

Unlearning

Education, Literature, Event



Éamonn Dunne

Submitted by Éamonn Dunne for consideration for a PhD degree in Education at Trinity College Dublin, 2020.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

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Publications

Some of the chapters here have appeared in print or as conference papers along the way in earlier versions, though they have been extensively rewritten for the current project. These are:

“Event, Weak Pedagogy, and Shattered Love in John Williams’ *Stoner*” was originally presented at the *ECER* conference in Budapest on 9/9/2015. It was revised again and appeared in the journal *JOMEC* (Journalism, Media, Cultural Studies) special issue on *Teaching the Event* ed. Éamonn Dunne issue 10, Nov. 2016, pp. 75-83. “Untology” appeared in a special issue of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* ed. Michele Ferguson vol. 49, no. 4, 2016 pp. 571-588. Part of the final chapter has appeared in *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* eds. Aidan Seery and Éamonn Dunne (New York: Punctum, 2016), pp. 13-24. A revised version of the trauma chapter appeared as “Against Trauma” in *Interculturality*, Vol. 9, March 2015, pp. 237-246. “Love Foolosophy: Pedagogy, Parable, Perversion” first appeared in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* ed. Paul Bowman, vol. 45, no. 6, 2013, pp.625-636. Part of the “Pygmalion” chapter appears in a Festschrift on J. Hillis Miller entitled *Nineteenth-Century*

Literature and Culture: Essays in Honour of J. Hillis Miller (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019)

Abstract

This thesis is an extended investigation into the concept of unlearning and how it can be used to further critical thinking in the philosophy of education and literary studies. The thesis argues, in the context of the global corporatization of education practices in schools and universities – specifically in second level literature classes and university literature seminars – that a reconceptualization of the possibilities of literature to re-empower and re-inform must be taken seriously (Apple 2001; Cottom 2013; Giroux 2014; Hussey and Smith 2008; Lynch 2006). It argues that a new language of resistance can be envisaged in a language of unlearning, where event, ignorance, and risk take center stage and replace the language of marketization, competition, and consumerism (Biesta 2005; 2006; 2010; 2013). It does this by echoing ideas already abounding in the work of contemporary philosophers, such as Gert Biesta, Jacques Rancière, Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo and others, whose analyses of learning vocabularies point to a flaw in our capacity to resist controlling forces that manipulate the democratic promise of education today. It also recalls Bill Readings' argument which criticises the institutions' new accounting system (standardisation) without a concomitant accountability (a value system). This thesis takes seriously the idea that the languages we choose to speak about education have a direct relation to how we conceive of it and its possibilities.

Methodology

This thesis attempts to reimagine education in terms of unlearning, an awkward, but it is claimed here, an enabling term. It does this in order to examine current critical and philosophical thinking concerning the purpose of education, especially as that relates to literature and the teaching of literature. The methodology chosen here to investigate this issue is a conceptual approach. Though conceptual expositions tend to be highly abstract, this method was chosen so as to be able to integrate examples from literary texts. The idea is to 1.) provide examples of the theoretical concepts being explored throughout the thesis 2.) illustrate how those concepts can work in the scene of teaching 3.) challenge those concepts through performative acts of reading.

Each chapter chooses a particular theme to be explored from the realm of teaching. Again, the focus throughout this thesis is on reading and teaching literary texts. Each chapter therefore chooses its topic – for instance, foolosophy, learnercentrism, prospopopoeia, untology, etc. – then, after exploring the concept and its relevance in contemporary criticism and theory, each chapter provides a reading of a literary or filmic text which is designed to focus attention on that concept. Texts are chosen here from contemporary film, drama, and novels – from Willy Russell to George Bernard Shaw and Hermann Hesse to Thomas Hardy – in order to show how philosophical themes relating to unlearning have been played out in fiction.

Emphasis has also been placed on narrative throughout this thesis. The point of this is to argue and illustrate the point that telling stories about teaching is an integral element in understanding what goes on in the scene of teaching. Stories matter in education, the thesis argues, because they are ways of exploring and explaining what happens when we teach. Stories, I claim, add an important experiential dimension to the thinking and teaching of literature. “Education uses experience as its primary medium” (Dewey 1938). Each concept tells its own kind of story. And each story has its own theorist. These theorists have been chosen because they consistently develop and interrogate what happens in educational institutions.

Stylistic choices are, likewise, made on a case by case basis, responding as responsibly as possible to the tenor of the reading experience, not as an attempt to separate literature (as such) from the sense of the world. Thinking about literature (about what it does, its effects, and performance) in what follows is not always a simple matter and not always articulable in the clearest manner; though every attempt to do so has been made. The languages we use to talk about education and the reading and teaching of literature matter (Biesta 2005; Miller 2001). They matter because “at least since Foucault we know that linguistic or discursive practices delineate – and perhaps we can even say: constitute – what can be seen, what can be said, what can be known, what can be thought and, ultimately, what can be done. Just as language makes some ways of saying and doing possible, it makes other ways of saying and doing difficult or even impossible” (Biesta 2005, p. 54).

To say this is to acknowledge what speech act theorists refer to as the performative dimension of language, namely, that language is more than mere description (constative), that it also has the capacity to bring something new into the world by “acting” on us (Austin 1976; Miller, 2001). When it comes to talking about education, this thesis claims, the language we use to talk about it opens up possibilities for what we can do with it and how we can imagine it. “In a sense the task before us is to re-invent a language for education, a language that is responsive to the theoretical and practical challenges we are faced with today” (Biesta, 2002).

In terms of reading and teaching literature, this means that the language we use to describe that particular process also matters. Speaking of speech acts in literature, J. Hillis Miller intimates that there may even be a cross-over or contamination of styles when one begins to speak about literature. “How,” says Miller, “can one speak other than literarily about literature?” (Miller 2001, p. 4). In full awareness of the shifting styles of the language herein, the claim is that the many stylistic choices made here are an attempt to respond faithfully to the spirit of the texts under consideration. They are also an attempt to interrupt thinking about education, to perform, in some sense, the principles set out in these pages.

Rationale

This thesis envisions a reader who is interested in the problematics of teaching from a pragmatic perspective, someone who encounters difficulties with knowing what educational impact (and value) their students ought to be getting or are in fact getting from reading literary works in their classrooms. The issue is one of accountability and accounting (Readings, 1996). The thesis is written in order to investigate such issues, to understand them as far as possible and to critically examine them as an abiding problematic in, specifically, literature classrooms in second- and third-level institutions. Since my own immediate experience is with students in advanced second level literature courses and undergraduate seminars, the argument is designed around personal experience in these domains. Moreover, though literary texts are in focus throughout this thesis, there is an awareness that these texts also have broader implications for what happens in other (not all) educational settings. Though these settings are mostly Irish schools and higher education institutions, and the approach is bolstered by ideas and approaches to similar issues from US and continental European philosophers and critical thinkers, the situation is often considered as an international educational scenario, especially when new forms of managerialism and global neoliberal practices are encountered (see *Keywords* section below). In other words, the theoretical underpinnings can have merit in educational philosophy outside of the immediate settings addressed. This claim, implicitly or otherwise, is not designed to imply that literature classrooms are like “all” educational scenarios. What happens in a maths class or a science class is manifestly not the same as what happens in a literature class; neither are they the same in different countries or at different levels.¹ However, thinking about narrative, event, unlearning, ignorance, and the limits of knowledge (central terms throughout this thesis) can certainly produce interesting and enabling questions for educators across disciplines, institutions, and borders, as will be shown.

Likewise, choosing literary texts (and literary and philosophical theories concerning reading practices) as a structural methodology to discuss issues in teaching and learning needs to be justified against other directions this thesis could have taken, for example through cultural studies, sociology, art history, psychology, film studies, etc. Why unlearning through literature? And why choose contemporary continental philosophy over, say, Aristotelian or

Socratic models, which are replete with educational arguments germane to critical thinking on education? (Scott, 2000; Bronstein, 2016).ⁱⁱ

First, the literary examples are examples chosen from prior teaching experience. They are texts that have been taught in classrooms and deliberated over at considerable length. Such texts have provided fertile ground for considerations of what it means to learn something and to encounter ignorance and nonknowledge in a classroom atmosphere. As such, this thesis adopts the view that anecdotal evidence is not a contradiction in terms. Rather it appeals to an understanding that pedagogy and narrative are ineluctable, that stories are central elements in understanding what happens in learning environments, this includes the stories we tell ourselves about our own teaching experiences. The term “unlearning” is centralised throughout this thesis in order to point to the experiential dimension of this process. This will become clearer later as the term is considered in more depth below.

A counter-argument to decisions made here might be that this thinking elevates literature above other disciplines and that the choice of continental philosophers, loosely categorised as proponents of deconstruction, re-enacts a propensity to praise arcane reading practices over practical considerations. This counter-argument could be phrased as follows:

The poststructuralist fantasy about the ideal-typical pedagogical scene is neither ‘arboreal’ nor ‘rhizomatic’ nor virtual nor mediated; rather, it is basically a fantasy about a really great literature seminar... too much poststructuralist thinking and writing about learning still seems based on at best an overvaluation of and at worst a ‘repressive hypothesis’ involving modernist literature – as if the evil instrumental rationality of the world has really got it in for the heroic minority still invested in the saintly endeavour of reading really difficult literature.

(Bowman, 2016, p. 139)

In response to such considerations, this thesis is premised on actual experiences gained within literature classes and the focus is on practical considerations in an attempt to understand how teaching and reading can be a more rewarding and responsible exercise for

teachers and students alike. In this respect, this thesis acts as a plea to teachers to take seriously the idea that literature classes do in fact provide opportunities for high-level critical thinking, most especially when such criticisms become self-reflective and metadiscursive analyses of interdisciplinary trajectories, subjectivities, ideological interpellations, and cognitive biases that may have been intentionally or unintentionally suppressed, elided, or ignored.

This thesis does not presume that the teacher is a saintly figure (see chapters on Rancière below) or that literature classes ought to be lauding literary works for their degree of difficulty. On the contrary, some of the examples chosen here, from movies to plays to comedy sketches, are chosen precisely to illuminate the erroneousness of a presumed textual or cultural hegemony, and institute at times a “low” theoretical understanding (Halberstam, 2011, 2018).ⁱⁱⁱ This may also be construed as a weakness if popular cultural models are understood as less critically or academically valuable or insightful (see Halberstam, 2011, p. 6). In such cases every effort has been made to ensure that the main points are sufficiently justifying the analyses and deployment of the chosen texts and commentaries.

In terms of fantasizing the experience of reading as a pleasure in and of itself, the argument understands that unlearning can often be a difficult exercise that seems futile and impossible – especially when ignorance and non-knowledge are concerned – and that these instances, far from distancing students and teachers from the cruel instrumentality of the real world, all too successfully push them to the limits of their understanding of what that actually is.^{iv} The thesis acknowledges Paulo Freire’s influential argument that teaching is fundamentally a political act and ought to be understood as such, especially at times when one is least cognizant of the political dimensions of the performance and practice of teaching. “*Conscientização*”, Freire’s word for coming to critical consciousness, of seeing education as a practice of freedom, informs the central concept here that arguing about how and why stories are important for teachers and students alike, the narratives of their lives, the political histories of their lives, counts for something outside the narrow confines of testing and training for vocational and financial worth (see the banking model in Freire, 2005). It conceives of education – in this case education in the humanities (specifically literature classes) – as a narrative act that often catches the spirit of emancipatory possibility. Far from

an idealist fantasy, this thesis believes that storytelling is intrinsic to the practice of freedom (political, intellectual, ethical, and social) and that the core worth of pedagogical practice is engendered in the event of critical awareness, or what Ronald Barnett understands as “critical being” (Barnett, 1997, p. 6).^v

Yet another criticism that might be levelled against this thesis is the selection of literary texts from what might at first seem like a traditional canonical base. The vast majority of literary texts considered here appear either on the Irish National Curriculum, the International Baccalaureate (IB), or the American and Canadian Advanced Program (AP) second-level syllabi and are employed to examine students across the world in terminal examinations each year. These texts were chosen as readings because 1.) they are pertinent to a great many readers in second- and third-level education institutions across the globe; 2.) because they provide particular challenges to outcomes models of teaching and learning; and 3.) because they are stories that critique particularly well the limits of institutionalised education practices as practices of freedom and offer in their own ways alternative visions to the status quo.

Second, to return to the question of theoretical choice, the rationale for this resides in the understanding that contemporary educators are facing an interesting moment in history at the present time where justifying what it is they actually do, and what it is their students are actually getting from their lessons, is paramount for their very survival in institutional settings (Hayot, 2019). Contemporary commentators such as Gert Biesta (2006, 2011, 2013, 2017), Ronald Barnett (2018, 2013, 2011, 2010), Michael A. Peters (2005, 2011), Jacques Rancière (1991, 2010), Jacques Derrida (2001, 2004), Henry Giroux (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), Bill Readings (1996), and Cathy Davidson (2017) have a lot to say about the crisis of education in our societies, in our universities, and in our schools in general. These critics inform arguments throughout this thesis because they consistently, deliberately, and rigorously follow debates that challenge their readers to reconsider the very nature and purpose of learning today. A case study for how contemporary critics in Ireland are tackling similar issues now, alongside a literature review, will make such issues clearer and draw attention to why these critics are chosen among so many others who are voicing similar concerns in the immediate present.

Context

In general, enrolments in teacher training colleges for undergraduate and graduate degrees have seen a significant downturn, as have the humanities and social sciences. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* notices that the latest trends in English jobs in particular are down to an historic low of 55% less than a decade ago with the MLA (Modern Language Association) reporting a drop from 1,826 jobs advertised in 2007-2008 to 828 in 2017-2018 (Kramnick, 2018). This is coupled with the casualization of the academic workforce in third-level institutions globally, which, in the US, means that more than 70% of all college-level instruction is delivered by contingent faculty members – part-time and full-time lecturers on temporary contracts with little hope of tenure (Shrecker, 2010, p. 3). With this downturn now such a significant factor in justifying education and career choices in many countries, these critics offer significant insight into what the dilemmas are and how things might change in the future.

One issue, therefore, that has not failed to dissipate in critical discourses surrounding justifications for the purpose of the university and, increasingly, the second level schooling system, is the importance of the humanities in education. In an age of measurement, economic pressures, competition, evidenced-based educational practises, and increasingly standardized forms of assessment, educators are finding it difficult to visualise an alternative to the culture of testing and the assumption that what matters in education is what becomes economically viable (see for example Sacks, 2001; Deresiewicz, 2015; Smith, 2016). In defending the humanities Martha Nussbaum has argued that open critical thinking and argument is an important element in political and civic engagement:

The Socratic ideal, however, is under severe strain in a world bent on maximizing economic growth. The ability to think and argue for oneself looks to many people like something dispensable if what we want are marketable outputs of a quantifiable nature. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure Socratic ability through standardized tests. Only a much more nuanced qualitative assessment of classroom interactions and student writing could tell us to what extent students have learned skills of critical

argument. To the extent that standardized tests become the norm by which schools are measured, then, Socratic aspects of both curriculum and pedagogy are likely to be left behind. The economic growth culture has a fondness for standardized tests, and an impatience with pedagogy and content that are not easily assessed in this way. To the extent that personal or national wealth is the focus of the curriculum, Socratic abilities are likely to be underdeveloped.

(Nussbaum, 2010, p. 48)

Nussbaum's concerns about the marketization of education echo powerful debates at large in education from critics like Michael Apple in *Educating the 'Right' Way* (2001), Stephanie Allais in *Selling Out Education* (2014), Alfie Kohn in *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (2000), Peter McLaren in *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption* (2001) and *Capitalists and Conquerors* (2005), Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhodes in *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (2004), and Stanley Aronowitz in *The Knowledge Factory* (2000). The arguments in such texts are comparable, sharing a concern for the ways in which market forces have embedded themselves in the fabric of education in a way that translates teachers into producers, students into consumers, and educational institutions into supermarkets. As Michael Apple argues:

The idea of the 'consumer' is crucial here. For neoliberals, the world in essence is a vast supermarket. 'Consumer choice' is the guarantor of democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television. By turning it over to the market through voucher and choice plans, education will be largely self-regulating. Thus, democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser. The ideological effects of this position are momentous. Rather than democracy being a *political* concept, it is transformed into a wholly *economic* concept.

(Apple, 2001, p. 39)

To put this in a humanities context, Mark Edmundson commented on a similar aspect of the contemporary consumer-producer dyad in educational settings in an article for *Harper's Magazine*, entitled "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students" in 1997, in which he criticized the course evaluation review forms his students were asked to fill out after taking his Freud class at the University of Virginia. For Edmundson the course evaluation forms offered the students an opportunity to fulfil their true positions, "playing the informed consumer, letting the provider know where he's come through and where he's not quite up to snuff" (Edmundson, 1997, p. 39). For Edmundson, the scene is deplorable because it hints at the manner in which such evaluations tend to reduce learning to entertainment and to explicitly encourage students to value their own education in the same terms they would value any other commodity. Likewise, Edmundson's value as a teacher is premised on his ability to cajole and regale his students with laughter, so that in the end affability and one-liners are all that stick with the students. Responses on the evaluation form reflect this and lend credibility to him as an accomplished and interesting speaker and teacher. However, upon further reflection, this becomes a worrying prospect for the author, whose central claim is to want to push students into difficult confrontations with their own knowledge and sense of identity.

Edmundson writes his magazine piece in a highly ironic and wistful style that mimics somewhat the *laissez faire* attitude of his students, whom he describes at times as "lazy", "conformist", and "passionless". "If we want to understand current universities", Edmundson claims, "with their multiple woes, we might try leaving the realms of expert debate and fine ideas and [turn] to the classrooms and campuses, where a new kind of weather is gathering". The atmosphere he describes is the atmosphere of unbridled consumerism and the failure to see outside the pervasive *weltanschauung* of a popular culture of immediate gratification. What worries Edmundson is that:

More and more of what's going on in the university is customer driven. The consumer pressures that beset me on evaluation day are only a part of an overall trend. ... From the start, the contemporary university's relationship with students has a solicitous, nearly servile tone.... Colleges don't have admissions offices any more, they have marketing

departments.... The university now [pursues] a tendency to serve – and not challenge – the students. Students can also float in and out of classes during the first two weeks of each term without making any commitment. The common name for this time span – shopping period – speaks volumes about the consumer mentality that's now in play.

(Edmundson, 1997, p. 43-44)

The issues here speak to a problematic not confined of course to the student's evaluation surveys or simply to the commitment universities have to their consumer-students, but also to the abilities teachers have to challenge their students with difficult thinking and advanced forms of criticality. Edmundson's argument is well placed to pursue a much larger issue in humanities classes in second- and third-level institutions because it points to a loss in teacher autonomy and the tipping of the scales to a consumer satisfaction model. Such models disempower teachers and lecturers and cast them squarely in the role of economic actors; more than this, they disenfranchise the students by casting education in the light of an accumulation of facts and standards.

Literature Review

Introduction

This Literature Review is written in order to do the following three things:

1. To provide a general overview of the main ways in which all of the key concepts in this thesis have been engaged.
2. To justify the selection of thinkers engaged with in this thesis and to explain why others have not been chosen.
3. To explain why the conceptual approach taken throughout this thesis is premised on philosophical reflections rather than, say, psychological studies.

In what follows each of these questions will be addressed through analyses of the major concepts developed in the thesis. These concepts include “event”, “unlearning”, “accountability”, “literature”, and “ignorance”, among others; each of which has a wide resonance in contemporary critical thinking, especially in the field of education but also in a host of other disciplines as well. Since this thesis is concerned with literature and the teaching of literature, the primary focus is on how these concepts relate to the practical dimensions of teaching and learning in literature classes and seminars. Therefore, it will be important to acknowledge those limitations and boundaries from the outset. That said, every attempt has been made to ensure that the arguments below are touching on wider disciplinary connections. These latter connections, it is believed, can be viewed as fertile ground for future studies in the area of unlearning.

