’ over against their actual experiences! How calming to replace the immersion in difficulty for the subject who teaches, and fails to teach, with ‘an in-between space’ (p. 17) But how dispiriting to displace the struggle of the subject with her students—her struggle and their struggle—with something represented by Biesta as unrepresentable; and how dissembling to posit this ‘unrepresentable’ space over the meaning and significance of teachers’ lived struggles and contradictions as if the former had some kind of meaning in its own right. The unrepresentable, Biesta admits, cannot be a third text related to the two texts of teacher and student, yet in denying the aporia as their experience, not only is the relation posited as a third text, it is posited in such a way that it stands above the actual relation of teacher and student. It matters not that Biesta would protest that the space is not above the partners in education but between them. The point is that in granting primacy to the space over the experience of the subjects, it
cannot be *their* space! As such, this postmodern theory of education has nothing of substance to offer the subjectivity of teachers at the moments of their most intractable difficulties.

But the philosophy of the teacher as we have presented it here in Part II, and I shall do again in more philosophical detail in Part III, can offer something more than a denial of subjectivity for teachers in regard to their aporetic experiences. It comprehends that the aporetic (external) struggle between teacher and student is also an aporetic (internal) struggle for the teacher. It is *their* struggle. To begin now to use language that can help to unpack this philosophy of the teacher, we can say that this one relationship of the external and the internal is the self-relation of education that is *in and for itself* when and because it is *for another*. We have already seen this beginning to emerge in Chapter 5, where contradictions and oppositions become, for Buber and Weil, spiritual and religious relations, and for Heidegger, spiritual and political relations. It still remains to us, however, to locate philosophers who can work with these contradictions and oppositions philosophically, and draw out from them philosophies of the teacher. This we shall do below in Part III. But to end Part II let us return finally to the thinker who began our study of the teacher, Gillian Rose. She has tried to articulate this philosophical education as a life being lived.

We saw in the Introduction to Part II that she found such philosophical qualities in one of her consultants. More generally, however, she asks, ‘what do you need to become a philosopher?’ (Rose, 1999, p. 42). In answer to this, she cites three qualities: first, ‘endless curiosity about everything’ (ibid.); second, ‘the ability to pay attention’ (ibid.); and third, an ‘acceptance of pathlessness (*aporia*): that there may be no solutions to questions, only the clarification of their statement’ (ibid.). Thus, she concludes, ‘you discover that you are a philosopher: it is not something you ever *become*; it is ‘a passion’ (ibid.).

Such a mind, fuelled by this philosophical passion, will not try to evade difficult or aporetic experiences. On the contrary, it will embrace the education and the learning that they commend. Rose is scathing about postmodern philosophers either who see reason and enlightenment as solely the province of the master, and so as merely totalitarian and domineering, or who, taking the servant’s point of view, teach that this domination can and must be avoided. What both approaches miss or refuse is that reason already re-presents itself to us in experiences that are difficult and contradictory, or that, in Rose’s term, are the representation of experience as a broken middle. It is the teacher’s job to re-present these re-presentations, even though they will, by definition, also be difficult and contradictory. No one can have these experiences on behalf of her students, and no one should stop the teacher having them in the misguided belief that freedom can be saved from itself.

Rose illustrates this in the following way:

This decision by the intellectuals that reason itself has ruined modern life, and should be dethroned and banned in the name of its silenced others, is comparable to the decision to stop small children, girls and boys, from
playing with guns, pugnacious video games, or any violent toys. This brutally sincere, enlightened probity, which thinks it will stop war and aggression, in effect aggravates their propensity. This decision evinces a loss of trust in the way that play (fairy stories, terrifying films) teaches the difference between fantasy and actuality. The child who is able to explore that border will feel safe in experiencing violent, inner, emotional conflict, and will acquire compassion for other people. The child who is locked away from aggressive experiment and play will be left terrified and paralysed by its emotions, unable to release or face them, for they may destroy the world and him or herself. The censor aggravates the syndrome she seeks to alleviate; she seeks to rub out in others the border which has been effaced inside herself (1995, pp. 117–118).

But for the teacher whose practice is philosophical, and who understands the gift she is entrusted with, there is meaning and significance not only in her struggles as a teacher but also in the way that she realises the truth of struggle in the education of others. This teaching, this vocation, is love, not only the love of the universal in and as the particular work of the teacher, but in and as the philosophy of the teacher itself.

Perhaps now I am going too far. Perhaps this call to the philosophy of the teacher has overreached itself. No matter. We must state the truth of this teacher even if it is thought to be too hard, or too unrealistic, or even too idealistic. In fact it is none of these, and it is already nearer to us than we realise. In our work the philosophy of the teacher is nearer to us than we are to our own selves, because it is the truth of the struggles of teachers. We all struggle between the universal that brought us to teaching and the particular ways that it is resisted. Between the universal and the particular, and in their struggle, we are the singular that holds that relationship in tension. This singular work that we perform is precisely the universality, the humanity that we share. Far from it being the case that we do not have these universal experiences, in fact they are all we have. The only equality to be found in the world is in suffering.

One does not have to be a teacher to lead this philosophical life. But, as was claimed earlier, the teacher is in the business of freedom. She is exposed to its contradictions because her practice always concerns the education—the freedom—of the student. If she does not doubt her own power and her authority then she is master. If she doubts them such that she eschews them altogether then she is only servant. But if she recognises her doubts to be the necessary negation of the illusion of her identity, her power and her authority, and teaches from within this experience, then she is master and servant, or, as we might call her, the philosophical teacher.6

This teacher risks contingency as its own truth, and risks her contingency as her truth. This experience, this learning, repeated over and over again in the difficulty of having to be and not-be what we are, is our continuing education. It involves knowing and understanding that as teachers we are living a life of learning, always learning about ourselves, always learning the same thing but differently every time. How can such a life be lived? It can be lived by being recognised in the difficult experiences we have where the opposition between what we are and what we are not come
together: in our power and powerlessness, in our independence and our
dependence, in our being master and servant, in our being teacher and
student. These meet above all in our arrogance in wanting to teach others
and our humility in trying to do so.

NOTES
3. But, as teachers will know so well, the time for thinking is very limited. One headteacher who read
this book in advance of its publication said that it had come too late for him! He no longer thought
about teaching in the ways that he used to, or probably still should. Lack of time for thinking is, I
think, part of the reason that so many new recruits leave the profession so soon after qualification.
Teachers are not given time to think about what they do. Educators are steered away from their
own education. Yet the philosophy of the teacher has shown us that those who educate others
without educating themselves at the same time are only masters. The teacher who feels the need to
continue learning so that she can better serve her students, yet who finds that there is neither time
nor encouragement to do so, becomes resigned to a simple choice: continue teaching without
learning, or get out. Many choose the latter.
4. The phrase Biesta uses here is from A. N. Whitehead.
5. I say more about this idea in Parts I and III of the book.
6. This is a dangerous term to employ here. It could be used against teachers as an abstract
imposition and imperative of what they must be and do. But as we shall see in Part III below, it is
the conjunction of philosophy and teacher that both disrupts the identity of the teacher and
recognises learning about the teacher in this disruption. The philosophical teacher will be found in
her work against abstract imposition, including against her own abstraction as the philosophical
teacher.