

# 1. Eleven Theses on Literature and Emotion

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## Introduction

This paper takes its inspiration, at least in terms of form, from Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, the eleven short notes Karl Marx wrote in 1845 as an outline for the first chapter of *The German Ideology* (a manuscript which was not published until 1932). The *Theses* have been described as “two of the most concise and stimulating pages within [his] entire corpus” (Loftus, 2009, p. 158); Louis Althusser claims that these “brief sparks [. . .] light up every philosopher who comes near them” (1969, p. 36). The eleven theses offered here will be neither this brief, nor this exciting, but they will (gradually) develop a set of claims about what we teach in the university literature classroom, about why and how we teach it, and about the role emotion plays in those processes. The structure employed here means that rather than presenting a singular primary claim at the outset, and demonstrating its validity through evidence and argumentation, these theses offer eleven separate ideas centring on or around the intersection of literature, teaching, and emotion, although often these are as much question as answer. One advantage of this structure is that by saying eleven separate things I have high hopes of saying “either one thing very clever [. . .] or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed”—though like Jane Austen's unfortunate Miss Bates, my difficulty may be to restrict myself to only “three” very dull things “at once” (2012, p. 364). The disadvantage (or is it in fact another advantage?) is that readers will not find a single, readily extractable and easily applicable argument

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or lesson in this chapter, instead being confronted with a diverse, although inter-related, set of ideas that may or may not resonate with their individual experiences as readers, teachers, and learners.

### **Thesis 1: We should not be satisfied with an abstract, rational, and rationalized approach to literature**

Given that the title and structure of this chapter are borrowed from Marx, it is only appropriate to begin with a quotation from the *Theses on Feuerbach*. “Feuerbach,” Marx writes in his fifth thesis, “not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, appeals to *sensuous contemplation*; but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity” (Marx, 1973, p. 64, original italics). For those who are not philosophers or Marxist theoreticians, this may not be the most transparent of statements. Indeed, many commentators have had serious difficulty in pinning Marx’s theses down (not just the fifth, but all eleven), with different scholars characterizing them as an expression of socialist humanism or of anti-humanism, as a materialist rejection of philosophy or as an extension of philosophy in the realm of practice (Loftus, 2009). Given the diversity of previous interpretations of Marx’s claims, and what one scholar has described as their “enigmatic, inexhaustible richness” (Balibar, 2012), I hope it will be forgivable to apply (or misapply) this statement to the place of emotion in experiencing, thinking about, and teaching literature.

We should not, this thesis suggests, be satisfied as readers, as literary scholars, or as teachers with an abstract, rational, and rationalized approach to literature. As Susan Sontag put it in her magnificent 1964 essay “Against Interpretation”, in certain cultural eras—and I believe ours is one of them—interpretation can be “reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling,” part of what she calls “the revenge of the intellect upon the world” (p. 7). An exclusive or excessive emphasis on, for example, interpretation in the form of the critique with a capital C that Rita Felski, following Paul Ricœur, describes in her 2015 study *The Limits of Critique* as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 1), or on the sort of data-driven computational criticism associated with the digital humanities (as recently exemplified in Richard Jean So’s *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*, 2021) can

be seen from this perspective as a form of aggression towards, rather than an exploration of, literature.

These abstract, rationalistic modes of literary inquiry and teaching, I argue throughout my eleven theses, ignore the common-sense understanding that literature and emotion are intimately and intrinsically connected. This claim—that literature is emotional, and that this fact is not always adequately acknowledged in our teaching—should not be controversial (although we must remain aware of differences between pedagogic contexts in, for example, the Anglosphere and Europe). We have all cried over a tragic scene in a novel or a moving passage of poetry, but we were unlikely to do so in front of a classroom. But it is nonetheless problematic, insofar as denying the primacy of abstract thought and the sort of rationalist, data-driven, objective analysis that accompanies it, is a sort of heresy in the contemporary university system. They may not burn you at the stake for it, but they'll certainly deny you tenure. This is true even in the humanities, where many observers have noted that “every softer discipline these days seems to feel inadequate unless it becomes harder, more quantifiable, more scientific, more precise. That, it seems, would confer some sort of missing legitimacy in our computerized, digitized, number-happy world” (Konnikova, 2012). This description was published a decade ago—ironically—in *Scientific American*, and the situation today is certainly no different. Between the quantification of the humanities, and the “proactive approach” of inserting the arts into the dominant STEM paradigm (which prioritizes science, technology, engineering and maths over other disciplines) “as a form of added value”—in other words STEAM—there seems little place in the study and teaching of literature for anything other than abstract reasoning (Mejias et al., 2021, p. 214).