The earliest decision made for this thesis was the choice to write a philosophical reflection on the concept of unlearning. It was decided early on that the approach that suited this kind of investigation best would be of a conceptual design, wherein unlearning could be investigated from different angles with a set of key critics in mind. The critics chosen for this

task are as follows: John D. Caputo on the event (1997, 2006, 2016); Jacques Rancière on ignorance (1991, 2009, 2010, 2016); Stuart Firestein on failure (2012, 2015); Bill Readings on accountability (1996); J. Hillis Miller on prosopopoeia (1991); Gert Biesta on learning (2006, 2010, 2014, 2017); and Judith Halberstam on triggering (2011). An earlier version of this thesis included a chapter on Catherine Malabou (2008), plasticity and studies of reading in neuroscience but was removed in order to keep the thesis from becoming too long.

Each of the aforementioned theorists is paired with a literary example in order to see how that theorist's ideas (event, ignorance, failure, accountability, prosopopoeia, learning, triggering) find corresponding expressions in literary works. These examples are provided in order to tease out the philosophical premises, assumptions and implications of these thinkers and, in many ways, to challenge or redefine their thinking through further acts of reading. They are also used to provide narrative examples of philosophical concepts in order to see how these concepts can be given practical realisation in the real world. In this sense, the belief is that telling stories about what happens in the scene of teaching and learning can have powerful effects on how we come to see pedagogical practices in our universities and schools. The belief is that in order to understand education, we need to tell stories about it. These examples are used to develop the central research questions of this thesis: namely, what is unlearning? And how can we become better teachers and students of literature in the contemporary university?

The majority of thinkers engaged with in this thesis can loosely be described as poststructuralists. The focal points for critics like John D. Caputo and J. Hillis Miller are Derridean (mostly religion for Caputo and literature for Miller), whereas Biesta's work is highly influenced by Caputo, Rancière, Levinas, and Derrida, especially as these thinkers take up questions of ethics and education (see also Biesta and Bingham, 2010). Halberstam's work in queer theory takes on a range of influences from Michel Foucault to Stuart Hall to Judith Butler and beyond, whereas Bill Readings' main influences are Lyotard, Derrida, and to a lesser extent – particularly in the final three chapters of *The University in Ruins* (1996) – Levinas. Stuart Firestein is seemingly an odd choice in this list of critics, as his influences come almost entirely from the world of science, though his interest in ignorance and failure offers exciting avenues for interdisciplinary exploration and crossover with the

aforementioned group.

For each thinker, then, the connectors are abiding interests in themes of nonknowledge, ignorance, failure, and the event. They are employed here because of these intersecting interests. This does not mean to suggest that these thinkers share common goals and outlooks, however. There are many differences between them. For instance, Firestein's (2012, 2015) understanding of failure and ignorance garners its critical force from scientific principles, whereas Halberstam (2011, 2015) argues her case through contemporary philosophies, popular culture, and sociological studies. Likewise, Hillis Miller's insights stem from acts of reading literature and contemporary literary theories (see Dunne 2010, 2013), which are different in turn from John D. Caputo's concerns in his writings on event and religion (1993, 1997, 2006, 2016). Jacques Rancière's arguments in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and a number of essays surrounding that book (Rancière 1991, 2009, 2010, 2016), arguments that challenge what he calls the "explicative order", differ radically from almost every other critic chosen here, in that they approach the scene of teaching from an angle at odds with standard pedagogical assumptions. As Samuel Chambers puts this: "Rancière's radical pedagogy... seeks the overturning of the explicative order. This new pedagogy rests on nothing more than a reversal of the explicative order's primary assumption. What if the student can perfectly well understand for himself? What if the student can read the text without the explanations of a master? It is the principle of equality of intelligence – nothing more and nothing less – that unravels the explicative order and founds a new, radical pedagogy" (Chambers, 2013, p. 30).

Furthermore, though most of the thinkers here, at some level, offer important insights on the work of Jacques Derrida, approaches, outlooks, and influential ideas from his works also point to significant differences. The intention in using such critics in this thesis is not to insinuate an implicit understanding that these are somehow the "right" critics to talk about unlearning and nonknowledge, merely that these principles are important in their works. Taken together, these critics provide compelling insights into the limits of knowledge in their respective areas and have interesting things to say about the roles concepts dealt with here can have on pedagogical practices.

Philosophies of Unlearning

In September 2014, myself and a number of my colleagues at Trinity College Dublin (Michael O'Rourke, Ger Dunne, Katie Guinnane, and Aidan Seery) held a two-day international conference on the topic of unlearning. The contributions to this conference resulted in the edited collection *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (2016). Contributors to the book included Jacques Rancière, Deborah Britzman, Samuel Chambers, John D. Caputo, Paul Bowman, Aranye Fradenburg, and Aidan Seery. The conclusion to the current work is an edited version of the introduction to that work. Inspired, in large part, by Rancière's philosophical work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), the book's main interest, perhaps, is the different directions each contributor took with the premise of unlearning. Rancière's understanding in particular inspired much of what happens in this thesis and is an interesting introduction to the concept:

'Unlearning' can also mean this: the dissociation between the acts of teaching and learning; the fact that you learn from somebody or something that never taught you... This might be the deepest challenge – of the 'un' present in 'unlearning' and 'un-explaining'. In a sense there is something wrong with the negative prefix. The un-explanation is not a negative form of criticism. It is not a denunciation of the explicative practice, which tries to weave a sensorium of equality, erasing the barriers that the explicative system had put on the paths of communication between speaking beings... The 'un' of unlearning or unexplaining does not simply mean that we break with the normal forms of teaching and learning. It points to a dissymmetry – or a dissociation – at the heart of those forms. We learn as ignoramuses and we teach as ignoramuses. We learn something from people who never taught us anything. We don't teach what we have learnt. We teach without knowing what we teach.

(Rancière, 2016, p. 41)^{vi}

Other contributors took the sense of unlearning in completely different ways. Samuel

Chambers, while understanding that the word neoliberalism, “is a term of growing capaciousness”, argues that the clearest way to understand neoliberal pedagogy is in “[Gary] Becker’s now-classic articulation of human capital theory” (Chambers, 2016, p. 81). Chambers argues that unlearning is a chance to “recommit... to the mystery of learning” and to view skills training and the accumulation of fact in the current corporatized university with a heightened circumspection. Fradenburg and Joy take a psychoanalytical view of the term in their “Duologue” (Fradenburg and Joy, 2016). Imagining a university-to-come (via Bill Readings and Jacques Derrida’s work on the university and its possible futures), Fradenburg and Joy argue for “a productive sort of mourning”, a letting go of what you know: “Learning is already unlearning, a continual upending of everything you thought you knew, and therefore difficult and melancholic, especially when it requires you to let go of something you thought you couldn’t live without” (Fradenburg and Joy, 2016, p. 174).

Deborah Britzman understands unlearning historically, tracing its rise in public education from Kantian Enlightenment notions of overcoming immaturity through post-war offerings by Adorno (“Education after Auschwitz”), Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*), Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and, in more recent times, in the works of Shoshanna Felman, Barbara Johnson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Paul Bowman takes unlearning through the world of martial arts and disciplinarity and wonders “could discipline be consciously unlearned, *deliberately* rejected” (Bowman, 2016, p. 151). Bowman’s anecdote about learning Taiji constituted “more or less exactly the *opposite* of everything [he’d] ever learned before. Learning Taiji involved *unlearning* so many accumulated habits: resistance, force against force, using strength, separation, speed” (original emphasis – Bowman, 2016, p. 151-152).

Also of particular importance for this thesis and the arguments herein, is John D. Caputo’s contribution to the unlearning project. Caputo’s essay, “Teaching the Event: Deconstruction, Hauntology, and the Scene of Pedagogy”, also employs anecdotal and experiential learning examples in order to argue his central point, that “Education is an event” (Caputo, 2016, p. 111). Caputo tells the story of running for election for the local public school board, the school that his children were attending at the time. Caputo was trying not to get elected but rather running in order to ensure another candidate was elected instead. What struck Caputo about this election were the threats from teachers that if the election didn’t have a favourable

outcome, they would “work the contract”, meaning that they would do exactly what was required of them from their contracts and nothing more. If they did that, of course, it would mean that a lot of what goes on in the school, *pro bono* so to speak, would cease to happen and the school would lose out quite a lot. Caputo’s paradox – which he elaborates through Derrida’s aporia of the gift in *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money* (1992) – is the following: “The teachers must make the contract work. If they work the contract, the contract will not work” (Caputo, 2016, p. 112).

Caputo’s main point in this essay is that deconstruction, as he sees it, is a way of imagining a possible future for education that is not premised on contractual observation alone, but of the order of openness to the event. “All the aporias surrounding justice and democracy, education and the gift, are problems of the event” (Caputo, 2016, p. 121).

One of the key arguments against this type of thinking is that if events happen all the time, then there is no point in speculating any further about them. What happens happens, and that’s all that can be said about it. There simply *is* no issue. Caputo’s understanding of the event, however, complicates this notion further by linking it to unlearning. Unlearning, this thesis argues, brings us close to our own ignorance and in ways that are not always benign or even fully acknowledged. It is difficult and risky, argues Caputo, to face up to one’s own ignorance in the scene of teaching and learning; nonetheless, it is an essential element of what happens in an educational setting. Thinking about the event is then a way of thinking about how education unexpectedly interrupts, challenges, and changes us. This is not something that one acknowledges (or can acknowledge) all the time:

The teacher has to play a delicate role of conjurer, of indirectly calling up an elusive spirit, of letting the event be, and that is because to learn is to be struck by the event. To teach is to teach by way of the event, to let the event touch the student. Teaching is haunting, subtly intimating that there are spectral forces afoot. That involves conceding the common exposure of the teacher and the student to the event, that there are unknown spectres all around, and that we share a common situation of non-knowing and mortality and open-endedness. To teach is to ask a question to which one truly does

not know the answer, because no one knows, and to make the answers we all think we know questionable. To teach is to expose our common exposure to the spectre of the secret. To learn is to unlearn what we think we know and expose ourselves to the unknowable. Teaching and learning alike are a matter of allowing ourselves to be spooked.

(Caputo, 2016, p. 125)

Undoubtedly, critics of Caputo will see in this a form of concentrated mysticism and hyperbole. Indeed, Caputo's philosophical writing style has garnered criticism in the past for being arcane, wistful, and highly ambiguous.^{vii} The tenor of the argument, however, is that the event has quite a lot to do with questions of what constitutes unlearning in education and that it is often difficult to face up to the limits of our understanding and what we know. Being interrupted by one's nonknowledge in such scenarios can be jarring but potentially educative.

Judith Halberstam thinks of unlearning in a similar vein in "A Path So Twisted: Thinking Wildly With and Through Punk-Feminism", a speech delivered at *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* conference in Dublin in 2014 and again at Oxford University in 2015.^{viii} In this paper, Halberstam claimed that "the request for a trigger warning in the classroom indicates a kind of shift-consciousness around the meaning of pedagogy: the expectation of what happens in a classroom, the encounter with the disturbing or the unknown, seems to have shifted from being something that you require and you look for when you walk into a classroom into something that you need to be protected against. This deep sense of needing to be protected is hampering our ability to think wildly and creatively on behalf of renewed projects around not just gender but social justice more broadly construed" (Halberstam, 2015).

Theories about unlearning are also ubiquitous in a number of fields outside of philosophy and literary studies. Unlearning, as a concept of forgetting (wilfully or otherwise), is popular in self-help, mindfulness, business management, and self-empowerment books, which seem to be becoming more popular online, as the number of titles on Amazon and Google books have proliferated in recent years.^{ix} In terms of academic journal articles, the term has also become influential across disciplinary fields, such as in ethnic studies (de Novalis and Spencer,

2018), business management (Feza, 2008); elementary critical literacies (Lee, 2011), development studies (Nayar, 2008); urban planning (Ritsema et al., 2011); motivational psychology (Rupcic, 2017); digital literacy (Hight, 2010); women's studies (Longwe, 2001); and history (Noorani, 2014), to name but a few.

One particular strand of postcolonial studies provides yet another critical framework for thinking through the possibilities of unlearning. This strand stems from Gayatri Spivak's work on the subaltern, initially in her oft-cited essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she argues for critically unlearning one's own privilege as a feminist and postcolonial critic (Spivak, 1994, p. 91).^x This also becomes a recurring theme in her later work. In an interview with Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson in *Boundary 2* in 1993, for instance, Spivak claimed, thinking retrospectively, that all of her work is a confrontation with unlearning and what it means to undo one's relationship with privilege and prejudice in Western educational institutions:

I understand all my work as being in a sort of stream of learning how to unlearn and what to unlearn, because my positions are growing and changing so much; since I don't really work from within an expertise, I have to really be on my feet learning new things all the time, and as I learn these new things, my positions change. It's a bit embarrassing, but they do. Initially, if I remember right, when I started talking about "unlearning one's learning," I was really thinking more about how to behave as a subject of knowledge within the institution of neocolonial learning. I also thought about how to behave as a woman subject of knowledge—I am not even saying feminist—obliquely placed within access to the subjectship of learning... Just as one doesn't romanticize, one also doesn't investigate, because one is trying to learn outside of the traditional instruments of learning, and also with the persistently asked question, "What is it to learn, what does it mean to learn?" In that situation, the suspension of learning, without legitimizing it by reversal, is so much more complicated than what I said fifteen years ago when it seemed more clear-cut, as a kind of political decision rather than as confronting the undecidability of ethics.

Spivak's interest in unlearning has also had a significant impact on feminist theory, according to Stephen Morton's analysis of her work (Morton, 2003, p. 90). "Before we can learn anything about the economic text of globalisation or the patriarchal oppression of 'Third World' women", argues Spivak in a number of her works, "we must first unlearn the privileged systems of western knowledge that have indirectly served the interests of colonialism and neo-colonialism" (Morton, 2003, p. 23). Pushed further again, Spivak's understanding of unlearning can be seen in postcolonial planning studies and indigenous South-East Asian studies (Porter, 2004; 2010), as well as second-language acquisition studies (Tolman, 2011).

The term has also most recently been used by the University of Sydney, Australia, as their publicity mission statement on the homepage of their website. The University of Sydney is now, accordingly, a university where students go to *unlearn*. By "unlearn" they mean: "to make an effort to forget your usual way of doing something so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way". They also claim that unlearning is "an idea that transforms research outcomes". Thinking about multidisciplinary interactions within the university setting, the University of Sydney understands its mission as opening up possibilities for cross-curricular and inter-departmental activities. Students and researchers are given opportunities to engage in dialogues with people in every imaginable field. We are asked to imagine what happens, for instance, when a lawyer talks to a psychologist about the nature of truth:

In these interactions and the countless others that are possible, there is one more element. The willingness of someone to let go of ideas they've always used and accepted, so a new idea can emerge. The willingness not only to learn, but to unlearn, and relearn. Creating environments where our researchers can learn, unlearn and relearn has created breakthroughs that are energising the University's research community and helping to shape the outlook for our students. The strength of past insights is our foundation, but thinking differently allows us to step into the future".^{xii}

In terms of philosophical speculations about unlearning and the conceptual difficulties of

placing this term as a pedagogical model, only one monograph exists to date. This is Nader Chokr's *Unlearning: or 'How Not to Be Governed?'* (2009). In this work, Chokr argues for a notion of education-as-*Paideia* in the contemporary university. That is, the notion that educational institutions should take it as their primary task to be developing a critical and self-reflective citizenship in order to live up to its "emancipatory role" in contemporary society (Nader, 2009, p. 4). Following Foucault's distinction between "dominant knowledge" (*savoirs dominants*) and "subjugated knowledge" (*savoir subjugués*), Chokr argues that dominant knowledge practices in the university have brought us to an impasse in thinking. Though Chokr does not explicitly reference Bill Readings' or Jacques Rancière's works in his book, his theories are suggestive of similar principles, as is his use of Plato's *Paideia* as a "constant inversion, uprooting, and transplanting of the whole person" as a possible approximation of unlearning (original emphasis – Nader, 2009, p. 55).

Beyond Chokr's Foucaultian reflections of "governmentality" and the university, and *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (2016) collection mentioned above, there exists no complete work on the concept of unlearning as both a philosophical concept and pedagogical model. This thesis aims to redress this balance by creating an argument for seeing unlearning as a concept worth pursuing in educational practice, specifically as it refers to what happens in literature seminars.

Coercive Accountability

In 1996, Bill Readings highlighted the eclipse of the "university of culture" by the "university of excellence"; that is, the shift from a rational institution of the nation-state to an instrumentalist transnational corporation or TNC (Readings, 1996). Difficulties arise from the logic of corporate models "when the 'product' is something as undefined as 'an educated student' and when there's a modicum of significance to the distinctions between getting an education and getting a qualification, between thinking and mere information processing, between producing knowledge and consuming it" (Harvey, 1998, p. 112). Readings' major question in this scenario – a question set out at the beginning of this thesis – is to whom and to what is the university responsible? Readings' belief in the pages of that book is that accountability is a central issue in this question. What does it mean to be accountable in the

ruins of the post-historical university? How can we keep accountability and accounting, the ethical model and the business model, from collapsing into the same? (Readings, 1996, p. 151).

In the last two decades the proliferation of accountability and audit cultures in universities and schools in Western countries has garnered a lot of critical attention from advocates and critics alike (Kamuf, 2007; Hursh, 2005; Messner, 2009; Morgan, Wortham, 2011; Smith and Benavot, 2019; McKernan, 2012). “The challenge is that these new accountabilities are at once obstructive and enabling of good practice. Through accountability the financial and the moral meet in the twinned precepts of economic efficiency and ethical practice” (Strathern, 2000, p. xi; Harper, 2000, p. 47). Quality assurance protocols, bureaucratic designs, and data collection procedures in universities and schools are, of course, in and of themselves not negative to the functioning of those institutions. They can and do perform necessary and productive analyses that keep those institutions open and functioning for staff and students. The issues arise, however, when the purpose and effects of such accountability procedures become unreflective and encroach upon the freedom of academic discourse and endeavor within those institutions; when they become, that is, overtly coercive, restrictive or even punitive measures.

In analysing the rise of an audit culture and a new managerialism in UK universities at the beginning of the new millennium, Cris Shore and Susan Wright coined the phrase “coercive accountability” to account for an accelerated form of “governmentality” in the university (Shore and Wright, 2004).^{xiii} While critical of Readings’ account of the university as a posthistorical institution, as well as his explanation of the modern university in terms of the demise of the nation state, both Shore and Wright highlight Readings’ premonitions of the contemporary impact the new managerialism has had on the university. “The key features of this new regime of governance include, *inter alia*, a fixation with the measurement, quantification and ‘benchmarking’ of seemingly all aspects of university life; the invention of a plethora of new ‘performance indicators’ (not to mention the creation of a whole new vocabulary to enable the new auditor-experts to assess and rank ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’) and an explosion of new league tables to render commensurable hitherto unimaginable phenomena” (Shore and Wright, 2004, p. 100).

According to Shore and Wright (2004), the rise of an audit culture in the UK gets voiced most prominently in Michael Power's book *The Audit Explosion* (1994), where Power envisions more and more detailed and intrusive accountability and control procedures encroaching in on and shaping modern cultural practices and institutions. Such policing and surveillance regulations render the workforce visible and accountable in ways, the argument goes, that fuel suspicion and mistrust, while simultaneously and counterproductively undermining professional ethics.

