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A Place Free From Compromise: Literary Study and Resilient Learning

Elizabeth Chapman Houlton

The financial pressures on many young people in the UK can mean that considerations of employability must be paramount in any decision about what to study at university, or indeed, whether to go at all. And who can blame them, when the chances of owning a home and gaining well-paid post-graduate employment are far slimmer than they were a generation ago? The most recent government White Paper on Higher Education has intensified this emphasis, taking for granted that students' primary concern when choosing a course or an institution is how it will contribute to their future wealth. In fact, the document explicitly aligns what it means to study at university with consumer choice and economic contribution. It proudly states:

“The measures outlined here will help ensure that everyone with the potential to benefit from higher study can access relevant information to help them make the right choices from a wide range of high quality universities and benefit from excellent teaching that supports their future productivity” (2016, p. 8)

Future productivity. The ironhanded language of industry underpins this policy intervention. At its heart is the assumption that students themselves are demanding a 'learning experience' that directly increases their value as future workers. As Stefan Collini (p.2016) puts it, “(a) curious inversion has taken place whereby academics now occupy the demonised role formerly assigned to students, who must now be defended in their efforts to obtain 'value for money.'” If your main consideration is getting the best economic return for your investment, you probably wouldn't choose to read English Literature at university. But for some people, there really is no other option than English Literature, regardless of what that might mean in terms of future income. Such young people will have

experienced the transformational effects of literary study at A level. It must be difficult to for them justify what is increasingly depicted as an eccentric choice of subject. How might they answer, when asked, ‘how will English Literature increase your future productivity?’ Or, to put it less crudely, ‘what is English Literature for?’ The question, of course, is born out of a society that values everything in terms of its economic return. Ideologically and morally I want to reject the question. There are good reasons for studying English Literature for its own intrinsic worth without having to justify it in terms of its utility value. Plenty of people have argued over the years for the aesthetic, moral and cultural benefits of spending time with remarkable texts. They are right and I won’t rehearse these arguments here, other than to say that studying English produces a way of looking at the world which, once achieved, is difficult to discard. Robert Eaglestone’s article (2016) in the previous issue of this journal is well worth reading in that regard. As he says, different academic disciplines do more than just provide knowledge sets to students, they teach “habits of mind”. What I’m most interested in here is what those habits of mind – or approaches and practices - can contribute *outside* of the English communities. How can the ability to read a text sensitively and rigorously and to understand that text in its generic and historical context offer something to the understandings we have of the ‘real’ world? I am going to argue that the study of English Literature has an important role to play in the production of knowledge.

The idea that the study of English Literature has a purpose beyond itself is hardly new. Brian Cox famously delineated five models of English teaching, drawn on evidence from teachers across the country. He clearly identified two of those purposes to be utilitarian: one was the idea that English existed within the curriculum to serve the language needs of other subjects. The other was the ‘cultural analysis’ model which focussed on the key skills of critical thinking and meaning construction (1989, p.60). Here I will add another argument which is that the study of literary texts can provide a theoretical framework through which to read and analyse data collected ‘out there’ in the world. I’ll illustrate this by drawing on my own work in the social sciences.

My research work is categorised, for auditing purposes as 'Sociology'. That is because I work with real people, finding out what they think about life - I interview them or work with groups and make recordings of what people say. Social scientists call this 'empirical data'. But I don't think of myself primarily as a sociologist. Such categorisation still feels surprising to me because my first degree was in English Literature and I draw mostly on its methodologies - such as close reading techniques – to make sense of qualitative data. I see my work as being located in the inter-disciplinary space between English and Sociology and I would argue that the study of literature provides an indispensable way of understanding people and problems that cannot be accessed by other disciplines alone. When I am trying to make sense of something I juxtapose thematically linked literary texts with 'real' data in order to reflect on what each brings to the other. In order to do that it is necessary to escape the binaries of what is 'real' (i.e. data) compared to what is 'not real' (i.e. fiction). In fact both types of discourses have equal claim to represent reality more or less faithfully.