Returning to Marx's fifth thesis, though, we can see what is missing from this approach: “sensuous contemplation” as a “practical, human-sensuous activity.” This may not be a very clear formulation, but it does direct us towards the gap that appears when we treat and teach literature as a phenomenon that can be understood primarily through “abstract thinking”: the ways in which reading is a sensuous form of knowledge that involves and invokes the mind, the emotions, and the body, in a total human response.

## Thesis 2: To teach literature is to study literature

When we talk about teaching literature, we are not talking only about teachers teaching students; teachers of literature are always students of literature, too. To teach literature is to study literature; to read seriously is to be a student, always, and never a master. As teachers of literature, we are perpetual apprentices (which means that these are the words of a student of literature who teaches literature to other students of literature). To teach literature is to surprise oneself by finding (how unexpectedly!) new ways of reading texts that seemed utterly familiar; in the same way, our students regularly surprise us with new ideas, new interpretations, new reactions—and this is even more true when we strenuously disagree with their ideas, interpretations, and reactions. However, as China Miéville writes, “this is not license for epistemological anarchy, according to which anything, any reading, always goes but it is to acknowledge that no text, whatever its author’s (or reader’s) intent, can have a simple, singular meaning” (2022, p. 14). Instead, “every text will generate something like a tangle of meanings and connotations, more or less concentrated around a core, and more or less protean or stable, according to political, social and linguistic context” (p. 14). Reading and teaching is an attempt, in Miéville’s words, on the one hand “to discern reasonable meanings close to the core” of the “vibrating aboutness cluster” of a text, and on the other “to contest those that range too far from it” (p. 15).

## Thesis 3: Literature’s primary task is instruction

If our job is to teach literature, literature’s job is to teach us; when we teach literature, in other words, we are teaching what Cynthia Ozick calls “the art of the didactic” (1983, p. 241). Literature is an inherently pedagogic medium. Literature can and does do many things—it entertains, it distracts, it amuses, it terrifies, it titillates—but at the centre, or somewhere near the centre, of its project is instruction. Literature teaches. Our job as teachers of literature, then, is to teach students how to learn from literature. But what sort of instruction does it offer? What should we teach our students (and ourselves) to learn from literature?

One answer to this question is that we can learn facts about the world through literature, even in perhaps unexpected places. Scottish thriller writer Phillip Kerr argued that “the modern thriller has replaced the didactic novel—and people read [these] books [. . .] to find out about things” (Field, 1996, p. 44). Kerr is not talking about the sort of “moral education” long associated with literature (Casement, 1987, p. 101)—although that is another sort of education that literature can provide—but about factual or theoretical information. “I am very pleased,” Kerr goes on, “that I can allow myself stretches of thought-filled prose [. . .] leavened by a plot” (Field, 1996, p. 44). Science-Fiction novelist Kim Stanley Robinson made a similar point in a recent interview: in his novel *Red Mars*, he rejected the standard model of SF narrative (in which you “avoid exposition”) in order to “convey [. . .] a mass of new information about Mars” – “I am going” he decided “to talk about rocks” (Plotz, 2020). And readers can indeed learn a great deal about the rocks of Mars (taking these rocks as a metaphor for facts about world we live in in the broadest sense) from Robinson’s novels and many other like them.

This factual education is an important, yet somewhat neglected, aspect of what it means to engage with literature. We live in a world where facts are instantly accessible through the internet, but the information provided by, for example, Wikipedia, is to a certain extent decontextualised, abstract, and remote. The information embedded in fictional narratives can provide readers with a much more embodied, lived, contextualised sense of what the world is and how it works. But this by no means exhausts literature’s didactic potential. When we read, we learn not just about the external world, but about the internal mindscapes of the people around us. In Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, the painter Lily Briscoe contemplates the Rayleys, a married couple with whom she is acquainted: “Their lives appeared to her in a series of scenes”—she sees (or rather imagines) them in their pyjamas, eating sandwiches, arguing, living their lives in all the private inaccessible seclusion of other people (1981, p. 172). This is a form of imaginative understanding that literature—telling stories about people—opens up to us, a way of learning about other people. There is a problem here, too, of course: as Lily (and Woolf)