In order to understand the dynamics of new forms of coercive accountability, Wright and Shore tell three stories of "creative accountancy" in which we see a development in recent years from auditing as "a set of practices linked to financial regulation and control to a more general tool of management" (Shore and Wright, 2004, p. 103). One of these stories is the closure of Birmingham University's renowned Department of Sociology and Cultural Studies in 2002, which caused something of a shockwave in academic circles in the UK. According to this story, the department was thriving in the year of its closure, with 250 undergraduates and 50 postgraduate research students, and the anticipated arrival of 30 more postgraduates in the following year. The department had achieved a perfect 24 in its last Teaching Quality Assessment and the staff were young and enthusiastic teachers and scholars (Shore and Wright, 2004, p. 101).

Why then the need for the closure? The answer was the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which gave the department a "3a research rating", which translates as unacceptable in its research output. Even though the department was vibrant and healthy, for the reasons just listed, the university felt it necessary to close it down due to a neoliberal agenda that inculcates the value of enterprise and sustainability within the public sector. The new "Raelity", as Simon Morgan Wortham has punningly referred to it, is that this new audit culture has essentially come to redefine what accountability means (Morgan Wortham, 2008, p. 85).

Peter Kilroy, Rowan Bailey, and Nicholas Chare, argued in the same issue of the journal *Parallax* ("Auditing Culture") that the close of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was an "institution of singular importance" and the closure

represented a “resolutely singular moment” (Kilroy, Bailey, and Chare, 2004, p. 1). They argue, furthermore, that the deleterious effects of “coercive accountability” from “Academy to State to Market in Britain” represents “the unchecked migration of ‘auditing’ procedures/discourses and rationalized performance criteria from corporate (*deemed* ‘public’) institutions, under the mediating administration of the State” (original emphasis – Kilroy, Bailey, and Chare, 2004, p. 1). Echoing Readings, they surmised that the authoritarian calling to account, where institutions were expected to render themselves and their practices “aud(it)able” and “(ac)countable” represented the same tautological assumptions described by Readings in the new university of excellence. So that, in “raelity”, it didn’t matter what was really being done in the university as long as it was done excellently and that its impact was measurable on a scale of excellence derived from market capitalist principles. Accountability in this sense is synonymous with accounting, whereby what happens in the university needs to be accountable on a research framework and relatable to what other universities are producing under the same protocols.

Accountability issues are invariably tied to funding issues in the university and the Arts and Humanities departments offer reliable litmus tests for university funding principles and fluctuations. In Ireland, in particular, after the economic crash in 2009, funding by the IRCHSS (Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences) saw its budget fall from 18 million euro to 10 million by 2011 (Benneworth et al., 2016, p. 104).^{xiv} This dramatic reduction in funding for the arts and social sciences in Irish universities made some commentators claim that these disciplines were becoming understood as “special needs projects” within higher level education. The HEA (Higher Education Authority) in Ireland has placed its confidence in policies known as *Horizon 2020* and *Innovation 2020*, where a more “upbeat” message is being offered in a post-recovery economy. The discourse and semantics are of particular interest to this thesis, as the language of the knowledge economy has changed. Ireland is now interested in positioning itself as a “Global Innovation Leader”: ... as it moves away from the shrill language of research prioritization, there are overtures towards the importance of ‘excellent research across all disciplines (including the arts, humanities and social science...’, to interdisciplinary research, and to the importance of A&H [Arts and Humanities] to helping solve some of the grand challenges of our time.

Prioritisation remains but with a recognition of the need to ‘support excellent research across the full continuum and across all disciplines’” (Benneworth et al., 2016, p. 104). Given Readings’ understanding of the shift from a university of reason to a university of culture to a university of excellence, it would seem that the dynamics of education and the language used to describe its accountability has shifted exactly to where Readings imagined it would in the mid-1990s.

In his book length analysis of *The University in Ruins*, Gary Rolfe puts the issue with this shift succinctly:

Educational excellence is... achieved and demonstrated through the effective *management* or *administration* of quality and standards rather than by directly attempting to assess quality itself. Institutional review is concerned, for example, with an examination of *procedures* put in place by the organization for the review of academic programmes rather than with the actual programmes, and with *management* of student assessment *processes* rather than directly with student assessment. There has clearly been a shift in focus and responsibility for the delivery and assessment of excellence in teaching from the academic to the administrator. The delivery of excellence has been replaced by the administration of excellence, where excellence is itself defined in terms of quantity rather than quality.

(original emphasis – Rolfe, 2013, p. 10)

In light of Readings’, and subsequently Rolfe’s interpretations of responsibility in the university, alongside a host of critics working today, this thesis seeks to find alternative means to understand and justify reading and teaching literature in the university. It seeks to explain accountability in terms of a response to an event, something that happens. It argues that accountability in reading literature means being open to interruption and ignorance in thinking. It does not seek to return to a nostalgic past or to recreate ivory towers. Instead, it attempts to think and rethink the questions Readings has set forth when he thinks about Thought in the university. To whom or to what are we accountable? It does this by reading

a number of critics with and through literary texts, by analyzing stories about teaching and its effects, and seeing why learning might be thought about as also a form of unlearning.

Auditing cultures and notions of neoliberal ideology within the university have been well documented and continue to influence critical attention across various fields, such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature studies, cultural studies, and so on (Readings, 1996; Barnett, 2013, Peters, 2011; Shumar, 1997; Docherty, 2011, 2015, 2018; Giroux, 2013, 2014; Lynch et al., 2012). Issues of new managerialism, corporatization, auditing cultures, tenure, and precarity are central concerns for academics, adjuncts, and students in the university today (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Ginsberg, 2011; Childress, 2019). These are practical considerations for how the university accounts for itself, how it justifies its existence and its relationship with Thought (Readings, 1996).

Reading Poststructuralism

It has been suggested that too much poststructuralist thinking fantasises reading and speaking about literature in English literature seminars as the pinnacle of knowledge in the university (Bowman, 2016).^{xv} The tenor of this argument can be traced back to at least the early 1990s when Antony Easthope (1991) argued that in a mere two generations the study of English literature in the university changed dramatically from an elitist institutional hierarchical power to a ruined institution at odds with itself and contemporary cultural knowledge practices. Following Kuhn (1962), Easthope argues that there was a paradigm shift from what seemed to be an established and unshakable discipline to a newer paradigm, the paradigm of cultural studies. This shift is indicative of a struggle between class hierarchies, whereby Leavisite and Arnoldian understandings of meritocracy and romantic high culture give way to popular cultural models and an intensified democratic outlook on aesthetics and reading cultures. Citing Terry Eagleton (1990), who, following Foucault, sees the shift as a shift in “discursive practices” giving way to an emergent form of “unified field theory”, Easthope claims that the change came as a result of the following notions within traditional English studies:

1. a traditionally *empiricist* epistemology

2. a specific pedagogic practice, the '*modernist*' reading
3. a *field* for study discriminating the canon from popular culture
4. an *object* of study, the canonical text
5. the assumption that the canonical text is *unified*

(original emphasis – Easthope, 1991, p. 10)

Elitist notions of what constitutes great literature and the canon were (and are) hugely problematic, mainly due to their overt exclusivity and the obvious power dynamics behind them. Who, for instance, controls the knowledge practices behind these notions? What kind of power formations are involved in formulating a list of great works of “Western” literature comprising the “canon”? Who gets in and who is left out? Why the elevation of modernist readings? Is there a gender imbalance or a subaltern? Easthope’s critiques of such models within university English departments are insightful and represent the narrowness of literary study as conceived of by a tradition dating as far back as at least the New Critics in works like Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929), Wimsatt and Beardsley’s *The Verbal Icon* (1954), and Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1949).

Interpreting Easthope’s critique of literary history in the university, Bill Readings provides a further criticism of Easthope’s understanding of literature and culture studies. In Readings’ view, when an attempt to define cultural studies emerges in the early 1990s, as in Easthope’s *Literary into Cultural Studies* (1991), the results are “interestingly problematic” (Readings, 1996, p. 97). What happens, according to Readings, is that Easthope notices a paradigm shift away from literary studies, claiming a new paradigm in the guise of cultural studies. However, while noting problems with the traditional practice of literary studies – as in the list above – no such critique is forthcoming of the new paradigm. The shift to a new paradigm of cultural studies is “interestingly symptomatic” since there is no definition of it, so that it is “characterised above all by resistance to all attempts to limit its field of reference” (Readings, 1996, p. 98). In the end, what we are left with is a tautology: “All manifestations of culture are signifying practice, and all signifying practices are manifestations of culture” (Readings, 1996, p. 98).

It seems that Readings gets caught, somewhat, on the tautologies of his argument in his reading of Easthope, as “signifying practices” repeat throughout the pages of *The University in Ruins*. What he is claiming is that in order to define cultural studies through “signifying practices”, Easthope has rendered cultural studies centreless. This, he also argues, might not be a bad thing, since it allows us to see the empiricist obsessions of traditional literary criticism, but there is also a sense that “there is a direct ratio between the intensity of apocalyptic claims for the institutional potential of Cultural Studies and their absence of explanatory power” (Readings, 1996, p. 99):

The difficulty with Easthope’s claims... is that they are based on the possibility of transferring the critical energy that the German Idealists assigned to philosophical culture, and that Arnold and Leavis assigned to literary culture, to the practice of Cultural Studies. If culture is everything, then the invocation of culture cannot have redemptive force, cannot lend meaning (unity and direction) to symbolic life. In effect, Easthope is offering to recenter the University around a decentred absence that will then be invoked *as if it were a center*.

(original emphasis – Readings, 1996, p. 99)

As Gary Hall has argued in *Culture in Bits* (2002), while it seems that Readings is castigating cultural studies for its “excellence” – in other words, because “culture” is a “dereferentialized” term signifying nothing in particular – rather, he is saying that cultural studies embodies the strong possibility now of being “rethought so that it is not simply institutionalised”, that it can become the way to think the university from the inside (Hall, 2002, p. 120). Simultaneously, in *The University in Ruins*, Readings is marking out a dark future for literary studies, particularly in the moments when he thinks of its melding with a host of other contiguous departments. Since English departments are “increasingly abandoning the research project of national literature”, the question is what is it that they are doing or going to do in the future? “‘English and Comparative Literature’ tends to function in the United States,” Readings informs us, “as a catch-all term for a general humanities department and it is likely for that reason to be gradually replaced by the less weighted title

‘Cultural Studies’” (Readings, 1996, p. 173).

The crisis in the humanities, and particularly English literature departments, has also been well documented over the years (Miller, 1999, 2002; Hall, 1990; Scholes, 1998, 2011; Felski, 2008; Stover, 2018).^{xvi} It might, therefore, be something of an anachronism to claim that too much poststructuralist thinking in the university is premised on reading really difficult literature (modernist literature). That said, this thesis is a plea to teachers to reconsider the value of reading as an activity, not so much of critical awareness, but of the limits of critical awareness in general. It attempts to map out moments when acts of reading in literature classes afford us a glimpse of a possible future for literature that does not see the text as a canonical object (a well-wrought urn) or a unified expression or the pinnacle of knowledge in the university. Unlearning refers to the ability one has to adapt to interruptions in acts of reading, but, in this sense, it can also refer to our ability to reconceive the importance of reading and how we teach it in the university.

Key Concepts

In the *Keywords* section of this thesis, many of the words and terms developed herein are given further descriptions and definitions. These terms include, “education”, “event”, “learning incomes”, “new managerialism”, “neoliberalism”, “risk”, and so on. They are provided as a kind of glossary to this work and are placed at the end of the thesis to ensure continuity of argument. They are also included to ensure that all of the key terms and concepts employed in this work are given full expression. That said, one word is missing from the list of keywords. This word is “ignorance” and it forms quite a large part of the argument.

The inspiration to speak about ignorance and unlearning comes most directly from Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), but also from Stuart Firestein’s writings in *Ignorance: How it Drives Science* (2012). However, on closer inspection, one finds that the field of ignorance is particularly wide and diverse and covers the broadest areas of interest imaginable: education, media studies, religion, politics, science, medicine, and so on (Vitek and Jackson, 2008; de Nicola, 2017; Graef, 2017). Indeed, Marlys Witte, a professor of surgery at the University of Arizona, even speaks of an “ignorance movement” in

contemporary culture across these diverse professions and interests.^{xvii} The movement finds its voice most fully perhaps in *The Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (Gross and McGoey, 2015). At 400 pages, the collection contains essays by prominent critics, beyond those just mentioned, in economics, risk management, philosophy, literature, social sciences, technology, medicine, and security studies.

Of particular interest to what happens in the following pages is Andrew Bennett's chapter on "Literary Ignorance" (Bennett, 2015, p. 36-43). Bennett's aims in speaking of ignorance and its relation to literature are as follows:

... my aim in this essay is to point to the importance of the tradition in which literature is specifically constituted in relation to the other of knowledge, to questions of knowing – to what James Ferrier, the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher, who also coined the term 'epistemology', named 'agnoiology', epistemology's far less successful counterpart. I want to highlight the significance of the tradition of literary agnoiology and to investigate the ways in which and to investigate the ways in which ignorance may be understood to be aroused, enacted, and explored in literature. According to this model, the literary is in principle neither knowledge-yielding nor knowledge-denying, but instead effectively avoids – and self-consciously avoids – or stands to the side of the *question* of knowledge. This alternative approach recognizes that literature is centrally concerned with knowing ignorance and, crucially, with remaining *in* ignorance, in valuing and exploring the condition or the experience of not knowing. It is not a question of the unknown as 'beneath, behind or secreted within the work', as the cultural theorist Gary Peters puts it, but instead a question of the unknown as the work, of an 'incomprehensibility' that is 'the very *articulation* of the work itself'.

(original emphasis – Bennett, 2015, p. 36)

For Bennett, then, reading (and, by association, teaching) literary works involves one in the activity of unlearning one's knowledge of ignorance; this may amount to undoing prejudice

or preconception, but it may also, just as likely, involve one in confusion and anxiety. There seems, however, to be something in literature (or the experience of literature) that links it specifically to questions of knowing and understanding, of comprehensibility at the limit. Conscious of his own argument and the criticism it may invoke, Bennett realises that by saying knowledge is “neither hindered nor advanced by literature” might lead readers to mistakenly understand him to mean that literature has no stake in knowledge. The opposite, however, is true: “literature embraces, explores, celebrates the condition by which we are all beset, that it confronts us with the human condition of no knowing” (Bennett, 2015, p. 37).

Speaking of Lacan and the narrator in literary works – like the psychoanalyst himself or herself – as the one who is supposed to know (*le sujet supposé savoir*), Bennett also makes the important point that narrators often narrate what they don’t know – examples are Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, Walton in *Frankenstein*, Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Stevens in *Remains of the Day* or Maisie in (the somewhat ironically titled) *What Maisie Knew*. With some of these examples in mind, Bennett makes what will seem a very large claim. Indeed, it will undoubtedly seem to some as unjustifiable. Bennett says: “narrators turn out to be individuals who, to a greater or lesser degree, do not really or fully or adequately know or understand the story that they tell... narrators [he suggests] are constitutively ignorant. Their ignorance is fundamental to the operation of the literary work” (Bennett, 2015, p. 39).

If this is so, then it would imply that readers are consistently involved in a kind of continuous dramatic irony, as they figure out what the narrator is and isn’t aware of, and relating this back to the reader’s own life would mean becoming aware, vicariously, of one’s own ignorance. An obvious rebuttal to Bennett’s argument would be to recall the omniscient narrator, the staple form of nineteenth-century fiction in the works of the realists like George Eliot or Charles Dickens. But there are restrictions to epistemic certainty even here, as there are even in the excesses of the modernists like Joyce or Woolf in their introspective streams of consciousness.

So Bennett’s central argument concerning ignorance and literature is that it’s the “limitation on what the narrator knows [that] plays out the ignorance, doubt, uncertainty, and conceptual

or narrative hesitation that characterizes the literary” (Bennett, 2015, p. 41). This notion is also linked in Bennett’s argument to John Keats’ famous 1817 letter to his brother where he discusses “Negative Capability”, the ability to experience doubt, uncertainty and mystery without having to reach out for fact, reason, or certainty. A critical response to Bennett would say that the last element particularly betrays the romantic origins of his theory and that these insights might be yet another form of liberation theology.

To be fair to Bennett and to agree with him on this is to consider that quite a lot that goes on in literary classrooms has the element of doubt and mystery about it, and like the analyst in Lacan’s story of transference, the teacher often becomes the *sujet supposé savoir*, knowing beyond and beforehand what the novel or poem is saying. In practical terms this is not always possible. Perhaps, theoretically, it is not ever possible. If it is in the gaps of knowing that we learn from literature, as Bennett suggests, then it is important that our teaching strategies begin to reflect this in our practices. The plea to unlearning takes this seriously in the hope that others will too.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explain the key concepts of this thesis (unlearning, event, ignorance, and so on) and to explore the broader significance of its central theme in terms of those concepts. It has also specified why the approach taken here is a conceptual approach, given that each these concepts is concerned with the limits of knowledge. Being that literature is the focus of this thesis and the plea is to teachers to rethink the importance of ignorance and unlearning in their lessons, this chapter has focused on literature and the teaching of literature. It has also argued that the reason for choosing the thinkers it engages with is due to their shared interest in these topics of nonknowledge and ignorance in education. In what follows, literature and stories will play a central role in teasing out the ideas set out in this chapter.

Introduction to Research Questions

The following five research questions are central to the arguments in this thesis. They are pursued at some length here as an introduction to this work in order to establish a platform for the arguments to come. If education is in a crisis, as a great many critics are claiming now, then it is important, first of all, to establish what that crisis is and then to invent ways to challenge it (Ginsberg, 2013; Giroux, 2012, 2014; Lynch, 2006; Peters, 2011; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004).

1. What Is the Crisis in Education?

The first question concerns the crisis of education. This thesis argues that the major crisis in education today can be broadly conceived as a problem with accounting and accountability. This is an argument first put forth in Bill Readings' influential book *The University in Ruins*, posthumously published in 1996. In that work Readings traced the birth of the modern university (from Kantian logic to Humboltian culture) and its current realisation as a place of "excellence", excellence being a "dereferentialized" term replacing culture and the nation-state as the new mission statement for what Readings sees as a "post-historical" or "ruined" institution. Skirting a radical militant view and a deep pessimism for the present state of education, Readings argues forcefully that contemporary universities now operate as performance-driven, entrepreneurial, powerfully bureaucratic organisations driven by market forces and international competitive rankings. Questions of social value or responsibility ("accountability") have acceded to questions of economic viability in a global competitive market ("accounting"). Education in *The University in Ruins* becomes commodification, something to be bought and sold, like any other commodity: "Cost-benefit analysis structures not only the University's internal book-keeping but also its academic performance (in terms of goal achievement) and the social bond with the University at large. The social responsibility of the University, its accountability to society, is solely a matter of services rendered for a fee. Accountability is a synonym for accounting in 'the academic lexicon'" (Readings, 1996, p. 32).

Readings' argument that the university has lost its idea and now matters primarily as a corporate instrument does not point to a nostalgic romanticism (for Culture or Reason) so

much as a realisation that the present crisis is profound and complex. The complexity of the current crisis reflects the inability of students, teachers, administrators and policy makers to see a way out. Michael Peters, speaking several years later, comments thus:

For anyone working in a Western university at any time over the past decade, Readings' observations must constitute an easily recognizable and frightening description. The language of managerialism with a focus on strategic planning, mission statements, and performance indicators seems to have nothing to do with the traditional governance of the university, and the further the university moves away from the old liberal structures, the more it loses its institutional uniqueness and looks like just another corporation. The neo-liberal policy paradigm now dispenses with any pretence to anything other than the underlying market logic: contestable funding, 'providers' and 'consumers', student loans, and so on, have real consequences and now form the parameters of the daily working lives of students and faculty. In short, the establishment of a new language of the university has been accomplished and while we might distance ourselves from the ideology of managerialism, or even attempt to subvert it in various ways, we cannot help but be effectively reshaped by it.