Literature provides us with a lens, a way of understanding what is mysterious, complicated and intangible. Take, for example, the question of why some people are able to thrive in the education system, despite suffering many disadvantages. In other words, they perform resilient learning. There are, to be sure, many explanations for resilience available through Cognitive Psychology, Sociology and Neuroscience. But none of those explanations expose and express the dynamics of resilience with the insight and memorability that Willy Russell did when he turned his intense gaze on the interaction between a non-traditional learner and her reluctant teacher in *Educating Rita* (1981). In my book *Adult Learning and La Recherche Féminine: Reading Resilience and Hélène Cixous* (2012) I explore the way that literature can contribute to our understanding of social issues, taking resilient learning as a case study and drawing on Willy Russell's play as a portal text. Rita is loosely attached to her literary antecedents and siblings, all of whom cluster around the Pygmalion myth, which links Rita to Shaw's Eliza Dolittle, Shakespeare's Perdita and, of course Galatea herself, in the

myth itself as it is told and retold by Ovid and Ted Hughes, among others. In these texts the struggle between teacher and learner is complex and shifting. Resilience cannot be reduced to an essentialist and simplistic list of characteristics. Ironically, given the highly allegorical nature of some of the texts, they are closer to the real experience of teaching and learning than are the countless educational research papers on resilience.

These are works of the imagination and yet they define the way we understand reality. Each provides a new insight into the way that resilience is played out, some literally and some in a mythopoetic way. The study of those representations of the central teacher/learner dynamic does not replace empirical data, but, juxtaposed with it, it provides deep and nuanced understandings of the 'real' world. By conducting a rigorous close reading of literary texts, then, we are able to construct a framework through which to read the data in ways that go well beyond what a sociologist would call a thematic analysis. The skills of literary criticism are vitally important here. A literary analysis of texts that pertain to resilience across genres provides a framework, or way into, understanding interviews with adult learners. So, for example, a common factor in literary texts that are concerned with the experience of resilient learning is that the learners are remarkable for their willingness to try on new clothes, or, in other words to relinquish single identities in order to experiment with other ways of being¹. Understanding this provides a way of reading the data gathered from in-depth interviews with real learners. As such, literary and non-literary discourses begin to web and weave into the analysis in ways that we all accept in real life – we do not experience the world as completely separate from the stories we tell of it. We make meaning based on the stories we have heard, that we have read and that we tell ourselves and we bring these to bear on experience.

Rita and Perdita represent hope and the challenge to the weight of privilege and the mechanics of what the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1977) called 'reproduction' – that

is, an education system which, rather than transforming and liberating, works perfectly to reproduce and increase the social and cultural advantages of some and to re-inscribe the failure and exclusion of others. Literature provides us with stories of people who defy this trend. For every Jude the Obscure, we have a Rita; for every Heathcliff we have a Jane Eyre or a Hetty Feather. These stories do more than represent a pre-existing reality; they enter and shape culture and they provide another way of looking at life, outside of the doom of endless disadvantage. As the French philosopher, writer and literary critic Hélène Cixous puts it, “Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing.” (1975, p. 72). What happens in fiction has the capacity to escape the reproduction machine. And if it can happen in fiction, maybe it can happen in real life. Stories are part of our lives, not somehow separate from them. We live in a society that is saturated with myths, stories and poetry – whether we acknowledge that or not. Even those people think of themselves entirely in terms of their future productivity are steeped in the tropes of romance, happy endings and tragedies, even though they may never have read ‘literature’. They have been formed by such texts: we all are.

This interaction between the literary imagination and people’s hope about the future is something that I have been considering in my recent work with men in UK prisons. We have been thinking about the future – for Planet Earth, for human beings or just for ourselves in six months or ten years’ time. In order to facilitate those discussions the group watched a series of classic science fiction films. By asking the group the question, ‘give me three interpretations of the ending of *2001: A Space Odyssey*’ it was possible to open up responses to the idea of plurality and to de-stabilise the idea that there is only one meaning available. The key literary skill, theorised most notably by the post-structuralists, can in turn open the ways we read our own lives, and our own futures. If we can

tolerate – even delight in - plurality with regards to a fictional text, perhaps we can also apply that same technique to the way we understand our biographies and our imagined futures.