knows: “And this, Lily thought [. . .] this making up scenes about them, is what we call ‘knowing’ people, ‘thinking’ of them, ‘being fond’ of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same” (p. 173). In other words, literature teaches us what other people are like, but only by teaching us how to make them up; other people are our own fictions. However, as a widely cited 2012 study by David Kidd and Emanuele Castano seems to indicate, this sort of education may well have a real-world impact by improving readers’ “capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and that these may differ from one’s own beliefs and desires” (p. 377). Literature teaches us about the otherness of other people. In a world increasingly shaped and defined by the solipsistic house of mirrors that is social media, this capacity is hugely important.

Even more broadly, literature can also teach us to be sensitive to, or conscious of, the world in which we live in all of its extraordinary particularity. Ozick call this the “pulse and purpose of literature: to reject the blur of the universal; To distinguish one life from another; To illumine diversity; To light up the least grain of being, to show how it is concretely individual, particularized from any other; to tell, in all the marvel of its singularity, the separate holiness of the least grain” (1983, p. 248). This is an ambitious task for literature, and an even more daunting educational goal—the average classroom on an average Monday or Tuesday may not be the ideal setting to “reject the blur of the universal,” and one can only imagine how some university administrators might respond to a list of learning objectives that includes “to light up the least grain of being”—but there are clear connections here to the more pedagogically familiar (and potentially institutionally acceptable), Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarization, which sees literature (or art more broadly) as a way to, in the famous words of Victor Shklovsky, “recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (1965, p. 12).

## Thesis 4: Literature teaches boredom

Another lesson that literature can teach may be even more important to us in the twenty-first century, or at least

more specifically relevant to the conditions of our post-modern (or is that post post-modern?) lives. When Kim Stanley Robinson was asked about writing about the rocks of Mars he noted, with some amusement, that “people say I talk about rocks for 20 pages at a time, but really it’s only two paragraphs at a time” (Plotz, 2020). Two paragraphs feel like twenty pages: this sensation of duration, of time, of effort is a vital didactic function of literature. It teaches boredom, or to put it less dramatically, it teaches patience.

This idea might turn us back (at least partially) to the “human-sensuous activity” of reading. Books are objects, they have size, weight, texture, smell. We thus encounter books as sensuous and sensory objects. Of course, many books are today read on screens—e-readers in the case of middle-aged, mobile phones in the case of the young—but the predicted displacement of the printed book by its virtual counterpart has not happened yet, and (even in digitally mediated forms) the fundamental experience of reading a book remains a physical encounter with a thing, and, critically, a thing that takes a long time, and/or a relatively high level of concentration and persistence to use. Books thus offer readers a sort of friction that many people today—particularly the young—are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. While our experiences will vary depending on the educational systems within which we work, many of students today belong to a generation that has been raised in an economic system dedicated to the removal of friction and its frustrations from the experience of life.

This is true of the real, physical world of objects and places, which has been made navigable and accessible through an all-encompassing ecosystem of apps allowing instant access to weather reports, real-time bus schedules, maps with travel instructions, restaurant reviews, food deliveries, and so on. All of these services collectively smooth out the experience of the physical world, minimizing the chance (or opportunity) of getting lost, of getting hungry, of getting wet, of simply waiting—the chance of experiencing, in other words, the friction of an intractable physical world. It is also true of the world of culture. Services like Spotify offer instant access to entire musical cultures and eras, from more than one hundred different recordings of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* to all nine of ABBA’s studio albums; Amazon offers

one-click shopping for literally millions of books that can be delivered within a matter of days pretty much anywhere in the world (or instantly for screen reading); and competing streaming services from Netflix to Apple TV+ offering unlimited, on-demand access to television and movies. Arguably, contemporary culture is defined less by any particular style, genre, or tone than by instant access to exactly what we want (or what the algorithm thinks we want) from a functionally infinite array of cultural objects, all of which are frictionlessly navigable. The ubiquitous gesture of the smart-phone scroll may well be the defining feature of our era, the slide of the finger over the screen correlating with the slide of the mind over the surface of culture.