(Peters, 2010, p. 151)

Readings' commentaries in *The University in Ruins* not only pinpointed a crisis in the concept of the university and its social mission (or lack thereof), it also pointed to an extreme escalation of neoliberal principles in the university and beyond.^{xviii} This burgeoning is pertinent in the manner in which a new escalation of managerialism – what Peters calls “the ideology of managerialism” – is also at work to complicate matters further. Since the university conceived of by Readings is now an “excellent bureaucratic corporation” it stands to reason that the system of education ought also to be conceived in the same way that one might view the structural hierarchy of a company:

The three functions that are invoked in the contemporary university are *research, teaching, and administration*. The last of these is, of course, the

most rapidly expanding field in terms of the allocation of resources, and, as I have argued, its expansion is symptomatic of the breakdown of the German Idealist contract between research and teaching. Indeed, I would be inclined to argue that the University of Excellence is one in which a general principle of administration replaces the dialectic of teaching and research, so that teaching and research, as aspects of professional life, are subsumed under administration.

(Readings, 1996, p. 125)

These remarks are compounded by Benjamin Ginsberg (a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins) more recently in his book *The Fall of the Faculty* (2013), where he argues that over the five decades he has been teaching in higher education there has been a radical change from faculty driven ideas and concerns to a new managerialism that centres and controls faculty life and student learning at every level. Though a lot less even-handed in its approach to the academy and its history than Readings' book, *The Fall of the Faculty* is an interesting indicator of how Readings' understanding of the rise of this "general principle of administration" has taken form (Ginsberg, 2013, p198).^{xix} Ginsberg's leading question is: what exactly is the roll of the administrator in the public university and in the elite private schools? The administrator, relates Ginsberg, claims that their ultimate goal is to "strengthen institutions in order to better equip them to pursue their teaching and research missions". However, if we shift the focus from the claim to the actuality we begin to understand the dynamic differently. "What administrators do with a good many tuition and research dollars is to reward themselves and expand their own ranks. At most schools, even midlevel administrators are now paid more than all but the senior professors in the professional schools and considerably more than professors in the arts and sciences" (Ginsberg, 2013, p. 198).^{xx} What matters in statements like this is the growing pay disparity between teachers and administrators, which begs the question of where the university sees its priorities (Ginsberg, 2013). Couple this with the understanding that students have become consumers of education and a picture begins to emerge of how, from a "knowledge capitalism" (Burton-Jones, 2003) point of view, the institution views its teaching staff and how "a general administrative logic of evaluation replaces the interplay of teaching and research as central to the functioning of

the University” (Readings, 1996, p. 126).

In his *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*, picking up on Readings’ argument, Henry Giroux proclaimed the following:

Defending education at all levels of learning as a vital public sphere and public good rather than merely a private good is necessary to develop and nourish the proper balance between democratic public spheres and commercial power, between identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, self-interested individualism that celebrates selfishness, profit-making, and greed.

(Giroux, 2014, p. 46)

The contemporary crisis of neoliberalism’s attack on the public good of education is one of profound complexity (Torres, 2008; Lynch, 2006; Springer et al., 2016). So pervasive are competitive modes of understanding, of performance indicators and languages of progress and outcomes, the language of profit-making and self-interest, rankings systems and commerce, that it is difficult to understand the “old liberal structures” Michael Peters talks about above. Stuart Hall, in “The Neoliberal Revolution” (2011), pertinently asked “Is neoliberalism hegemonic?” before commenting that one should be careful in thinking that it is, since hegemony is a “tricky concept”. “No project achieves ‘hegemony’ as a completed project. It is a process, not a state of being... Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions ... and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew” (Hall, 2011, p. 728). The issue, however, as Hall notes in the same essay, is that the depth of the social architecture and the impact on common sense of the neoliberalist project, does indeed constitute a hegemonic project (Ibid.). So embedded in the cultural sphere has neoliberalism become, and so vast its ambitions, the difficulty now is that explaining the issue as a crisis is also problematic to a large number of students and teachers who see the neoliberal project as natural and unavoidable (Monbiot, 2016, p. 17). The neoliberal project is therefore wedded to the so-called TINA principle (“There is no alternative”), so much so that it is often difficult to see the problem (Queiroz, 2018). In what

follows, this thesis aims to identify further the crisis of neoliberalism in education, develop a means of critique, and propose an alternative vision through the notion of unlearning.

2. What Is Unlearning?

The second question in what follows is how to define, demarcate, and understand the concept of unlearning? What is it? And why is it pertinent to the crisis laid out in this thesis? Bill Readings' understanding of accountability pitches two concepts together quite neatly (Readings, 1996, p. 32). Accounting, as recounted above, has an economic overtone that points to the consumer culture of education and the university's espousal of that dimension. Accountability is, by contrast, a value term and asks us to understand value as something beyond mere economic principles (Hellenbrand, 2002). The neoliberal university's propensity is to privilege the former meaning over the latter in order to justify its existence in an world of excellence frameworks.^{xxi} Readings' claim is then that we have to understand how this administrative logic is actually affecting teaching and research.^{xxii}

Accountability is a difficult concept to get right, since it involves an ethical gesture in the form of a judgement. To whom and to what are students, teachers and administrators accountable if the university has no idea of itself or its purpose? Readings' challenge therefore is to keep the conversation an open one, to challenge his readers to keep the question of accountability from falling into a synonymous relationship with accounting. In Chapter 8 of *The University in Ruins*, "The Posthistorical University", Readings argues that "holding open the question of value is a way of holding open a capacity to imagine the social order otherwise" (Readings, 1996, p. 121).

Questions of accountability and accounting, furthermore, may be more easily identified in STEM research models but less easier to see in the humanities or social sciences.^{xxiii} The question of value sits uneasily in conversations in these latter areas, so the ability to keep the question open is essential to the very existence of such programmes (see also Biesta, 2010; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Kamuf, 1997).^{xxiv} Readings' claim is that we can't continue to make redemptive claims for the humanities by appealing to a "University of Culture, be that culture humanistic, scientific, or sociological" (Readings, 1996, p. 129). Instead, the pressing need now is to enter into honest discussions about what values educational institutions can

provide for its students outside of conservative consumer models.

“Judgement”, says Readings, “is better understood in relation to a continuing *discussion* rather than as a finality”:

To whom and to what the University remains accountable are questions we must continue to pose and worry over. Appeals to accounting – whether in the form of numerically scored teaching evaluations, efficiency ratings, or other bureaucratic statistics – will only serve to prop up the logic of consumerism that rules the University of Excellence. Value is a question of judgement, a question whose answers must continually be discussed”.

(Readings, 1996, p. 134)

This thesis claims that the concept of unlearning provides a way to understanding how questions of accountability and value can be kept open in the scene of pedagogy beyond the limitations of accounting. Unlearning refers to the ability to react to the shock and surprise of the new, to keeping an open mind to other discourses, and other voices, that may challenge closely held beliefs and values. It speaks of an ability to welcome discourses from others by keeping the spirit of democratic discussion alive. To speak reductively, unlearning refers to the challenge education places on its students now, given the work of Bill Readings (1996), Michael Peters (2010), and Henry Giroux (2014) above – and the many critics discussed below – to adapt to new modes of thinking in the face of ideologies espousing education as a means to financial and self-interested ends.^{xxv} Unlearning can therefore be equated with intellectual adaptability and “a refusal to believe that some new rationale will allow us to reduce that complexity [of our ruined institutions], to forget present complexity in the name of future simplicity” (Readings, 1996, p. 129). Though this thesis wants to argue further that in order for unlearning to be a productive power in educational discourses it ought also to encapsulate an ability to be creative and to find new ways to be hopeful in the face of a neoliberal hegemony and what seems to be an increasingly bleak prospect for education (see, for example, Blumenstyk, 2014; Cottom, 2018; Selingo, 2013). As Samuel Chambers has argued, “any meaningful or viable challenge to neoliberalism requires a pedagogics of

unlearning, in the very simple sense that any challenge to neoliberalism depends upon a prior unlearning of the neoliberal theory of education” (Chambers, 2016, p. 74).

One way this thesis argues for the pertinence of unlearning and its power to readjust the lens of education in the face of neoliberal challenges to its marketability and utility is by presenting stories about educational experiences. These stories are taken from literary texts, films, plays, and poems – the purpose of using these will become clearer in the rationale and methodology below. The central idea is to reproduce aspects of unlearning through narrative examples, to illustrate as often and consistently as possible moments of unlearning, moments of provocation and challenge to entrenched modes of understanding in order to catch the dimensions of what an unlearning project could become. Literature and the teaching of literature (the main focus of this thesis) is compelling in this regard because of the focus it places on stories and the meaningful impact stories can and often do have on our lives, how they can change our perceptions on what it means to know the world (empirically or existentially) and how to live and learn in it. These moments are conceived of as educational here when they “interrupt” us and challenge us to keep the discussions of value and accountability open and alive. They also, in many ways, challenge the university to account for their usefulness, a challenge that sees stories well placed to critique its neoliberal ideals of worth (see Young, 1992; Cottom, 2003).^{xxvi}

Unlearning is also a term that reflects moments of ignorance and nonknowledge. The word can suggest the inability to know for sure if one has actually understood something. The interplay of learning and not learning harboured in the word is important here in order to keep the discussion about what it means open for further deliberation. Ignorance and failure are intimately tied to the use of the word throughout this thesis, as will be shown specifically in the opening chapters discussing Judith Halberstam and Stuart Firestein below. Both writers, in different ways and different spheres, (Firestein is a neuroscientist and Halberstam a cultural critic) have realised that failure and ignorance can often be powerfully productive teaching tools. “Knowledge is a big subject”, according to Firestein, but “Ignorance is bigger. And it is more interesting” (Firestein, 2012, p. 10); whereas Halberstam argues that failure can be read “as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (Halberstam,

2011, p. 12). Though both critics are speaking from different disciplines and their projects are ostensibly speaking to different audiences (non-academic and academic, respectively) both of their arguments strongly converge on the concept of mastery and what it means to master learning. They are chosen in this thesis to reflect the dynamics of unlearning because of their shared understanding that ignorance and naivety can lead to different sets of knowledge practices and that, pragmatically, the questions researchers and teachers present can often be much more important than the answers we are given (Firestein, 2012, p. 11). For both critics, the ability to question and critique, that is, the ability to keep the discussion of what it means to learn open, is paramount.

The word “unlearning”, as it is used in this thesis, aims to encapsulate in a word how we can keep learning open and unsettle what it means to have fully “learnt” something. Unlearning, therefore, speaks of the notion of adaptability by refusing to settle on the notion that once something is learnt one can move on with the assurance that there is no more to know. By asking questions of learning, by trying to open up even more questions about what it really means to learn, of why ignorance and failure might have become the useless (valueless) other of learning, we can begin to understand the importance of keeping discussions about utility, outcomes, standards, and models alive in analyses and critiques of the aims of education. In Bill Readings’ terms, the word is employed to ensure that questions of accountability and accounting are continually addressed, that questions of value versus use-value are consistently acknowledged as central to the democratic promise of education.

3. Why Teach Critical Reading?

Rather than ask “how” to teach critical reading, it might at first be better to approach the question from another angle. Why do we want to teach it? What good is it to encourage students to read critically? Also, does this critical reading apply only to a printed text culture or a broader understanding of textuality? Once again, this thesis focuses primarily on the reading of literary texts and takes its guiding principles from what happens in literature classrooms in second- and third-level institutions; though if critical thinking is understood as a broader conceptualisation of what is meant by critical reading, then it would be permissible to think of the connection between the two as a broader interdisciplinary one.

Teaching reading is often a difficult enterprise in many diverse and often incompatible ways. First, it is not a politically neutral activity, despite Stanley Fish's arguments in *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2012), as a host of questions concerning race, class, gender, ideology, and so on, are often at play in any given class and the teacher is often called upon to respond judiciously.^{xxvii} Second, this difficulty is compounded by the perceptions among some students in literature classes that teaching, say, Shakespeare or canonical texts in the present climate is outdated, irrelevant, or simply boring (see Balinska-Ourdeva et al., 2013). Third, literacy levels are never the same in any class (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). Fourth, interest, willingness, and openness to personal challenges in classrooms are diverse and unpredictable (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Fifth, understanding the impact of placing sensitive materials on a curriculum is likewise unpredictable (Chan, 2007; Wolfsdorf, 2017). Sixth, teaching printed text can be seen as either an unnecessary distraction or a latent punitive measure (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014; Mizrachi, 2015). The late Mark Fisher, who worked for much of the 2000s in a Further Education College in Kent, recounts the scenario in the following manner:

Ask students to read for more than a couple of sentences and many – and these are A-Level students mind you – will protest that they *can't do it*. The most frequent complaint teachers hear is that *it's boring*. It is not so much the content of the written material that is at issue here; it is the act of reading itself that is deemed 'boring'. What we are facing here is not just time-honoured teenage torpor, but the mismatch between a post-literate 'New Flesh' that is 'too wired to concentrate' and the confining, concentrational (sic) logics of decaying disciplinary systems. To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp – and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension – that the indigestibility, the difficulty *is* Nietzsche.

(Fisher, 2009, p. 23)

Fisher's argument is interesting because it combines a critique of hyper-consumerist culture with an insightful attempt to account for the effects neoliberal market forces are having on contemporary society. Fisher's critique is more subtle than these lines make out in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), wherein he argues that this teenage torpor isn't so much a wilful desire to rebel against the carceral policing of the social order as much as an inbuilt and preordained helplessness and despair, which is driven by the excessively mediated "business ontology" of the current age. That is, Fisher sees the current neoliberalist climate, via Fredric Jameson's analysis in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", and Deleuze and Guattari's and Jacques Lacan's suggestive models of a schizophrenic society of fragmented subjectivities, pure material signifiers and unrelated temporalities, as a pathology. The argument is that we are in a "post-lexical" scenario where teachers are functioning increasingly as disciplinarians trying to force words into the heads of a disenfranchised and severely depressed youth culture. Fisher's term for this is "reflexive impotence". Students know the situation is bad; they are aware of it, but they know that there's no hope of change, so they give in to it.

On one occasion, Fisher recounts from his own experience teaching, a student came to his class wearing headphones. When he was asked to take them off in the classroom, the student replied that the headphones were not turned on. On the next occasion, the student came to class and took the headphones off but had music playing lowly from the headphones. The response to the request to turn them off was that they were playing so quietly that the student couldn't even hear them. Fisher's insight into the situation was to argue that the presence of the headphones represented the proximity of the "matrix". "The use of the headphones is significant here", continues Fisher, "pop is experienced not as something which could have impacts upon the public sphere, but as a retreat into private 'OedIpod' [sic] consumer bliss, a walling up against the social" (Fisher, 2009, p. 24). The failure to connect is indicative of an "agitated interpassivity", a failure to concentrate on what's important, or important for the student's own future. This failure, Fisher points out, is symptomatic of more than demotivation; it speaks of a much more profound shift in contemporary consciousness, an "ahistorical, anti-mnemonic blip culture – a generation...for whom time has come ready-cut into digital micro-slices" (Fisher, 2009, p. 25).

Fisher's commentaries illustrate the difficulties teachers of reading often have in their

classrooms, especially since the introduction of iPads and laptops in schools and universities, which can often act as powerful distractors undermining the best pedagogical intentions. It would of course be easy to set these readings off against an idealized romantic nostalgia for a time when students came to class ready to read “great” works of literature and were proactively attuned to learning. Doubtlessly, this was never the case nor could it ever be, though Fisher’s argument does identify an ongoing issue for the “digital natives” – those students born in the era of the internet, the current technological education atmosphere.

The flipside to Fisher’s understanding in *Capitalist Realism*, that students are disconnected from their education by being super-connected to an online matrix, is that never in the history of humanity has society been more textualized up to this point in time (see Scholes, 1998, p. 84). Seen from this angle students’ reluctance to switch off or unplug can also mean that they are reading incessantly (not “post-lexical” but hyper-lexical), interpreting data at a rate that is increasing exponentially every minute. It would seem, then, that critical reading – the ability to interpret and to act as an agent of change in the world – would mean questioning the very institution of learning itself with a view to finding new ways and new languages to enhance and direct methods of reading alongside a background of what Fisher calls cyber-utopianism. These methods would need to work to enhance students’ understanding that it is necessary to question where these devices are leading them, to what purpose, and to what end?

These questions are indicative yet again of a crisis in education. They point back to issues raised in Robert Young’s essay “The Idea of a Chrestomatic University” and Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* about how the humanities, and English departments in particular, can justify teaching literature, theory, and close reading practices in the present climate.^{xxviii} To whom or to what are we responsible in the ruins of our institutions? To a tradition or to a future of reading or to both? What strategies can English teachers come up with to reimagine their place within these institutions? And how can they justify the “why” of teaching critical reading now?

Mark Edmundson has been engaging with these questions for well over a decade in books like *Why Read?* (2005), *Why Teach?* (2013), *Self and Soul* (2015), and *Why Write?* (2016).

Edmundson's attempt is to justify the role of the humanities in the university, especially as it concerns the teaching of literature, for which we are concerned here. According to him, what is most important in what he calls "a real education" is the ability in students to link literature to life "the test of a book lies in its power to map or transform a life. The question we would ultimately ask of any work of art is this: Can you live it?" In order for it to have meaning, it must connect us to the world, it must instruct us in making decisions that are important to us. Reading in this vision is a process of becoming, the site of engagement with the world and its truths. It is also a way to understanding that critical reading ought to have a purpose outside a rhetorical skill for debunking any and every position one encounters. Being critical does not equate to being adroitly pessimistic in Edmundson's view:

Despite the rhetoric of subversion that surrounds it, current humanities education does not teach subversive scepticism... rather, it teaches the dissociation of intellect from feeling – something that can be a prelude to personal and collective anomie. True education, as Friedrich Schiller rightly saw it, ought to fuse mind and heart. Current education in the liberal arts does precisely the opposite. At the end of this road lies a human type bitterly and memorably described in Weber: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved'.

(Edmundson, 2004, p. 45)

Given Edmundson's passion for literature throughout his works, reflected in the title of his omnibus collection, *The Heart of the Humanities* (2018), his profession as a lecturer in Romantic poetry at the University of Virginia, and his abundant reliance on Emerson, Shakespeare, Thoreau, and Whitman as models for "great books", one can clearly see the ideological angles in the argument. One possible counterargument could be framed as follows: Edmundson's concentration on English literature as the "heart" of the humanities assumes a conservative and somewhat unreflective Arnoldian cultural hierarchy; the concept of a "true education" is provocative but ultimately subjective and partial – true to whom and (more pertinently) for whom?; to say that liberal arts teaches the opposite of subversion and

promotes cold calculation distancing students from social or ethical standards is equally generalizing and could only really be understood on a case-by-case basis; nor does it necessarily follow that reading strategies that teach deep rhetorical investigation will lead to what he calls a little further on “narcissism”.

“We will not have real humanistic education in America”, argues Edmundson, “until professors, and their students, can give up the narcissistic illusion that through something called theory, or criticism, they can stand above Milton, Shakespeare, and Dante” (Edmundson, 2004, p. 50). He continues: “When you hear a literary critic repeating terms over and over, whether they be ‘ideology’ and ‘class struggle’, or ‘repression’ and ‘neurosis’, or ‘patriarchy’ and ‘oppression’, you know that you are in the hands of a writer who is devoted to the soft institutional usurpation of literary power, the better to create other, less varied kinds of writing – and fewer vital options” (Edmundson, 2004, p. 50).