So I will make the bold claim that some of the habits of mind associated literary study are important components of a resilient approach to the world. In this sense, then, literature is, or at least can be, a political act of resistance. It imagines beyond the narrow, conformist model of what *is*. This happens most notably in the study group. Ben Knights has perhaps contributed more than anyone else to thinking through the links between pedagogy and English Literature, particularly in relation to the way that study groups function. As he puts it,

“A learning group is a small-scale social system, a matrix within which the dynamic relationship between the areas we simplistically oppose as the cognitive and the affective can be experienced and examined, and in which participants can find the courage to risk analogical leaps. In the study group which is nourished by densely-wrought symbolisms, the complex process of feedback and mutual insight, the alternation between boredom and sudden leap finds a nurturing environment.”
(1992, p.11).

Within the collective experience we open up most notably to the idea of plurality. For example, in the prison when we watched Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* together, the weirdness of the film allowed us to draw on any resources we had in the group with which to understand it – Milton's *Paradise Lost* brushed up against our previous appreciation of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the other films in the *Alien* series as we challenged each other to interpret the uncomfortable question that Scott leaves us with – why was the Earth not destroyed by its creators? The analogical leaps that Ben Knights writes about helped us to make sense of a dark and strange film in the context of our own

lives and, in turn, these discussions helped us to make some shared sense of the social and economic forces with which we grappled in the world outside of the prison walls. Thus the study of literature supports and frames our alienation and separation and tells us irrefutably, that others feel the same. Until we read or watch a play we think we the only ones who are going through something. Literature promotes connections, it links us to others – imaginary others at first, but if there are imaginary others in the text then there must also be real others who inspired that text and who also read it. We are joined by an invisible web to other readers and to the writer and it provides us with a power to resist. Isolation is challenged. Connections thrive.

In 2014 the poet Lemn Sissay's poem 'Superman was a Foundling' was printed large on the walls of London's Foundling Museum. The result was a piece of public art which named and celebrated the characters in literature who were orphaned, adopted, fostered. Sissay, who grew up in the social care system himself described his aim as explicitly calling attention to the enriching links between the fictional characters and the real children in the social care system. He lists the characters from popular and classic fiction.

"They range from Romulus and Remus of Rome's foundation myth, to Lisbeth Salander of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Their adventures have enriched our lives, but we do not recognise the connection between the fictional characters and the fostered, adopted and orphaned children in our midst." (Sissay, 2014).

The effect is moving and powerful – a huge statement of survival and hope onto which other lives can be projected and understood differently. Here is the refusal to allow literature to simply decorate and add cultural sugar to our 'productive' lives. Here is a writer challenging us to make

direct links between our appreciation of texts and the real lives that have informed the writing of those texts; he forces us to make connections.

Finally, that is perhaps what studying literature does best: it brings together the fragments. It means that we can experience wholeness and reflection, either in the contemplative environment of the prison study group or in the circle of space between an individual and the text. We need not be split apart but instead we know that others have suffered, and survived - just like we do. Studying literature then is indeed an act of resistance of the philosophy that says the only reality is this one, in which advantage and disadvantage are reproduced with depressing predictability and in which the drive for individual profit is presented as natural. The serious study of English Literature at university allows for a different world view to emerge and for the development of resources which exceed the material ones which fixate the writers of the White Paper. Perhaps by choosing to read English Literature, one's 'future productivity' could then be understood rather differently.

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ⁱ As I argue in my book, "They show a willingness to divest themselves of their 'clothing' (inherited ways of thinking and artificial concepts) and to try on new clothes." (Hoult, 2016, p. 56)