Literature, on the other hand, is (at least in some forms) gritty, resistant, long. As the late, great, and splenetic Philip Roth argued towards the end of his career and life, literature—reading—is becoming a “cultic” activity; for many people today, it is “the print that’s the problem, it’s the book, the object itself” (Flood, 2009). “To read a novel,” Roth claims, “requires a certain amount of concentration, focus, devotion to the reading. If you read a novel in more than two weeks you don’t read the novel really. So I think that kind of concentration and focus and attentiveness is hard to come by—it’s hard to find [. . .] significant numbers of people, who have those qualities” (Flood, 2009). And this reduction in the number of readers in the sense Roth is using the term, readers willing and able to put up with the friction of the book, is directly related to education. As Frank Kermode points, “the desire to read is in modern times acquired for the most part in universities” and “almost all the potential readership passes through the college classroom” (1989, p. 44). Placing these two ideas together leaves us with one of the signal tasks of university-level education in literature: teaching students to experience, learn from and, perversely, enjoy the boredom of the book.

## **Thesis 5: The human, humane, and emotional aspects of reading should be the focus of our teaching**

As teachers, how are we, then, to help our students (and ourselves) enjoy the resistance of literature? What approaches can we emphasise in our own reading and teaching that will make the



experience of, for example, the 760 dense and difficult pages of Thomas Pynchon's 1973 masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* (1995) as rewarding as we know they should be, and indeed are when we are at our best as readers? How can we help students not just understand but welcome the involuted complexities and inaccessible imagery of poets like Sylvia Plath, whose work demands re-reading, contemplation, active, engaged response, persistence, and the stretch of the self towards language and ideas that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable—everything, in other words, that is not part of our current cultural model?

One approach would be to focus our reading (and our teaching) on the human, humane, and emotional aspects of reading rather, for example, than on historical, contextual, structural, political or theoretical issues that may arise in relation to these texts. This is not a new approach, of course. One of our oldest works of literary criticism, Aristotle's *Poetics*, links the origins of poetry to our "universal pleasure in imitations," our "delight in seeing images" (1995, p. 6–7). So here is an initial emotional response to literature in particular, and the arts more generally: a delight in representation, a delight in the image itself. To return to the examples of Plath and Pynchon, this would be a delight in the image of the poet as "White Godiva" riding hell-for-leather "into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" in "Ariel" (Plath, 2010, p. 29), or in the image of Teddy Bloat "mincing bananas with a great isosceles knife [. . .] into waffle batter resilient with fresh hens' eggs" (Pynchon, 1995, p. 9) in the extraordinary banana-breakfast that opens *Gravity's Rainbow*. Alongside this pleasure in images themselves is, according to Aristotle, the delight we experience when they are presented in "language made pleasurable," language, in other words, "which possesses rhythm and melody" (1996, p. 10). We can thus add to the pleasure of the image itself our pleasure in Plath and Pynchon's powerful or playful or penetrating linguistic performances, the pace and pop of their poetry and prose. We can name these pleasures (alliteration!) for our students, but first we and they must learn how to experience them. Finally, and most famously, Aristotle proposes that literature should create pleasure by generating an emotional response in the reader or viewer: "the pleasure which comes from pity and fear" in the case of tragedy, or of "astonishment" in the case of the epic (p. 22). We experience

the image, we relish the language deftly deployed to place the image before us, and we then relish the emotions generated by the fictional situation. Gertrude's speech describing the death of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2010) offers a strong example of all three of the Aristotelian pleasures of image, language, and emotional response:

[. . .] her clothes spread wide;  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element: but long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (IV.7.13–31)

It would seem to me no mean classroom achievement, and by no means an unworthy pedagogic goal, to help students appreciate a passage like this on the three levels proposed by Aristotle, acknowledging and embracing the range of responses, from aesthetic pleasure to empathic sorrow that accompany it.

## Thesis 6: Not all emotional responses are born equal

There is a number of potential problems if our goal as teachers is to help students cultivate what I. A. Richards called almost a century ago a “systematised complex response” to literature, one that includes an emotional response alongside or linked to other facets of the text (1934, p. 183). Firstly, as Richards points out, not all emotional responses are automatically of value: “It is not the intensity of the conscious experience,” he writes, “its thrill, its pleasure or its poignancy which gives it value, but the organization of its impulses for freedom and fullness of life. There are plenty of ecstatic instances which are valueless” (1934, p. 132). People experience, for example, extremely powerful emotional responses to football games, but their long-term value is perhaps questionable. Similarly, a reader may well experience an intense emotional response to a work of literature that is little more than an ephemeral nervous reaction based on the epiphenomena of

a particular conjunction of time, place, and situation. Reading Auden's "Funeral Blues" (2019, pp. 412–413) aloud to commemorate a loved one's death (as famously seen in Mike Newell's *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) will no doubt lead to tears, but it is questionable if these are the tears of literature or the tears of grief, which would have been shed just as freely if any other poem, or indeed any other sort of text, had been selected for the purposes of eulogy.