Looking at Edmundson and analyzing his interpretations of the “great” writers of English literature might appear to some critics to look and feel like hagiography – Dante, Shakespeare, Melville, Emerson, Yeats, and Whitman. The “real” humanistic tradition invoked and the claim that literature exemplifies real cultural power is problematic, once again, since such power is gleaned from assumptions about literature’s primary cultural status in the university. This cultural status has a long lineage according to Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins*, a lineage that springs directly from a nineteenth and twentieth century shift from philosophy to literature as the bedrock of the Western university’s core mission to acculturate its citizens as fully realized members of the nation-state (Readings, 1996). Given that in this story “Shakespeare is positioned as nothing less than *the national origin of culture*”, in England as in the US (alongside Emerson and Whitman), and that, as F. R. Leavis proposed, “all study in the university should be centered in the study of literature”, questions ought to arise again about why these “great books” are so integral to such a view and why such claims consistently espouse a similarly condensed canonical tradition (Readings, 1996, p. 79-82).

In light of Readings’ fears that such thinking is often “ethno-centric and non-representative”, a cultural usurpation, it would be pertinent to ask of Edmundson if the failure of the

humanities to justify itself in the present is actually symptomatic of “the fact that culture *no longer matters* to the powers that be in advanced capitalism”? (Readings, 1996, p. 105). The question is, to be precise, why Dante or Shakespeare or Milton? What use are they to, say, Fisher’s students and their hyper-mediated technological worlds? And what exactly is the problem with critical analyses that encounter such writers with a view to, for example, gender studies, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, or deconstruction? Why not read those works through the lens of Freud, Derrida, or Foucault? Why the anti-theoretical impulse?

Looking at Edmundson’s reading here, one can certainly claim that this is a romantic view of education, as it privileges not only romantic figures, but a certain rebelliousness, a disdain for programmatic understanding, the primacy of the imagination, a concentrated nostalgia, and the mystical power of great books (“literature as such”) to change the lives of their readers.^{xxix} Though it does confront issues of multiculturalism, it is still firmly demarcating borders between the “great” and the not so “great”, and the past and the present. In *Why Read?* the argument is that the uses of the liberal arts are part of the “conduct of life” (an Emersonian phrase). Writers of great works are afforded an uncanny power to answer some of the most important existential questions: “Who am I? What might I become? What is the world in which I find myself? How might it be changed for the better?” (Edmundson, 2004, p. 5). A liberal arts education allows students to think about the larger questions in life by seeing those questions arise and play out in canonical works of literature. The experience can therefore be transformative, and reading is a part of that experience, the possibility of alternative worlds, or at least alternative worldviews.

Critics of these ideas can certainly see this reflected in the word “romantic” in the sense that Raymond Williams relays it in his book *Keywords*, i.e., a byword for sentimentality, hopeless idealism, and effusive passion: “the older uses [of the word] are still active, with considerable ambivalence. A *romantic* place is still approved; a *romantic* scheme is not. The derived C19 words, *romanticism* and *romanticize* (outside the specific cultural references), are heavily unfavourable” (Williams, 1983, p. 276). Edmundson’s argument is romantic in the sense that it adheres to passionate ideas and what might be deemed unfashionable (unfavourable) concepts. To speak of “truth”, of “life”, of “love”, and “passion” is, it would seem now, to lay on the foundation for a criticism claiming one is not critical enough, that one is naïve,

misguided or simply wrong to appeal to such outmoded metaphysical ideals (See also Scholes, 1998, p. 39-58).

Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) pinpoints this difficulty in contemporary critical theory. The idea of critique, she says, is varied but its key elements include the following: “A spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be *uncritical*” (Felski, 2015, p. 2). Felski’s argument illustrates, therefore, the danger of understanding Edmundson’s position as *uncritical*. There is a sense, according to Felski, that the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Paul Ricoeur’s phrase for the critical cynicism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) has gone too far when it becomes “the dominant metalanguage” of literary studies (Felski, 2015, p. 5). Edmundson reflects this further when he argues the following: “If you set theory between readers and literature – if you make theory a prerequisite to discussing a piece of writing – you effectively deny the student a chance to encounter the first level of literary density, the level he’s ready to negotiate. Theory is used, then, to banish aspiring readers from literary experience that by rights belongs to them” (Edmundson, 2004, p. 41).

This thesis argues, in light of these examples, that literary theory and critical reading have their limitations. They can, at times, draw us away from what matters in our pedagogical endeavors. Teaching critical reading can work to enrich students’ and teachers’ values but it can equally fail to enhance the experience and value of education itself by taking away what is often most important. Critical reading can fail to negotiate the difference between what Bill Readings called accountability and accounting. It can demotivate, diminish, slow down, or otherwise curtail creativity and intellectual stimulation. It can also become a value in itself, above and beyond the act of reading. What is most important in the act of reading, this thesis argues, is a truthful response to acknowledging the ignorance one brings to texts and the ignorance one takes away from them.^{xxx} This is in line with what the romantic writer John Keats would call “negative capability”, which will be discussed below (see also Todd, 2015).

Furthermore, this thesis understands that the pejorative force of the term “romantic” can be fully levelled against it, but, in the pursuit of truth (a value concept – a pragmatic and experiential one) being uncritical does not always equate with being willfully naïve or unread; rather it illustrates a desire to find a justification for what actually happens every day in literature classrooms; in short, it illustrates a commitment to the truth. This thesis argues that what happens in the event and act of reading has its predictable limitations and that theoretical models can assume too much undue power over the experiential dimensions of reading, be these theories sociological, cultural, neurological, or philosophical. What will be referred to as the “event” of reading will be elaborated below in order to argue that the surprise of reading, its provocation, can often be understood as an initially uncritical, unknowing, and unlearning experience, and that these latter elements are of supreme importance in the pursuit of the transformative truth of this activity. “The work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative”, says Helen Small, “more than it is critical” (quoted in Felski, 2015, p. 4).

To be true to what this thesis refers to as the event of reading (*pace* Jacques Derrida, Gert Biesta, and Jack Caputo), and to what Edmundson and Felski both understand as its liberal and democratic promise, criticism, it is argued here, ought to pursue the reality of what happens. This does not mean adopting what Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick called “sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary” readings as an antidote to the assumed tyrannical dominance of Theory, or eschewing straight off the institutional structures and prerequisites of academic discourse and scholarship (quoted in Felski, 2015, p. 5). Rather, the argument here is that critical reading and theory can often become preeminently procrustean models and that teachers and students alike ought to be conscious that sometimes these models restrict what can and cannot be said about the actual experience of reading. For graduate students writing examination papers the latter point is particularly salient, as Felski points out in one of her earlier works:

Even as contemporary theory prides itself on its exquisite self-consciousness, its relentless interrogation of fixed ideas, there is a sense in which the very adoption of such a stance is pre-conscious rather than freely made, choreographed rather than chosen, determined in advance by the

pressure of institutional demands, intellectual prestige, and the status-seeking protocols of professional advancement. Which is simply to say that any savvy graduate, when faced with what looks like a choice between knowingness and naiveté, will gravitate toward the former. The dichotomy, however, will turn out to be false; knowing is far from synonymous with knowingness, understood as a stance of permanent skepticism and sharply honed suspicion. At this point we are all resisting readers; perhaps the time has come to resist the automatism of our own resistance, to risk alternate forms of aesthetic engagement”.

(Felski, 2008, p. 4)

In response to such comments this thesis takes a risk by acknowledging the importance of ignorance in reading. Not only that, this thesis espouses the notion that students and teachers ought to be critical of critical reading itself. This thesis is therefore a plea to teachers and students to rediscover in acts of reading a passion for naivety, ignorance, and failure that may compel us to a better understanding of the limitations of knowing. Failure and ignorance are quintessential to literature classes. They are elements in the stories that make up the entire trajectory of the educational and the human experience. Unlearning, as is argued herein, signals a necessary humility, a weak theoretical framework, permeable, and shakable, for a new pedagogy of hope. This hope is that ignorance will be factored back into the learning equation, that students and teachers will begin to realize the importance of accountability beyond accounting, to echo Bill Readings yet again, to what happens as opposed to what one wants to happen; or, to echo Felski, the hope is to disrupt the choreography of knowingness.

To answer the question concisely, yes, critical reading ought to be taught but it ought to be taught in a way that makes it critical of itself. As Rita Felski claims, we ought to be taught “to resist the automatism of our own resistance”. “One of the most important jobs a teacher has”, claims Edmundson, echoing Felski’s sentiments, “is to allow students to make contact with their ignorance. We need to provide a scene where not-knowing is, at least at the outset, valued more than full, worldly confidence” (Edmundson, 2004, p. 60). Teaching critical reading, therefore, ought to begin with an acknowledgement of its own limitations.

4. Why Narrative Examples?

This thesis claims that making contact with one's own ignorance can be best achieved by creating, reliving and interrogating the stories of our own educational experiences. These stories make up the epistemological and ontological core of education and are often based on lived experiences in the classroom, hence the justification for what will be referred to below as the experiential dimension of pedagogy. In their popular textbook *An Introduction to Literature and Theory* (1995), Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argued for the centrality of stories in our lives by tracing the following propositions:

1. Stories are everywhere.
2. Not only do we tell stories, but stories tell us: if stories are everywhere, we are also in stories.
3. The telling of a story is always bound up with power, property and domination.
4. Stories are multiple: there is always more than one story.
5. Stories always have something to tell us about stories themselves: they always involve self-reflexive and metafictional dimensions.

(Bennett & Royle, 1995, p. 41)

There are degrees to which these propositions are true. For instance, for proposition 5, to say that stories *always* harbor self-reflexive and metafictional dimensions can often say more about the reader than the text. Not all stories are – obviously at least – metafictional or self-reflexive. Some stories lend themselves better to criticisms and interpretations in the latter regard, whereas other stories seem deliberately – or not so deliberately – to resist such interpretations. Such generalizations seem unwise, therefore, when we talk about stories. Nevertheless, to say that “disagreements, arguments, even wars, are often the result of conflicting stories”, as Nicholas Royle and Andrew Bennett put it, seems eminently laudable (Bennett & Royle, 1995, p. 41). What we are, who we are, what we believe, and why we

believe it, are all tied up in the narratives we tell ourselves and the narratives others tell us according to Jean Paul Sartre, who sums this up neatly in his autobiography: “a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it” (cited in Bruner, 1987, p. 21). The power and domination of stories in proposition 3 above speaks also to the way in which such stories (and the acts of telling them) have a special dominion over our lives.

Consequent to the narratives others tell us are the stories we read in books, see in movies, listen to in music or interpret in other forms of mass media.^{xxxix} In the field of education particularly this realisation is distinctly visible in the still emergent field of narrative inquiry – sometimes also referred to as narrative learning or narrative analysis (see Clandinin, 2013, 2007; Kim, 2016; Kohler Riessman, 2016). This field is closely allied to ethnographic surveys wherein students and teachers provide experiential tales of their practices in the classroom, as in, say, portfolio work, interviews, autobiography, and teaching and learning journals. The field is also acutely aware of the importance of examining the stories that confront students and teachers in their daily lives and why paying attention to these narratives is a way of understanding more fully what Kierkegaard meant when he said that life must be lived forward but can only be understood backwards. Ivor Goodson (2010) argues:

In a very fundamental sense we exist and live our lives ‘in’ and ‘through’ stories. When we are born, we enter into a world full of stories: the stories of our parents, our generation, our culture, our nation, our civilisation, and so on. Over time we begin to add our own stories and through this may alter the stories that have been told about who and what we are. When we die the stories of our lives continue in the stories of others. Stories have the potential to provide our lives with continuity, vivacity and endurance. They can create a past of which we have memories and a future about which we have hopes and fears and can thus bring about a sense of the present in which our lives are lived. Stories can give our lives structure, coherence and meaning, or they can provide the backdrop against which we experience our lives as complex, fragmented or without meaning.

Stories do not just provide us with a sense of who we are. To a large extent the stories about our lives and ourselves are who we are. Where, after all, would we be, and what would we be, without stories?

(Goodson et al., 2010, p. 1)

When it comes to actively engaging with the power of stories over our identities and our lives we encounter alternative epistemologies, alternative perspectives on what we think is crucial to teaching. Narrative inquirers are acutely aware that the stories that matter in education are stories of personal battles with what is learned and unlearned in the quotidian process of instruction and scholarship. In the 1980s, Jerome Bruner, a key figure in constructivist theory, radically altered the field of educational psychology in his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986), and again in *Acts of Meaning* (1990) by decrying what he referred to as the “cognitive revolution’s” propensity to adhere to a “computational metaphor” over a human psychology whose core concept and initial impetus was to study the human transactions involved in the construction of meaning (Bruner, 1990, p. 33). Bruner’s purpose was to emphasize the centrality of narrative in the construction of self. The dramatic shift in Bruner’s work illustrated a move away from an overtly logico-scientific approach to psychology in works like *On Knowing* (1964) to a narrative approach – what he variously called “folk psychology” and “folk social science” in later books (Bruner, 1990, p. 35).

The issue with narrative inquiry is that it takes a step towards an interior interpretive model from within the pragmatic world of teaching and sees in this a profound human quest for realization and meaning. In this view the phrase anecdotal evidence never functions as an oxymoron. Such personalization lays it open to more traditional criticisms claiming the procedure’s lack of objectivity and rigor.^{xxxii} What Bruner started in the 1980s is also echoed in Donald Schön’s popular work from the same era, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), though Schön’s emphasis is on a less radical interpretation of the effects of narrating the process of teaching and recollection.

Bruner argued, somewhat controversially, in an essay entitled “Life as Narrative” in 1987, that “eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner, 1987, p. 16; see also Hyvarinen, 2008; and Strawson, 2004). Bruner’s argument is that life-narratives and autobiographies are not only recollections and memories transposed into narrative patterns but that the narrative patterns that we choose to tell our stories shape the stories themselves, that those stories become who we are, what we think, and how we live. That these patterns are considered “events” is not fortuitous as we will see later on. For Bruner, moreover, stories are who we are; they shape us and our thinking. “My life as a student of the mind”, continues Bruner, “has taught me one incontrovertible lesson: a mind is never free of precommitment... Our precommitment about the nature of a life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together” (Ibid. p. 31). This latter point echoes Ivor Goodson above and throughout the collection *Narrative Learning* (Goodson et al., 2010), wherein Gert Biesta, Michael Tedderis, and Norma Adairis argue that “in a very real sense the story *constitutes* the life and the self” (2010, p. 1), and again in *Critical Narrative as Pedagogy* (2012) where Goodson and Scherto Gill argue for the centrality of “storying” and “re-storying” in the conception and construction of the self and therefore one’s view of education (see Goodson and Gill, 2014, p. 105).

Previously in their attempt to emphasize the importance of viewing stories about teaching and the lives of teachers as paradigmatic examples of narrative learning, Nona Lyons and Vicky Kubler LaBoskey (2002) argued that new epistemological battles in the research university would see narrative models run up against entrenched models of “technical rationality”. There was a need, they argued, for “a view of knowledge that did not privilege standard research-based theory and techniques, but could foster attention to ‘practical competence’”; a need “to support teachers to claim the legitimacy of their own investigations” (Lyons and laBoskey, 2002, p. 2). The point made in their collection *Narrative Inquiry in Practice*, after Bruner, is that “although narrative is complementary to traditional scientific knowledge, it is also different from it”, and that, historically speaking,

by the 1990s “standards of positivism that had so dominated the social sciences in the 20th century no longer remained unchallenged” (Lyons and LaBoskey, 2002, p. 2). Accordingly, the acceleration of narrative inquiry in the fields of history, literary criticism, psychology, philosophy, feminist theory, and law is indicative of a kind of paradigm shift in thinking about education. Others, like Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1990), Martha Nussbaum (1997), W. J. T. Mitchell (1981), and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) had been laying the grounds for such narrative theory in educational discourses and therefore polishing the cornerstones for what is now the field of narrative inquiry. Jean Clandinin (2006) notably argued that increasing testing and measurement in schools, where measurable outcomes models, competition, and efficiency become laudable strategies for refining education more often than not resulted in neglecting the needs of the very students that those schools claim to be championing. Such emphasis often neglects the experiential dimension of education and forecloses the opportunity for telling and retelling personal narratives of failure and ignorance.

In this thesis stories matter for the aforementioned reasons. In each of the chapters below, narrative examples are provided in order to come closer to an understanding that education is an experience of narration and that telling and retelling stories from multiple points of view, though in no ways exhaustive, can provide deeper insights into the pragmatic dimensions of pedagogy. These stories are sometimes personal, sometimes literary, sometimes cultural or cinematic, sometimes formal, and sometimes informal. What they all share is a pedagogical dimension, one that lends credence to the importance of storytelling as an accounting for ignorance; not accounting in an economic use-value sense, but accounting for the peculiarity and excessiveness of the experience of ignorance and nonknowledge by reliving, in a sense, that originary ignorance. Each of the narrative examples below are chosen to illustrate the difficulties with understanding learning as an uncomplicated dialectic between the known and the unknown. The attempt is to do justice to stories by pointing out what remains unaccountable. “We see a great urgency”, says Goodson and Gill (2010), “for schooling to shift its concept of learning to embrace the notion of human becoming and to begin to explore the potential of narrative learning and pedagogy” (Goodson and Gill, 2010, p. 37). Part of this shift in the concept of learning, as is argued below, is a

shift in the very concept of learning itself, a shift to an accountability for what happens not what was supposed to happen. This shift in learning, as it is argued herein, ought rather to be conceived as the experience of unlearning.

5. How Can Reading Be Justified?

Given Rita Felski's queries above, the argument that follows makes the claim that being uncritical (in Felski's sense of naiveté above) is not synonymous with wilful ignorance or lack of intellectual engagement. Rather, the issue is with a general ethos of accounting and what some critics see as an increasingly pervasive imaginative malaise factored into educational enterprises by overarching frameworks that think of knowledge primarily as a process of production and quality assurance. To think of this yet again, this time from the angle of justification, we might say that there is often an overriding presumption in the contemporary scene of pedagogy that teaching and learning ought to be consistently justified and accounted for; particularly, as recent critics of neoliberal strategies in education have been arguing, in terms of learning outcomes and standards based education practices (Biesta, 2004; Hussey and Smith, 2003, 2008, 2010; Lassnigg, 2012; Allais, 2014; Reindal, 2013; Peters, 2017). To labour the point somewhat: though accounting and justification are not in themselves malign presences in education, far from it – such practices are often necessary guardrails – the point is that such conceptions, if left unchecked or unexamined by reasonably sustained and consistent criticisms, undermine broader possibilities for students and teachers to gain from alternative knowledge practices not factored into the learning trajectory by process models (Kamuf, 2007).^{xxxiii} There is always the risk, that is, of justifiable inertia.

In one particularly polemical essay along these lines, for instance, David Hursh makes a compelling argument in “The Commodification of Knowledge and the End of the Imagination”(2001) regarding current standards based models, which are being used to justify teaching practices and goals across the United States and further afield: a practice that Hursh sees as detrimental to the core values of education as a public good. For Hursh, teachers are encountering more frequently than ever controls on their teaching by administrators whose primary concerns are for linking curriculum to standardized, high-

stakes testing programs; programs that are designed to align knowledge practices and rank and judge teachers and students alike. Concomitantly, ranking systems and fiscal pressures imposed on schools and colleges in the US, according to this argument, are forcing teachers to spend more and more time teaching to the test and less and less time thinking about developing interpretive habits and critical reading practices in the classroom, habits that such classes ought to actively promote. “How do we explain this shift”, he asks, “from promoting teachers as thoughtful, intelligent practitioners who are partners in developing curriculum and methods to reducing teachers to mere technicians who implement curriculum, methods, and assessments designed by others?” (Hursh, 2001, p. 736).