Secondly, there is the vexed question of the relative merit of different emotional responses. In 1923, Richards offered his students at Cambridge anonymised poems and asked them to respond to this 'innocent' or 'unframed' work. As a recent commentator on Richards' work notes, "it is hard to see how he could have failed to be saddened as well as exhilarated" by the responses he collected (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2004, p. 376). His students not only rated works by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, author of the immortal lines of doggerel "Laugh, and the world laughs with you; / Weep, and you weep alone. / For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth / But has trouble enough of its own" (1889, p. 41) higher than works by major, canonical figures like Gerald Manley Hopkins, whose poetry may not unfold itself readily to the inexperienced reader, but is I think nonetheless clearly better (to use a provocative term), and capable of producing a more valid or valuable emotional response:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.* (Hopkins, 2019, p. 24,  
lines 1–8)

The difficulty is to demonstrate that one set of emotional responses to one piece of literature is more valid and valuable than another. One of Richards' students responded to a Hopkins poem ("Spring and Fall" which opens with the lovely if somewhat lexically challenging lines "Márgarét, áre you grieving / Over Goldengrove

unleaving?”) (2019, p. 412) in the following terms: “I read this ten times without finding any meaning in it and very little attraction. Either I am, or the writer is, more than usually idiotic, but I really am quite unable to digest this doughy, heavy, obscure, indigestible and unsustaining piece of whatever it is meant to be” (1956, p. 85). Another student responded to the same poem more pithily: “pish-posh!” (1956, p. 87). As Richards notes, this, and the many other similar responses he gathered, are the considered opinions of “serious and professed students of English” (1956, p. 85), but we would be justified I think in asking how seriously they should be taken.

### **Thesis 7: Emotional responses to literature vary widely**

As indicated a century ago by I. A. Richards’ students, and as every teacher of literature knows, responses to literature, emotional and otherwise, vary widely from person to persons—or perhaps vary wildly would be the more accurate phrasing. Works that lead to piercingly intense responses for one reader do little or nothing for another. This can be a result of differences in individual experience—someone who has recently lost a loved one may well respond more emotionally to Auden’s “Funeral Blues” than the person sitting next to them in a class. Or it can arise from cultural differences. Years ago, when I was teaching literature in a small English-language liberal arts college in rural Japan, I was confused to find that in several of my classes almost any literary reference to stars—for example, in William Blake’s “The Tyger” (“When the stars threw down their spears / and watered heaven with their tears”) (2019, p. 452)—would be treated as an occasion for deep sighs, sentimental, romantic effusions, and even covert hand-holding between students. It was only later that I realised that we were in the midst of *Tanabata*, a festival commemorating two lovers represented by the stars Vega and Altair who are only allowed to meet once a year—and only if the skies are clear.

Another common cause of differential emotional experience of literature, and one that seems especially relevant to the situation of the teacher of literature is age. I regularly teach Philip Larkin’s “Aubade” (2003) to undergraduates, ostensibly to illustrate the

way meaning can derive (in part) from the manipulation of genre and generic expectation, but in truth to share a poem that never fails to shake and terrify and move me. Instead of the generically typical celebration of love found in the morning songs, or *aubades*, of the Provençal troubadours of the High Middle Ages or the seventeenth century metaphysical poets, Larkin's poem deals directly and unflinchingly with the dread of death:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
 Till then I see what's really always there:  
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
 Making all thought impossible but how  
 And where and when I shall myself die.  
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
 Of dying, and being dead,  
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify. (2003, p. 190, lines 1–10)

Yet while this is for me terribly and terrifyingly effective—in other words it elicits a powerful emotional response—it often leaves my students unmoved. During the pandemic, online teaching meant that student responses that might once have occurred silently appeared in the class chat box: “Depressing, teach. LOL”. The pedagogical focus of a class like this thus inevitably turns away from emotional response (that is to say my emotional response) to more meta-textual and perhaps teachable factors including allusion, genre, intertextuality, structuralism, and so on. Is this disappointing? Of course it is, but I remember (all too well) the poetry that I responded to on an emotional level as an undergraduate. Suffice to say I was the proud owner of a complete collection of Kahlil Gibran's works, and was very fond of giving people copies of *The Prophet* (1923). But does this mean that the most appropriate works of literature for the classroom are those that resonate with the emotional life of undergraduate students? This sort of retrograde movement does not strike me as a solution. I loved Gibran as a young man, but I am more than grateful to the teachers (formal and informal—many were my fellow students) who helped me learn to read different sorts of literature, and to read it differently.

## **Thesis 8: Literature does not contain its own meaning**

The clash between my emotional (and affective) response to Larkin's "Aubade"—shudder, I'm going to die—and my student's well-intentioned if perhaps youthfully insensitive "LOL" indicates one of the primary difficulties in integrating the emotional with the pedagogic. This is what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley called (in 1954) the "Affective Fallacy", or a "confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does)" that attempts "to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism" (1982, p. 21). The result of the affective fallacy is that "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (p. 21). When my students and I read the words of Larkin's "Aubade", they are identical, but we experience them differently. What the affective fallacy—which may not be a fallacy at all—indicates is that, as Stanley Fish puts it "the experience of an utterance [. . .] *that* is its meaning" (1970, p. 131), and the text's objectivity, its existence separate from individual experience and response, is, again according to Fish, "an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing" (p. 140). We see the words printed on the page, and think they must contain meaning, but meaning only arises from the encounter between the page and the reader.

## **Thesis 9: The emotional response of the informed reader is more valid than the emotional response of the uninformed reader**

But what reader? My students disagree with me regarding the emotional heft of Larkin's "Aubade", which leaves them cold (as it does me, though in very different ways). When asked what poetry they like, some of my students have enthusiastically referred me to the school of the so-called Instapoets, and works like this by Najwa Zebian: "Sometimes / the best thing you can do / for someone you love / is let them go / Set them free. / Wish them happiness and set them free / *Set yourself free*" (n.d.). It would be all too easy to be dismissive of this sort of writing, the venues in which it is published, and its larger role in the cultural economy

of the twenty-first century, but that is not the point. One poem arouses a strong emotional response in me, one in another reader (and, given that Zebian has 1.3 million followers on Instagram, more than just one). Are the Instapoets my students' version of Kahlil Gibran, offering works that may not always be poetically or intellectually sophisticated, but which speak directly to the emotional contexts of their audiences?

Fish (and other reader-response theorists) have tried to square this circle by stipulating the need for a "mature" or "fit" or "informed" reader who is linguistically and semantically competent, and thus able to assess meaning at the grammatical and syntactical level, and who has a degree of literary competence—the ability, for instance, to think in terms of genre, to make comparisons between styles, and so on (Fish, 1970, p. 145). The "mature", "fit" or "informed" reader will thus be able to experience, and communicate to others, Richards' "organized response" to the literary work. Two other traits might help to identify "informed" readers. First, they should have not just the sort of linguistic literacy identified by Fish, but also a level of what Philip Roth calls "aesthetic literacy" (qtd. in Flood, 2009), which is not just the sort of broad conceptual knowledge of literature, its tropes, its patterns, and its history referred to by Fish, but a developed and always developing sensibility that works line by line, sentence by sentence to distinguish the great from the good from the mediocre from the execrable. They should also have a level of emotional literacy, or emotional competency, which might be defined as the ability to respond sympathetically, even empathetically, to a wide range of emotional situations that may or may not be personally familiar. It is not adequate, although it is honest, to respond to a love poem as one of Richards' students did by saying "I have never been in love" (1956, p. 61). When, to take another example, readers are confronted with William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), they are being asked to respond not just to Benjy Compson's bewildered sense of loss and longing for his sister Caddy (not too hard), but also to his brother Quentin's obsessive, incestuous need to police Caddy's sexual purity (harder), and his brother Jason's resentful, misogynist hatred of Caddy's daughter (much harder)—not to mention Caddy's own desperate, if unvoiced, need to escape from the stultifying grip of her family,

and Dilsey's powerful, enduring, and calm loyalty to that family. To respond to a novel like this requires an extraordinary level of emotional literacy, which—and this is critical—perhaps only literature itself can teach us.