Hursh’s argument claims, furthermore, that in the last three decades conservative political policies in the United States alone have reoriented education in such a profound way that there has been a seismic shift from thinking of educational institutions as places concerned with developing an imaginative, democratically engaged citizenry to institutions concerned with manufacturing compliant and economically focused individuals. So drastic has the shift been in the West, according to Hursh, that the real role of education has now become the development of the individual who can succeed in the marketplace (Hursh, 2001, p. 739; see also Peters, 1994, p. 66; O’Brien, 2017, p. 157).^{xxxiv}

Hursh’s arguments are revisited in Stephanie Allais’ meticulous survey of learning outcomes models in contemporary education theories across Europe and beyond in *Selling Out Education* (2014). In the latter work, Allais traces the rise to prominence of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) across the globe since their adoption in places such as the United Kingdom in the 1980s, Ireland in the 1990s, and most of Europe by the 2000s, and the claims being made to justify aligning second- and third-level educational practices as supranational education policy reforms through learning outcomes models. According to Allais, despite a grandiose rhetoric behind such policy reforms and their almost unanimous acceptance across international borders, little empirical justification can be found to support the claims that such frameworks are in fact producing the desired or intended outcomes attributed to them (Allais, 2014, p. 21). For example, when Allais led a team of researchers in an international comparative study of National Qualification Frameworks across 16

countries for the ILO in 2009, she noted that: “None of the case studies found evidence demonstrating that employers found qualifications easier to use than they had prior to the introduction of a framework, nor were other data found to demonstrate that competence and outcomes-based qualifications had improved the match between education and training systems and the labour market” (Allais, 2014, p. 23).

For Allais, learning outcomes models essentially represent a desire by policy makers and stakeholders to forge a neater link between education, economics, and the marketplace, and in doing so privilege human capital theories that are often negligent of important disparities between education and training (see also Chambers, 2016). Specifically, on the one hand, in the context of the growing influence of neoliberal tendencies in education, there is an understanding that learning outcomes models “can improve the relationship between educational institutions and the market place” and on the other hand, that “they can improve how education is delivered, by making it more competitive and therefore more responsive to market needs” (Allais, 2014, p. 51). The reality behind this thinking is more insidious than it might at first appear. According to the neoliberal mindset in Allais’ argument:

The outcomes-based qualification model sees colleges and other educational institutions becoming entrepreneurial, offering qualifications desired by businesses, and marketing themselves to learners. This model is often linked to funding models whereby funding is directed to training providers through employers commissioning training for their staff, or when colleges choose to offer industry- designed competence-based qualifications. The college is the seller, the learning programmes are the products, and the consumers—whether in the form of learners and their parents, or employers—are supposed to dictate their requirements for the product. Advocates believe that competition improves quality. But, particularly when the ‘commodity’ being purchased is as complex as education is, and where there is no direct way of testing its benefits or evaluating its quality, the likely effect is a pressure on institutions to keep prices as low as possible, keep quality as low as possible, and focus on short-term desires of ‘consumers’. This may well be at odds with more

long-term ideas about what learners should learn.

(Allais, 2014, p. 66)

What Allais is pointing to is essentially the same problem Bill Readings worries about when he describes the chasm between accountability and accounting. There are difficulties with the outcomes and frameworks model, since there are qualities of education that are not quantifiable: “in order to be administered to students”, claims Readings, “knowledge has to be made into *manageable* doses” (original emphasis, Reading, 1996, p. 152). What is being left out of the equation may in fact be what is most worth learning, for instance failure, ignorance, nonknowledge (more of which below). To do justice to education, Readings would say, is to pay attention to what we value in it. However, “exploring the question of value means recognizing that there exists no homogenous standard of value that might unite all poles of the pedagogical scene so as to produce a single scale of evaluation” (Readings, 1996, p. 165). This is not to imply that the outcomes models are redundancies; rather, that the radical insistence of such programmes in second- and third-level institutions – with a view to the marketable commodification of knowledge practices – can have far reaching consequences for the values we might espouse in our centers of education. By “selling out” to big business, as Stephanie Allais infers, the university is selling out the distinction between accountability and accounting. As she says, “learning outcomes rely on an idea of transparency that they cannot achieve in practice, [...] the outcomes approach leads to narrow over-specified outcome statements, and so does not enable curriculum coherence (Allais, 2014, p. 139).

One way we can make this discrepancy apparent, this thesis argues, is by telling stories about why this is the case and what values we might draw from reading practices. Perhaps it is not ancillary that Bill Readings speaks of doing justice to Thought (with a capital “T”) in the final chapters of *The University in Ruins* in a way that reflects the dialogism and perspectivism of storytelling. He does this in a manner that again furthers the notion of accountability. In the penultimate chapter of that book, Readings argues the following:

If pedagogy is to pose a challenge to the ever-increasing bureaucratization of the University as a whole, it will need to decenter our vision of the educational process, not merely adopt an oppositional stance in teaching. Only in this way can we hope to open up pedagogy, to lend it a temporality that resists commodification, by arguing that *listening to Thought* is not the spending of time in the production of an autonomous subject (even an oppositional one) or of an autonomous body of knowledge. Rather, *to listen to Thought*, to think beside each other and beside ourselves, is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the question of meaning open as a locus of debate. Doing justice to Thought, listening to our interlocutors, means trying to hear that which cannot be said but which tries to make itself heard. And this is a process incompatible with the production of (even relatively) stable and exchangeable knowledge.

(Readings, 1996, p. 165)

Given Readings' challenge to the contemporary bureaucratic university, and his insistence that we need to keep thinking open, it follows that justifying reading practices in the classroom amounts to acknowledging the limitations of practices that focus on closing down the dialogue we have with our own ignorance. Doing justice to Thought, in Readings' understanding, would mean listening to and engaging with the stories we have about our own failures to find an autonomous body of knowledge that justifies our reading practices.

From the Ruins of the University

The greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. *Hannah Arendt*

Introduction

Jacques Derrida's lecture "Mochlos; or the Conflict of the Faculties" delivered on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the Columbia Graduate school in 1992 includes the following statement: "We feel bad about ourselves. Who would dare to say otherwise? And those who feel good about themselves are perhaps hiding something from others or from themselves" (Derrida, 1992, p. 7). Derrida's lecture was delivered as an academic to academics and follows from the knowledge that the contemporary university is experiencing a crisis.^{xxxv} This crisis is a central concern he returns to again and again in the same essay pertaining to a responsibility which he claims is difficult to summarise or understand in the present climate, but is nonetheless pressing and worrying. From Kant's insistence on the primacy of reason (and the place of philosophy within the university as a "lower faculty") in *The Conflict of Faculties* (1798), to the foundation of the University of Berlin under Humbolt's Kantian inspired mission statement of *Bildung*, to the writings of Schelling, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and the German Enlightenment tradition, which gives birth not only to the modern German university but inspires the tradition of modern universities in the West, Derrida's argument spirals through the question of whether responsibility means responsibility to a past tradition or a future to come. To whom or to what are we responsible? What does it mean to be responsible in or outside the university? Whether or not we are realising it explicitly, Derrida continues, the institution is a dominant factor in how we work and what we say:

By the clearest possible thematization I mean the following: that with students and the research community, in every operation we pursue together (a reading, an interpretation, the construction of a theoretical model, the rhetoric of an argumentation, the treatment of historical material, and even of mathematical formalization), we argue or acknowledge that an institutional concept is at play, a type of contract signed, an image of the ideal seminar constructed, a *socius* implied, repeated or displaced, invented, transformed, menaced or destroyed. An institution – this is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation. If, then, it lays claim to any consequence, what is hastily called deconstruction *as such* is never a technical set of discursive procedures, still less a new hermeneutic method operating on archives or utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution; it is also, and at the least, the taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competences, and our performances. Precisely because deconstruction has never been concerned with the contents alone of meaning, it must not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic, and has to require a new questioning about responsibility, an inquiry that should no longer necessarily rely on codes inherited from politics or ethics. Which is why, though too political in the eyes of some, deconstruction can seem demobilizing in the eyes of those who recognize the political only with the help of prewar road signs. Deconstruction is limited neither to a methodological reform that would reassure the given organization, nor, inversely, to a parade of irresponsible or irresponsibilizing destruction, whose surest effect would be to leave everything as is, consolidating the most immobile forces of the university.

(Derrida, 1992, p. 22)

What these sentences speak of is an excessive responsibility to counter-signing the contract

with the university in a manner which is neither purely responsible nor purely irresponsible – Derrida’s word for this is “irresponsibilizing” (see Miller, 2009).^{xxxvi} In other words, Derrida’s comments here are neither wholly quietest nor explicitly radical; they speak rather to the manner in which critics have taken the deconstructive gestures in Derrida’s work as a template for either willful destruction and blind critique or simply surreptitiously reconstituting the university’s institutional status. Rather, as Derrida sees it in this essay, deconstruction is not a methodology or an attempt to simply reform an old one. It speaks rather of an instability within the institution itself (from the violence of its very foundation) and is a response to a “political-institutional problematic” that is already at play in our readings, interpretations or “ideally” constructed seminars.

Responsibility and Truth

A serious question arises from the concept of responsibility when it is pitched against methodology. To say that deconstruction is not a methodology is easily understood as an attempt to raise deconstruction to an elitist position outside the confines of the university, its laws, and controlling mechanisms. Seen from this angle deconstruction is attempting to find a higher ground and merely surreptitiously reverses the elitist position to establish itself as the proper point of an advanced hermeneutic methodology. This reading would miss, however, the constant return to this question of responsibility in Derrida’s work and what he consistently says about the excessive responsibility deconstruction has to the institution itself (Derrida, 1992; 2001; 2004; 2002).^{xxxvii} Elsewhere, in *A Taste for the Secret* (Derrida, 2001a) Derrida confirms that “deconstruction is not a method for discovering that which resists the system; it consists, rather, in remarking, in the reading and interpretation of texts, that which has made it possible for philosophers to effect a system is nothing other than a certain dysfunction or ‘disadjustment’, (sic) a certain incapacity to close the system” (Derrida, 2001a, p. 4). In such cases, the argument does not renounce the system *tout court*; it merely suggests that what is going on already within the system or methodology requires closer examination and inspection. A deconstructive gesture requires both a responsibility to the tradition of interpretation and the understanding that those systems are never entirely flawless, that they require responsible attention and interpretation in order to see where the flaws arise (Bennington, 2000, p. 36). The willingness to investigate “outside the contents

alone of meaning” means to be critical of the kind of hermeneutics that adheres unquestionably to any system of interpretation, even, perhaps especially, “deconstruction”.

What this amounts to is a reluctance to take methodologies or theories at face value in order to respond as responsibly as possible to both the institution and the act of reading, which may or may not challenge the reader to reconceive the structures and protocols of reading practices within the confines of the university. The latter requires a responsibility to what happens [*ce qui arrive*], as Derrida puts it, as opposed to what one wants to happen (see Derrida, 2001a, p. 19-20).

Picking up on how Derrida says he feels at the beginning of this lecture, Robert Scholes claims that the major crisis and reason for this despondency among professors in the university, especially those in English literature departments, “is that we have become reluctant to make truth claims about the matters we teach” (Scholes, 1999, p. 39). Many commentators, as Scholes argues in *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), have mistakenly taken Derrida and deconstruction to mean an abdication from truth claims (see also Norris, 1993; 1997).

Elsewhere again, in a lecture delivered at Stanford in 1999, Derrida defended the right of free speech within the institution by claiming that the university as a site of learning ought to be a place that espouses, above all, the right to its own critique. Speaking of the university without condition, Derrida says “[t]his university demands and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required of research, knowledge, and thought concerning the truth. However enigmatic it may be, the reference to truth remains fundamental enough to be found, along with light (*lux*), on the symbolic insignias of more than one university. The university professes the *truth*, and that is its profession” (Derrida, 2002a, p. 202).

According to Derrida, this unconditional university is of course a promise, something that does not exist but is always yet to come. In such a university, the right to question anything,

to speak about anything, or to publish anything, ought to be defended by the institution, even the right to question democracy itself. Derrida confers these rights most specifically on what he calls the “new humanities” and connects these rights further to literature and fiction, where, theoretically at least, everything can be said.^{xxxviii}

The Truth of Teaching Literature

In *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), Robert Scholes picks up on Derrida’s concern for truth in the university and argues that it is the minimal responsibility for professors in the humanities. Scholes’ intended audience is, like himself, teachers of literature, though his concept of truth has larger ramifications:

The "love of truth" seems to me the first protocol of teaching, upon which any others that we might devise would depend. And I mean to include in this notion both the seeking of truth and a scrupulous truthfulness in our teaching, which includes the admission of the weak or dubious elements in what we profess. Truthfulness begins in a rigorous attention to the grounds of our own beliefs and a willingness to be corrected. As a habit of mind, the love of truth is one of the great things that we, as teachers, have to offer, but we cannot offer it by merely talking about it; we have to enact it, to embody it in our whole practice as scholars and teachers. This means being truthful with ourselves about how we came to be where we are, what interests we are serving, and what good we can hope to accomplish.

(Scholes, 1998, p. 57)

The difficulty with statements such as these is that it is all very well to claim one is seeking the truth, defining what is meant by truth, however, in a particular circumstance, in a particular context, and by a particular person is a complicated issue. Scholes claims that his notion of the truth includes words like “fair,” “accurate,” and “comprehensive” (Scholes, 1998, p. 57). He claims also that his notion of truth is “not profound but neither is it nebulous” (Scholes, 1998, p. 57). It means asking questions of ourselves, about how we became what we are and why we chose our profession in the first place. Such notions are espoused here,

since this thesis is claiming that the truth (with a small *t*) is what happens in the event of teaching and reading in literature classes and that, after Derrida and Scholes, a responsible response finds value in this activity.

This does not mean adhering faithfully to a central theoretical model by pitching one theory against the next, say, New Criticism against New Historicism, or Queer Theory against Humanism. It means, as Derrida and Scholes are arguing in their own ways, and as Bill Readings argues in his, that the task is to be *accountable* to what happens in the event of reading and teaching. Undoubtedly, this is a risky business, given the dangers Rita Felski notices with knowingness and unknowing above. Perhaps it would be better to sound like one knows (Scholes, 1998, p. 60-67). Though, in reading, as Derrida puts it, whether we acknowledge it or not, we are counter-signing our relationship with the institution and its traditions.

To be responsible, therefore, to the tenor of critique and the tradition that precedes it, means being, likewise, irresponsible. The double bind is necessary and immanent. One is faithfully faithful when one is critical of what one perceives to be unjust in the service of truth. Deconstruction, Derrida claims further, is also “the taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competences, and our performances” (Derrida, 1992, p. 22-23). Though deconstruction may be circumspect about a number of things—referentiality, metaphysics, origins, identity, being, presence, the institution, etc.—it is not politically silent, nor, for that matter, does it seem particularly one-sided.^{xxxix} To be responsible, Derrida will claim, to be really responsible to an institution, means to read as closely and as rigorously as possible by making the institution’s “aporias as clear and thematic as possible” (Derrida, 1992, p. 22; Morgan Wortham, 2006). Reading the institution’s foundations, its histories, its politics, and its power formations responsibly means employing a lever, or a wedge—in the case of the aforementioned essay—a “mochlos,” to open it up to ever further investigation. The hope is that such scrupulous rigor might yield future possibilities for a democratic institution to come, one that is progressive and hospitable to what Readings calls, somewhat enigmatically, “Thought” (Readings, 1996).

Literature and the Idea of a University

In the opening chapter of his book *Black Holes* (1999) J. Hillis Miller picks up on Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* and Derrida's concerns for the university by interrogating what he calls "The Transnational University".^{x1} What concerns Miller most in his reading of the plight of the contemporary university is that there is need now, more than ever perhaps, to account for the function of literature within the university. "The question that haunts me," says Miller, "that has haunted me ever since I first read Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*... is this: What is now the function of literary study, if any, in the new technologized, globalized, post-colonial research university, the university whose mission is to produce an educated workforce to make the region where it is located 'competitive in the global economy?'" (Miller, 1999, p. 57).

As Readings has argued, that since the link between the nation-state and its virtual subjects has disintegrated over time, a link the university's "idea of culture" has historically forged, there is no longer any cohesive ground for a "generalized subjectivity" (Readings, 1996, p. 87). In other words, since there is no recourse to a centralized ground, tradition, community, or monolithic cultural epicenter upon which to pin literary nostalgia, Arnoldian and Leavisite notions of the canon and tradition have lost their institutional foothold. What matters now is what the university has done to account for the void left by the recognition that "the grounds on which we used to make large claims for the humanities have been undermined" (Readings, 1996, p. 90). Since the university is now what Readings called a "ruined institution," what is left is a task for thinking, namely "thinking what it means to dwell in those ruins without recourse to romantic nostalgia" (Readings, 1996, p. 169).

For Readings, the void opened up by the failure of literature (and philosophy) departments to maintain their hegemonic status, can be noticed through the rapid rise of cultural studies. Indeed, for Readings, what is interesting in this story is that "Cultural Studies arises at the point when the notion of culture ceases to mean anything vital for the University as a whole" (Readings, 1996, p. 91). Hence the status of cultural studies in Readings' work as presenting "a vision of culture that is appropriate for the age of excellence" (Readings, 1996, p. 17). Readings' point, "to put it in the cruelest terms", as he himself does in *The University of*

Ruins, is to emphasize the notion that cultural studies arrives in the university at the moment where “culture no longer functions as a specific referent to any one thing or set of things”, that, as a “dereferentialized” signifier, it speaks most pertinently of “a certain exhaustion” (Readings, 1996, p. 17).

Gary Hall (2002) reads Readings’ argument in *The University in Ruins*, however, as a strong claim to promote the function of cultural studies in the contemporary university. For Hall, “Cultural Studies... remains extremely important to Readings, for all its close ties to the University of Excellence, precisely because it is *the* contemporary way to think about the university” [original emphasis] (Hall, 2002, p. 119). Hall’s argument in *Culture in Bits* (2002) challenges the idea, in fact, that the two (cultural studies and literary studies) can be unequivocally separated. The rub of the argument concerning cultural studies’ takeover of the departments of literature, philosophy, and whatever else, in light of Readings’ claims, is that drawing distinct lines between these disciplines is in turn problematic in itself.

In Hall’s reading of *The University in Ruins*, we learn that Readings’ big lesson, gained from reading theory, specifically deconstruction, is that it is necessary to “think the institution”, “to think the university from theory” (Hall, 2002, p. 119-120), meaning that cultural studies needs to be “rethought so that it is not simply institutionalized” (Hall, 2002, p. 120). The theoretical dimension is quintessential for rethinking a university without idea. It is also quintessential, as Hall argues, to note the difficulties with setting cultural studies apart from disciplines that it continues to be influenced by and to be conversing with:

... cultural studies cannot be set up in an oppositional relationship with literary studies... and any investigation of the relation between the two would have to take great care to chart the unevenness of their respective positions, at one time or another, in this place or that, with regard to theory, politics, the university, and each other – always supposing, of course, that cultural and literary studies can be distinguished in the first place, which is something of a problem.