### **Thesis 10: There is such a thing as too much emotion**

And now, approaching the last of these eleven theses, for something completely different. Might all of this palaver be an overstatement or misstatement of the role of the emotions in literature? T. S. Eliot argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1960) that "it is not the 'greatness,' the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts" (p. 55). In other words, the writer (the poet in this case) uses emotion as a raw material for processes of art, and poetry becomes not the expression but the "transmutation of emotion". "Poetry," Eliot argues, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (p. 58). In making this claim, Eliot is by no means denying the vital role of emotion in art, but arguing, as he concludes, that "the emotion of art is impersonal" (p. 59). And what is true for the writer is true for the reader; the emotional experience of literature is, or should be, an impersonal one, as paradoxical as that might sound.

### **Thesis 11: If emotion is the key to literature, we must change the way we teach**

The last of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, the eleventh, is probably the most famous: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (p. 65, original italics). The same can be said for the topics I have been discussing in my preceding ten theses. Our goal is not only to analyse the study and teaching of literature, but to change it in ways that embrace the role of the emotions in literature. This is of course a question of pedagogy. As Lionel Trilling noted in his 1961 essay "On the Teaching of Modern Literature", "pedagogy is a depressing subject to all persons of sensibility" (2000, p. 381), but it is not



one that can be avoided. How can we in practical terms change the way we teach to include a diverse range of emotional, sensual responses to literature in the context of mass education in increasingly goal-oriented, corporatized universities in which the position of literature is at best marginal, and more often threatened?

Unsurprisingly, I have no very good answer to this question. I wholeheartedly embrace Felski's suggestion that reading "be conceived as an act of composition—of creative remaking—that binds text and reader in ongoing struggles, translations, and negotiations. The literary text is not a museum piece immured behind glass but a spirited and energetic participant in an exchange" (2015, p. 182). Part of this process must be, I think, an embrace of the emotional and affective role of literature. But how to make this happen in the classroom?

A partial response to this question would include a continued insistence on our students reading and engaging with what Matthew Arnold described as "the best that has been thought and said" (1994, p. 5). This is not to suggest that some sort of conservative, fixed canon be re-inscribed in our curricula, but to argue that value, and specifically literary value, be at the centre of the choices we make about what to teach (instead, for example, of what we think our students will respond to, or will accept, or will be able to cope with). As Kermode writes, "historically the concept of literature is inextricably involved with the presumption of quality in both text and reader. It is therefore not surprising that the dismissal of quality as irrelevant to the study of writing [. . .] should entail a denial of literature" (1989, p. 26). Of course, we can and should try to think about the ways one work of great literary value might also speak more clearly, or connect more powerfully, with our students and their experiences of life than another. Bernardine Evaristo's 2019 Booker prize-winning *Girl, Woman, Other* is a very fine novel, and one that may well resonate in its discussions of sexual, gender, and racial otherness more readily with students in 2024 than other very fine novels, such as (to take an example almost at random) Eleanor Catton's 2013 Booker prize-winning *The Luminaries*, which relies heavily on a complex set of structural parallels between astrology, characterization, and plot for much of its impact.

There is also a question of assessment, of the actual work we expect students to do with literature. As Trilling notes, the student term paper—probably still the standard vehicle for assessment—is not “a diary of the soul,” and we cannot necessarily expect to find in it a real engagement with the emotional textures and depths of literature (2000, p. 399). Other assignments—dialogues, adaptations, reviews—may well be better suited to eliciting these sorts of responses. We might also consider assignments that ask for, as Susan Sontag did in her call in “Against Interpretation” for an “erotics of art” (2009, p. 14), “really accurate, sharp, loving description[s] of the appearance of a work of art” (p. 13).

Finally, it seems to me essential that we do not separate the emotional content of literature from the text as a sort of free-floating affective supplement. The point is not that a given text makes a reader feel in a certain way (this poem makes me feel sad) but that a given text is in its very specificity and in the specificity of a reader’s reading of it is an embodiment of a particular feeling (this poem makes me feel this poem). One way to achieve this is to encourage and teach reading as an actual practice built around articulation and rhythm and pace and, finally, emotion. If nothing else, this would give us the intense pleasure of hearing literature in the classroom, instead of just hearing about it.

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