(Hall, 2002, p. 120)

Reading and Theory

Much of the major focus of *The University in Ruins* – a focus that relates to how the post-historical university is envisaged in the mind of Readings and others who follow his thinking – is the complication already set out between accounting and accountability, which is also claimed here throughout this thesis to be a problem concerning the truth of what happens in and of the event of reading, especially as this occurs within literature classes.

Though “truth” is not a word Readings would readily use to describe the value of reading events, this thesis argues, after Derrida and Scholes, that it is of paramount importance for thinking about and justifying teaching and reading practices in literature classes, especially in terms of *accountability*. Again, this is not a romantic nostalgia for a bygone tradition, but a plea to teachers to consider carefully the issue of accountability in literature classes, especially in cases where being accountable means accounting for what Readings calls “Thought” (Readings, 1999, p. 159). It also means being accountable for what happens outside of learning trajectories and outcomes models.

How might this work? Readings positions an “institutional pragmatism” as a provisional remedy in order to make an argument for the “tactical use of the University, while recognizing that space as a historical anachronism”. What is at stake here, in this vision of the future, is the corollary “need for a philosophical separation of the notions of accountability and accounting” (Readings, 1996, p. 18). “It is imperative,” for Readings, “that the University respond to the demand for accountability, while at the same time refusing to conduct the debate over the nature of its responsibility solely in terms of the language of accounting (whose currency is excellence)” (Readings, 1996, p. 18). The difficulty, to paraphrase, is to keep accounting and accountability apart by keeping separate the notion that responsibility is something one can count, that being great is great because of its cultural capital and intrinsic economic prospects. As Readings states, baldly, “accountants are not the only people capable of understanding the horizon of contemporary society, nor even the most adept at the task” (Readings, 1996, p. 18).

Then how can one be responsible without conflating accountability with accounting in the work of the university? Much of the power of Hall’s (2002) reading of Readings is that he

insists on how conflicting opinions between disciplines are often “implicated” (Hall, 2002, p. x), that conflicts which set up alternative positions within departments can “remain blind” to broader theoretical understandings and agreements. This does not mean that dialectical approaches are always the best way forward either. It means merely that antagonistic one-sided approaches to curing the ills of the modern university will not solve the issue. Anti-theorists, who claim work in cultural studies should be more politically involved, more worldly and less introspective – who view theoretical work in the university as disengaged and elitist – according to Hall, who emphasize the need for less theoretical debate and more action, are missing the levels of complexity of the issues at hand. What is needed now is more theory, more thinking about the complexity of the situation we are faced with now.

Following Robert Young in *Torn Halves* (1996), Hall’s attempt is to bring theory back into the argument and claim that deconstruction, a theory Hall espouses, and pretty much equates with “theory” as such, does not set antagonistic positions up in a relation of conflict with one another but shows how they can function in a productive, if irresolvable, tension (Hall, 2002, p. x). Exploiting that tension is deconstruction’s major concern and a productive one at that (see Vrablikova, 2017). From Theodor Adorno and Robert Young, Hall understands that the “essential point about culture under capitalism... can be found in its dialectical structure of perpetual antagonism in which different kinds of art never add up to a totality, truth or freedom” (Young, 1996, p. 21). Again, the tension is key. Though yet again, this thesis argues, that it is precisely an attention to truth (with a small “t”), which is integral in keeping the antagonistic tension from collapsing. This latter point will be insisted on in terms of the acts of reading that take place herein.

The tension between reading and theory is highlighted particularly in J. Hillis Miller’s reading of *The University in Ruins* in “The Transnational University” chapter of *Black Holes* (Miller, 1999). Here Miller understands that “[n]ostalgia for the old Humboltian university or even the hope that we might turn it into a new, unified, multicultural university to replace the monocultural one will not reverse the changes now in place” (Miller, 1999, p. 153). What we are left with is a model of a new transnational university. The transnational university occurs, for Miller, after the Cold War, the decline of the Nation-State, the globalization of economies, and the shift from funding from government sources to transnational

corporations, also known by their acronyms as TNCs (Miller, 1996).

To return to why Readings' book "haunts" Miller, then, the point is that what Miller is responding to in Readings' argument is the corporatization of the university, what is understood throughout this thesis to be the legacy of a current global neoliberal agenda. How, in the face of this, are literary studies to be justified in the university? Miller's argument here emphasizes a tension between reading and theory, a concern his work has grappled with for decades (Miller, 1987; 1991; 1998; 2001; 2012; 2015). This tension is productive in that it surreptitiously keeps theory open to further elaboration and change. "Reading," claims Miller, "must be distinguished from 'theory'":

Though theory may facilitate reading and should ideally have risen from acts of reading, the two are not the same thing, nor are they by any means always in harmony. Genuine acts of reading are always to some degree sui generis, inaugural. They always to some extent disable or disqualify the theory that may have been the motivating presupposition of the reader. It is easy enough to sprinkle a text in cultural studies with cogent, correct, and forceful appeals to 'theory' – for example, references to Foucault, Benedict Anderson, Bhabha, Fanon, Said, or Irigaray – while performing acts of reading that are precritical, pretheoretical, and predominantly thematic... The work's force as an event bringing cultural value or meaning into existence depends on a certain performative use of language or other signs. Such a reading must attend to what is internally heterogeneous, contradictory, odd, anomalous about the work, rather than presupposing some monolithic unity that directly reflects a cultural context. Only such a reading can hope to transmit or preserve some of the force as an event the original work had or can still have. This might even make the reading, as recorded in an essay or lecture, a new event helping to bring about social change.

(Miller, 1999, p. 151-153)

Reading Literature as Event

The insistence on the event of reading in this thesis is a response to what both Miller and Derrida in their own ways understand by the “event”, especially as such events manifest in the teaching of literary texts. The question of theory and reading in Miller’s work is one way of seeing why this is a central issue.

The perennial argument that theory is detached, politically innocuous or peripheral in the university stems from a reaction to the way theory is often seen as self-absorbed, self-referential, narcissistic or ineffectual outside a relatively closed coterie of aficionados (see also Chow, 2006). Miller’s point here is to emphasize that what makes theory ineffectual is the type of reporting that cites these theorists without a “genuine” act of reading. Part of the difficulty with teaching theory, in Miller’s view, recalls Felski’s understanding that “knowingness” has quite a lot to do with what passes for theory in the university. By saying that responses that are precritical, pretheoretical do nothing, Miller means that these readings are choreographed, staged to respond to texts in a manner that isn’t really responsive to the initial force of the arguments. Such readings are, in Derrida’s terms, etiolated (Miller, 2001, p. 37).

Miller’s argument will almost certainly draw the following kinds of response from critics: what exactly *are* “genuine acts of reading”? Who decides that acts of reading are genuine? Who controls this? How can we believe that these “genuine” readings “always” disqualify the theory upon which they are based? Isn’t this notion of finding the text’s oddness, heterogeneity, and internal contradictions just a reframed New Criticism that lauds literary texts for their difficulties and sanctifies the reader-critic along the way. Isn’t this a return to the “*I analyze this*” mode of criticism? Shouldn’t we rather be asking questions like “Why have we come to read this way?” “What kind of social formations give rise to such thinking?” “What role does this text play in larger theoretical frameworks?” “How does this text reflect its cultural heritage?”

These are all genuine criticisms. And Miller’s argument isn’t disqualifying any of them outright. The crux of the argument is that acts of reading that attend rigorously and patiently to the rhetorical movements of a text *can* have powerful effects. These effects are most powerful when the reading produces, furthers, or even distorts the central argument of the

text under discussion, not wilfully but sympathetically, after an intellectual engagement. Neither does this mean that the text is being treated like a verbal icon, closed off from the world around it. Attentive reading to the manner in which theory itself is expressed – its voice, its structure, its style, its preconceptions and affiliations – alongside the content of what it is effectively saying, can only serve to move theory on by exacerbating the tensions between theoretical positions – a tension, which in Gary Hall and Robert Young’s commentaries is all for the good (Hall, 2002; Young, 2006). What Miller’s argument foregrounds, is another kind of accountability, the kind of accountability that is so faithful to the force of the original text that it *rediscovers* it in a kind of “perverse fidelity” (Critchley, 1999, p. 145; Dunne, 2017). Such faithful infidelity and rigor can often reproduce from the act of reading surprising results. “I suggest that real reading when it occurs,” says Miller, “is outside the institution, allergic to institutionalization, private, solitary” (quoted in Young, 1996, p. 10).^{xii} Which means that, for Miller, genuine acts of reading can and do, however inadvertently, alter the institution (Miller, 1999).

To say that “the work’s force as an event bringing cultural value or meaning into existence depends on a certain performative use of language or other signs” means that the initial impetus of the writing brings something new into the world by using language in a way that is not simply a statement of affairs – a constative act in J. L. Austin’s language (Austin, 1975). In order to be effective – in order for it to “act”, a textual reading exceeds itself, causes something to happen. This happening changes things.

Derrida’s argument for the new humanities echoes Miller’s and gives us an indication of why thinking about events is so important for rethinking the humanities and its place within the university, and, why, the event takes such a prominent place in Derrida’s thinking and in deconstruction at large. What is the event? Derrida asks in “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition” (2001):

It must not only surprise the constative and propositional mode of the language of knowledge (*S is P*), but also no longer even let itself be commanded by the performative speech act of a subject. As long as I can produce and determine an event by a performative act guaranteed, like any

performative, by conventions, legitimate fictions, and a certain “as if,” then to be sure I will not say that nothing happens or comes about, but what takes place, arrives, happens, or happens *to me* remains still controllable and programmable within a horizon of anticipation or precomprehension, within a horizon period. It is of the order of the masterable possible, it is the unfolding of what is already possible. It is of the order of power, of the “I can,” or “I may”. No surprise, thus no event in the strong sense. Which is as much as to say that, to this extent at least, it does not happen, it does not come about, or as I would say in French: *cela n'arrive pas*, it does not arrive. For if there is any, if there is such a thing, the pure singular eventness of *what* arrives or of *who* arrives and arrives *to me* (which is what I call the *arrivant*), it would suppose an *irruption* that punctures the horizon, *interrupting* any performative organization, any convention, or any context that can be dominated by a conventionality. Which is to say that this event takes place only to the extent where it does not allow itself to be domesticated by any “as if,” or at least by any “as if” that can already be read, decoded, or articulated *as such*.

(Derrida, 2001, p. 53)

Part of the issue with discussing events in literature and reading, especially as these are conceived of in terms of the scene of teaching, is the argument that, if events happen all the time, then what is the issue? If we can't see an event coming, then we can't theorize it. So there is no issue. This thesis wishes to argue against this kind of thinking by saying that thinking about events (especially in literature classes) is crucial to our understanding of accountability within our schools and universities. Accountability to what? The short answer is: accountability to what comes in the event of reading. In order to see this, it will be necessary to tease out what Derrida is saying above.

Interrupting Thought

A performative speech act in J. L. Austin's terms – which Derrida famously investigates in his early paper “Signature, Event, Context” (1971) and again more fully in his critical

response to J. R. Searle in *Limited Inc* (1988), refers to a mode of speech that *does* something or makes something happen. The classic example Austin gives is saying “I do” at a wedding ceremony (Austin, 1975). If the conditions are “felicitous”, in other words if the context is right and the person marrying you is legally sanctioned to perform the task, then the result of this locution is that you become wedded to your partner. A constative statement, by contrast, simply describes a state of affairs, for instance, when someone says “it’s raining outside”. The initial distinction Austin sets up is between describing and doing. Much of what Derrida will do with this line of thinking will have to do with the issues surrounding separating out performative and constative, which is highly problematic, as are issues surrounding closed contexts for felicitous performatives (Derrida, 1988; Miller, 2002).

Here Derrida is arguing that the event (in the “strong sense”) must not only worry knowledge, predictability, and understanding, it must also be something that cannot be commanded into presence. A performative speech act, Derrida is claiming, cannot command or control the event; it can’t make it happen. An example of this would be the *fiat lux* in the old testament where, in the book of Genesis, God says “Let there be light!” Such a locution controls what happens, predicts it, and foresees the outcome; the language and the action are synonymous (see Miller, 1995). What Derrida means here is that performatives that are “controllable and programmable within a horizon of anticipation” are not events. In order for an event to happen it must be of the order of the *arrivant*, who arrives out of nowhere, so to speak. Events are irruptive and interruptive by being totally unpredictable. There are connections here to Derrida’s understanding of hospitality, the gift, trace, democracy, decision, *différance*, iterability, *le tout autre*, and so on. All of these terms have temporal concerns and speak of the interruptive movement of events.

Such strong events, as Derrida is claiming, do not happen all the time. They do not form a model of predictability in a classroom, nor do they even point to what *could* happen in a class. The point is, in thinking of a pedagogy of the event, to find a way (each time) to ensure that classrooms are kept open to the arrival of absolute surprise. This does not require the teacher to see what is coming, rather it requires teachers and students to be open to an idea, to Thought, which, for Bill Readings provides an *alibi*. “The name of Thought precisely is a name in that it has no intrinsic meaning” (Readings, 1996, p. 159). Like excellence, it doesn’t

mean anything specifically, it is an empty signifier, but unlike excellence “it does not bracket the question of value” (Readings, 1996, p. 159). Being accountable to the event is another way, this thesis claims, of responding responsibly to Thought, truth, and the act of reading; in short, to moments of unlearning, moments when what happens elicits a responsibility to adapt and/or change one’s thinking.

Interrupting Neoliberalism

In order to conceive of why “events” in the “strong sense” are important to education now, it will be necessary to consider how things *are* in the here and now, according to current criticism. Much of what is being said of the current crisis in recent debates in education surrounds the word “neoliberalism” (Olsen and Peters, 2005; Baltodano, 2012; Di Leo, 2016; Casey, 2016; Tett and Hamilton, 2019). The word is so diffuse and widespread, so elastic and variegated, that its meaning is difficult to pin down in any particular context; so it is important to reflect on what is meant by this term in this thesis and how it pertains to acts of reading, events, and the possibilities of and for unlearning. Furthermore, “neoliberalism” is not set up in this thesis as a straw man argument in order to pitch radical pedagogies as the saving grace of education. Much of what is said of neoliberalism is negative, extremely so, but accepting this, knowing it, is not the same thing as believing that the only way forward is by unreflectively rejecting everything that comes with it.

This section aims, therefore, to develop a brief overview and outline of some of the general tenets of neoliberalism – “the defining political economic paradigm of our time” (McChesney, 1999) – in order to provide a contemporary context and to set the scene for arguments that will be developed later concerning new managerialism and outcomes-oriented educational practices.

The first thing that can be said about neoliberalism, however, is that it can be difficult to speak about this term without overtly alarmist or sensationalist rhetoric. This can therefore set up what might be construed as a straw man argument (see Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009), but the point is that there is a general consensus among critics that there is a serious crisis in education today and it is imperative for educators to understand the difficulties and pursue the solutions. Many of the world’s most important analysts of neoliberal policies have

adopted a rhetoric of profound pessimism as a result of what they view, somewhat hyperbolically, as the “ideology at the root of all of our problems” (Monbiot, 2016). Henry Giroux, for instance, refers to neoliberalism as “a toxin that is generating a predatory class of the walking dead who are producing what might be called dead zones of the imagination” (Giroux, 2015, p. 163). Noam Chomsky says that “the very design of neoliberal principles is a direct attack on democracy”(Chomsky, 2010). David Harvey writes that we have entered an epoch of “new imperialism” whereby corporate interests have figured that the best way to extort money from labourers is not how Marx described capital investment and surplus value but through “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2017, p. 257), that is the transference of assets from one class to another: for example the housing crisis in the US in 2007 and 2008, which saw 6 to 8 million people lose their homes to banks and corporate financiers (Ibid.). “In sum,” says Robert McChesney “neoliberalism is the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy, not just in the United States but across the planet, and will be for the foreseeable future” (McChesney, 1999).

If these philosophers, social theorists, and critics are to be believed then the crisis is one of epic proportions that goes far beyond simplistic forms of economic theory and reaches rather deep into the realm of ethical values, political agency, identity politics, education, and basic human rights.^{xliii} It is necessary then to see how these economic and political ideological principles are effecting how teachers teach and students learn at the present time. It is also important to reflect again on what neoliberal values might make of Bill Readings’ position on accountability and accounting.

To recall Readings’ view for a moment, a university of excellence espouses excellence in education precisely because it is a dereferentialized term and can be made to suit a variety of needs and purposes. Readings’ argument is that the language of excellence provides managers with an alibi to empower or subjugate as it wishes, without recourse to a set of values. How can accountability, he asks, in the same vein and manner of speaking as Derrida in *Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties*, referred to above, make us responsible? How can we rethink judgement “without banal and cliché-ridden mission statements”? How can institutions move from “jiggling indices of excellence and filling in charts of ‘goal

achievement” to “facing up to fundamental questions concerning the nature of value and quality” (Readings, 1996, p. 133)? Echoing Derrida’s worries, Readings says:

To whom and to what the university remains accountable are questions we must continue to pose and worry over. Appeals to accounting – whether in the form of numerically scored evaluations, efficiency ratings, or other bureaucratic statistics – will only serve to prop up the logic of consumerism that rules the University of Excellence. Value is a question of judgement, a question whose answers must continually be discussed.

(Readings, 1996, p. 134)

In this sense, Readings’ argument for responsibility means interrupting the process of accounting by pursuing the question of value, by generating an atmosphere of simultaneous interrogation and disturbance within the university. The question then becomes what values does the corporate university privilege and why? And how can value (conceived of as Thought) be brought back into the equation?

What Is Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is an economic and political ideology within a capitalist framework that is commonly understood as a doctrine premised on free-market enterprise and rampant entrepreneurialism. At the most basic level, neoliberalism refers to the new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasise market relations, competition, and deregulation by re-tasking the role of the state and individual responsibility (Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy, 2016). Emphasis is often placed on government practices and monetary organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation (OECD), that attempt to increasingly enforce policies that reduce public spending, decrease labour costs, and promote expansive flexibility in the workforce. An important result of these tendencies is the accretion of competitive market values into every aspect of social, political, and economic life. Given the geographical scope of neoliberal tendencies in many diverse areas of the world (Peck, 2004), it is also inadvisable to claim that neoliberal policies are the same across borders. So

amorphous has the term become and so ubiquitous across disciplines that the term can imply a policy paradigm, a hegemonic ideology, a system of governmentality, or a doxa (Larner, 2000; Barnett, 2010; Patrick, 2013). David Harvey explains the concept clearly as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.

(Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Historically speaking, neoliberalism comes to fruition in the late 1970s and earlier 1980s as a result of an economic paradigm shift known as the “market turn”, a transition period in Western economies from social democracy to market liberalism. Part of the difficulty with the term, therefore, is that it’s not all that new and it also doesn’t relate to a traditional understanding of what liberalism means as a political perspective (Chomsky, 2017). The “liberal” in the term refers more specifically to the idea that the markets should be free (liberated) from state control and entrepreneurial freedoms should be upheld. The popular narrative is that many liberal democracies after the Second World War adopted a Keynesian model of economic planning. This entailed an economy premised on regulating the markets and espousing the welfare of its citizens over free capitalist enterprise. Government regulations would ensure that basic human rights and needs were available to its citizens in a democratic society regardless of wealth or status. The “New Deal” is an example of how

John Maynard Keynes' economic models saw the US climb out of the Great Depression (Harvey, 2005). During this period democratic governments in the UK and the US set standards for minimum wage, established a system of education for the public good, and intervened in corporate monopolies in order to protect and regulate public enterprise.

What came to be known as “embedded liberalism” meant the government was conscious of capitalist tendencies to exploit the markets for its own good and took steps to prevent privatization and monopolization of services deemed universal such as education, health care, housing, and so on. Reaction to these principles came most prominently from the Mont Pelerin society, which viewed Keynesian economic theory as Marxist in nature and an assault on personal liberties. The society was set up in 1947 as an economic think tank with attendees invited by its leader Friedrich Hayek, author of the influential book *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and dedicated anti-Keynesian (Harvey, 2007, p. 21). The society had strong ties with some of the most influential universities in the world and was instrumental in developing governmental economic policies across the globe. Early members of the society included Milton Friedman, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises, and George Stigler. Both Friedman and Hayek's work went on to influence economic policies in the US and UK in the 1970s and 1980s to a huge extent, and in effect abolished most of the economic policies set up by Maynard Keynes.

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister in the UK and proceeded to restrict trade union power and privatise public institutions. A year afterwards, in the US, Ronald Reagan was elected president and, in order to revitalise a flagging economy and inflationary stagnation, continued to deregulate industry and liberate the powers of finance. Both episodes are traced in David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) as pivotal moments in the genesis of neoliberalism, not only in these two countries, but on a global stage. Since then, and through the policies engendered in political ideologies following from the neoliberal desire to privatise and marketize public institutions, such as education, neoliberal ideas have become widely accepted as common sense, with few alternatives. Neoliberalism “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand our world” (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). What this amounts to is that the way institutions

like universities and schools work, and the values they promote, for people like Harvey (and Hillis Miller, Jacques Derrida, Bill Readings, Michael A. Peters, Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Kathleen Lynch, and a host of others) have quite a lot to do with many of the principles and agendas of neoliberalism. The question is what effects these principles have had on our understanding of what constitutes a “good” education and what values must be held on to. In order to see how this happens it will be necessary to look at a case study.

Case Study: Ireland, Neoliberalism, Education

Much of the thinking about neoliberalism and education here comes from teaching and practicing in Irish second- and third-level institutions, specifically in English literature seminars and in secondary schools. On an experiential level, therefore, Ireland is chosen here as a case study because of familiarity with that system. It is also chosen in the interest of narrowing down an understanding of how neoliberalist policies are effecting a particular sector (the university) in a particular country (Ireland) and in a particular context (now).

In one of the most interesting recent statements of the impact of neoliberal policies in Irish universities in particular, current Irish President Michael D. Higgins has taken a critical view of the emergence of a “new precariat” in academia in Ireland (Higgins, 2018). These are the younger academics in Ireland, whose lifestyles are adversely effected by flexible cheap labour brought on by the emergence of short-term research-only and teaching-only positions with the nation’s universities (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). Speaking of the humanities in particular, to an audience of historians at Dublin Castle in April 2018, Higgins criticized the emergence of the “ideological fad” of a “neo-utilitarian mediocrity”. Higgins stated:

Within the universities, humanities have borne the brunt of the vicissitudes of new funding models, as resources are increasingly channeled towards areas which, it is suggested, will yield a return, at least in the short-term, to the university in terms of increased funding. Much of this is facilitated by an abuse of metrics; an ideological fad that views the use of metrics of academic work, not as a contribution or instrument of knowledge but as a conforming bending of the knee to an insufficiently contested neo-utilitarian mediocrity.

(Higgins 2018)

As a former lecturer in sociology and politics, President Higgins, it would seem, is acutely aware of the difficulties faced by young academics in the humanities and social sciences, and his speech surely picks up on the current atmosphere of anxiety and despair afflicting many new PhD graduates in Ireland. It is incumbent on those with tenured positions within Irish universities, Higgins argues, to respond responsibly to a duty of care and compassion to the younger generation in order to ensure a future solidarity in the profession. What is required now is “a persistent advocacy within the university” for this upcoming generation and an acknowledgement that the humanities have value exceeding or extrinsic to market-oriented models of metrics and data (Higgins, 2018).

In a response to these arguments, concerning neoliberal models in Ireland’s higher education sector, Áine Mahon and Shane Bergin published an op-ed in *The Irish Times* two months after Higgins’ speech in Dublin Castle. In “Why Irish Universities Are in Thrall to Neoliberalism”, Mahon and Bergin (two young academics working in Dublin universities) claimed that Higgins’ critique of the “ideological fad” within the university referred to research and rankings models, which form the “troubled epicentre of utility and enterprise” in the Irish education system (Mahon and Bergin, 2018). Universities are now continually anxious about competitiveness in a global marketplace; what we are witnessing, accordingly, is, in Ronald Barnett’s words, a shift from “a university-in-itself” (committed to teaching and scholarship and edification of selves) to ‘a university-for-itself’ (committed to performance and productivity and competition against others)” (Mahon and Bergin, 2018). No longer do Irish universities occupy a position of relative autonomy against social or political agendas in the service of contemplation and intellectual life, rather, what we have today is an extension of corporate interest and its desire for quantitative data and “impact” research (Lynch, 2014; 2016; Bourdieu, 1993; Hazelkorn, 2017). Mahon and Bergin do not argue for a “nostalgia for a university that never was”; instead, what they offer is a tentative model for hope. They suggest the following:

1. Academics must “push back against the discourse” of “neoliberal buzzwords” and create a new discourse with “expressive language” for a reconsideration of what it means to have an education and to live well.
2. Academics must align research with action by working for the implementation of social justice: “we cannot critique neoliberalism and return to neoliberal practice behind our office door”.
3. Academics already working permanent jobs within the university system “must care for their insecure colleagues and call out the toxicity of hourly-paid work”.

Arguably, Higgins, Mahon, and Bergin’s concerns are not new. Thomas Mitchell, provost of Trinity College Dublin, was speaking in a very similar manner almost two decades earlier:

A more worrisome effect has been the pressure on universities to divert energy and manpower into the most basic, service-oriented forms of vocational training that can generate significant revenue. Researchers can be similarly forced to devote more of their efforts to consultancy and to problem-solving dictated by industry in order to earn revenue to support their main research programs. The result is that more of the agenda of universities is being set by market forces and funding needs than by the universities' own ideals and priorities... These trends obviously have several negative effects, but perhaps the most serious is that universities are fast losing sight of the first principles that have for so long inspired our educational ideals and underpinned the intellectual and cultural attainments of Western civilization.

(Holbrook and Hulbert, 2002, p. 104)

It would seem that in recent years there is a growing counter-hegemonic movement to tackle neoliberal principles in Irish Higher Education: examples are the “Occupy University” movement and the “Provisional University Project”, both of whom launched social movements (between 2010 and 2016) in Dublin to challenge and reimagine the purpose of the university in Ireland (Finnegan, 2019, p. 159-160). Reflecting the well-known protests

in Wall Street from 2011-2012, the Occupy University movement set up camp on Dublin's Dame Street from October 2011 to March 2012.

For Finnegan, as a result, what is needed now is “modes of analysis that move beyond sterile scholasticism or immobilizing pessimism”, both of which are unfortunately most prominent in literature concerning neoliberalism (Finnegan, 2019, p. 152). Referring to Raymond Williams' (1977) work on the distinction between “dominant” and “emergent” meanings – values and practices within critical historical analysis – Finnegan argues that an “emergent culture” carrying new meanings and values into the institution is forming a kind of resistance to neoliberal hegemony. He argues that within the fields of scientific inquiry, social studies, and the humanities, renewed attention to the purpose of education is having political consequences.

Neoliberalism has been the driving socio-economic force in Ireland since the late 1980s, in which time it has effectively changed the country into a “market state” oriented to prop up corporate interests (Finnegan, 2019). These corporate interests have stimulated significant growth in the so-called “knowledge economy”, for example in the biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and technology industries (Olssen and Peters, 2007). The “light-touch” regulations and low-level taxation on corporate interests has also seen Ireland become one of the leading economically globalized countries in the world (Finnegan, 2019, p. 153).

During the Celtic Tiger boom (1993-2007) Ireland was transformed from a poor post-colonial outpost to a “shining star of neoliberal orthodoxy” (O'Callaghan et al., 2014; Allen, 2007; 2000). From the early 1990s, the Irish government embraced free market enterprises and dropped its corporate tax rate to 12.5%, outdoing its neighbors in the UK and Europe in competitiveness for large corporate investments. In 1985, Ireland had one of the third-worst poverty levels in the EU, by the mid 90's the average income had become one of the highest in Europe. Furthermore, unemployment fell to a record low of 4% in 2000 and again in 2004 (O'Callaghan et al., 2014, p. 34). Despite the rise in employment, however, the economic wage gap grew significantly during this period, where tax cuts to the more privileged sections of Irish society resulted in increased economic prosperity for the few. At the peak of the boom in 2006, wage inequality in Ireland reached an all-time high, with 1% of the population

earning 20% of the national wealth, while 17% of the population was on the poverty threshold (O’Callaghan et al., 2014, p. 35).

In order to promote new public service (NPS) management, the Irish government adopted neoliberal economic and social policies from the 1990s onwards (Lynch, 2012). Such promotion ushered in a series of new managerial reforms that curbed the power of professionals working in public sector organizations (Farrell and Morris, 2003; Lynch, 2012). It also initiated a cross-over effect between private interest and public services, which saw the gradual deregulation of public enterprises and the corporatization of public amenities such as electricity and gas supply, postal services, and rail and bus services.

In education, new managerialism “redefined what counts as knowledge, who are the bearers of such knowledge and who is empowered to act” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 3; Lynch and Grummell, 2018). It did this by shifting the focus within higher education institutions from a traditional model of intellectual inquiry to a performativity model emphasizing measured outputs, accountability, and an audit culture (Olssen and Peters, 2007). These principles are led by a new managerial force concerned with competition between institutions of learning, both at second and third levels in Ireland. “The task is not just to do the job well but to show that one is doing it well, to ‘sell’ the school or college in the local and, in the case of higher education, global market” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 50; Allais, 2014).

Since the mid 90’s the “knowledge economy” has become the clarion call for the neoliberal university in Ireland, emphasizing rankings systems and competition in a newly designed global marketplace (Lynch et al., 2012; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2005). Accordingly, the language of policy documents in Ireland shifted dramatically to quality-assurance models and outcomes indicators:

While human capital theory provided the framework for Irish education from the 1960s onwards, more distinctly neo-liberal principles came in to play in the 1990s. Accountability was one of the key principles informing policy in the *Education White Paper* in 1995. This paper called for more appropriate ‘performance indicators’ for measuring educational outcomes. The Department of Education and Science began to use the language of the market from that time in its key strategy

documents beginning with *Implementing the Agenda for Change* in 1996.

(Lynch et al., 2012, p. 27)

The linguistic shift in policy documents in education in Ireland reflect the sweeping changes in the Irish economy and the rise of new managerialism in the education sector. It also reflects a change in the way “accountability” (see Readings, 1996) is perceived in the service of education goals. The word becomes a performance indicator, reflecting the values of the market rather than its traditional semantic range, which indicates ethical responsibility and civic engagement. *The National Strategy for Higher Education* (2011), also known as the Hunt Report, is “heavily laced with the new managerial language of efficiency, flexibility, and accountability” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 46). The new language of accountability has also surreptitiously shifted the focus of value to market enterprises over individual or collective wellbeing: “The focus is the product not the person, both in terms of what is attained and what is counted and countable. A culture of carelessness is created, one that is already visible in higher education” (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 51).

Conclusion

“Education,” claims Kathleen Lynch, speaking about the necessity for thinking beyond the ruins of the university, “is compelled to be proactive in defending its foundations as a public good, enabling the unnamed, unknown, unspoken, and unthinkable to be thinkable and visible” (Lynch, 2019, p. xvii). The imperative to resist the market logic underpinning education in Ireland and abroad refers not to a nostalgia for an institution that never was but to an institution that could be, in Derrida’s parlance, something to come. There is no dwelling outside the ruins, as Bill Readings intimated, no way back to a grounding Humboltian *Bildung* (Miller, 1999). If Mahon and Bergin (2018) are correct, then one way of resistance resides in the language used to describe what the university is doing, what it should be doing, and why it should be doing it. If the university is to readapt from a transnational commercial enterprise to a custodian of the public good, then it follows that the language it uses to describe its goals and intentions would need to change. This thesis takes seriously the idea that the languages we use to describe what we are doing in education matter, that the stories we tell about what happens matter, and that the humanities matter, despite their current

precarious position in the university and the global economy.^{xliii} We need expressive languages to tackle the jargon imported from a marketing mentality to justify accountability beyond accounting. Truth, what Scholes calls “the first protocol of teaching,” is one of these expressive registers – unlearning, event, untology, nonknowledge, learnercentrism, and failure, I claim here, are other such terms.

Failure

Doesn't reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises. (Joseph Litvak)

We are failing to teach the *ignorance*, the most crucial part of the whole operation. (Stuart Firestein)

Introduction

This chapter aims to investigate the concepts of failure and ignorance by giving several examples of theorists and teachers whose understanding of learning is at odds with conventional thinking of what constitutes a good education. In their own ways, each theorist offers his or her own understanding of the situation and proffers ignorance and failure as a way to reimagine or relearn what is valuable in educational experience. Under investigation here is Stuart Firestein (2012; 2016), a neuroscientist claiming that since ignorance and failure are central to what goes on in the world of science, they should be radically reconceived and promoted in our schools and universities. For Firestein, “we have developed an extraordinarily effective system [in schools] for disengaging the interest of the maximum number of students” (Firestein, 2016, p. 88). The task, claims Firestein, is to come up with a better understanding of failure in order to readjust our thinking on what it really means to fail.

Marlys Witte, a surgeon at the College of Medicine at the University of Arizona, is understood to be a progenitor in this field, having set up a Centre for Medical Ignorance (CMI) at her university. Witte's investigation into the teaching and practice of medical ignorance aims to instil in medical students a more robust relationship with questioning and curiosity in medical science. Judith Halberstam (2011) argues that failure is a “queer art” capable of readjusting the lens of education and its normative assumptions concerning wealth accumulation, maturity, high theory, and so on.

The last two theorists dealt with in this chapter look at failure on an institutional level: Cathy

Davidson (2017) argues for a new adaptability in the institution, whereas a return to Bill Readings (1996) sees Thought as a new paradigm for hope in the university.

The chapter ends with a reading of failure in Hermann Hesse's novel *The Prodigy* in order to tease out these ideas through a literary example. This last section attempts to explore these issues through a narrative example in order to understand how educational failure and ignorance can play out in the lives of students.

Thought Experiment

For the purposes of the thought experiment that follows, let's proceed as if a traditional understanding of failure, namely a term for understanding what happens when a student fails to learn, or fails a test, or fails to show up, communicates the full and true meaning of the word. Let's proceed on the basis that the categories constructed in order to judge success and failure are wholly justified, on the basis that education today judges failure correctly.

Imagine a class, in any discipline, in which you ask your students to talk about what they don't know. Now imagine that you invite other teachers, scholars, and researchers into your class to discuss what they don't know. Finally, imagine opening up to your own class and talking, open and honestly, about what you don't know. It would seem that the last idea is particularly difficult for some teachers because it would seem to contradict what the teacher is supposed to be doing in a classroom environment. Some teachers might feel distinctly uneasy about this, and the first reason that comes to mind is relevance. They might question the point of the exercise.

In the autumn of 2006 Stuart Firestein did exactly this. He was teaching a class at Columbia University entitled "Cellular and Molecular Neuroscience" to a group of third- and fourth-year undergraduates (Firestein, 2012). Firestein describes these students as bright young people expected to have likewise bright professional careers in medicine or bio-research. The neuroscience class he was teaching was run over a 25-lecture duration, with each lecture lasting one and half hours. He was using a dense 1,414-page textbook entitled *The Principles of Neural Science* edited by three eminent scholars in the field. Firestein's task, as he describes it, was to use the facts from the book to hang a few broader concepts around in

order to create his lectures and teach his students what they needed to know about neuroscience. He realised, however, that the students in his class had a view of neuroscience that was off, that they “must have had the impression that pretty much everything is known in neuroscience”(Firestein, 2012, p. 4). This of course is distinctly untrue, but could follow given that when both students and teacher diligently followed these teaching and learning protocols they ended up with an accumulation of facts. Firestein’s worry was that this presented a false notion of what science was about:

This crucial element of science was being left out for the students. The undone part of science that gets us into the lab early and keeps us there late, the thing that ‘turns your crank,’ the very driving force of science, the exhilaration of the unknown, all this is missing from our classrooms. In short, we are failing to teach the *ignorance*, the most critical part of the whole operation.

(Firestein, 2012, p. 4)

Here was the failure. Firestein’s claim is that students in “Cellular and Molecular Neuroscience” failed to understand the mystery of the whole thing and, given the manner of presentation, were unlikely to ever understand that what really pushes science along is the ignorance of the whole enterprise, the grasping after clues to discover something new, something beyond what we know or even think we know. He invited biologists, zoologists, ecologists, astronomers, chemists, physicists, geneticists, mathematicians, ethnologists, and neurobiologists, all of whom were asked to speak about what they didn’t know. Interestingly, he describes how inviting other scholars and teachers to speak of their ignorance in the field also meant that they had to give up the impulse to project slides on a screen, something students tend to refer to as “death by PowerPoint”. They had to ad lib, to speak creatively and deliberately without a script about what provoked and drove them in their field.

One of the key insights in Firestein’s claim about education is what he refers to as a “controlled neglect” (Firestein, 2012, p. 12). The reality is that students in our classrooms have available to them more information than at any time up to this point. Terabytes of information spill from Google webpages at the push of a button. Our students can pull us up

at any point in our conversations in our classrooms now with more information than we could ever possibly know. We are in the midst of the biggest techno-information revolution in history, making facts available to everybody who has access to a computer, creating arguably the greatest intellectually emancipating model ever known. However, since there is so much information out there, since there are so many websites, books, articles, research papers, and so on (including this thesis of course), students and scholars need to exercise a control mechanism for what it is they study and research. To achieve intellectual movement one needs to exercise a kind of cautious neglect for what is superfluous.^{xliv}

“Ignorance” is Firestein’s catchword for something of this sort. Working scientists, he claims, focus on what is not known rather than what is known. They do this in order to push science forward:

What can one do in the face of this kind of information growth? How can anyone hope to keep up? How come we have not ground to a halt in the deepening swamp of information? Would you be suspicious if I told you it was just a matter of perspective? Working scientists don’t get bogged down in the factual swamp because they don’t care all that much for facts. It’s not that they discount or ignore them, but rather that they don’t see them as an end in themselves. They don’t stop at the facts; they begin there, right beyond the facts, where the facts run out. Facts are selected, by a process that is a kind of controlled neglect, for the questions they create, for the ignorance they point to. What if we cultivated ignorance instead of fearing it, what if we controlled neglect instead of feeling guilty about it, what if we understood the power of not knowing in a world dominated by information?

(Firestein, 2012, p. 12)

Education, claims Firestein, often seems at odds with this kind of thinking, placing value instead on established teaching practices that can hamper or deny students’ rights to think and on assessment as little more than showing evidence of the accumulation of facts. The former is why Heidegger drops the notion of philosophy in order to pursue thinking in his later years (see Heidegger, 1968). Once thinking settles into a model for thinking, that’s when

thinking stops. If students are to be able to develop the critical consciousness that the likes of Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, and others espouse in their arguments then the temptation to adhere to current models of understanding and testing has to be resisted (see Darder et al., 2017). This end-goal oriented market economy is not best served by promoting doubt. Firestein's argument and approach point to value beyond knowledge, recognises that the promise of education resides beyond the system, beyond what we know or think we know. The educative dimension is often beyond fact, and beyond return, in Firestein's argument.

The mindset of education being beyond the realm of measurable return is arguably the biggest threat to a neoliberal regime, but at the same time arguing that good education lies beyond return is the weakest argument imaginable against economic pedagogical protocols. Administrations do not ordinarily condone teaching ignorance, nor are they likely to do so except in exceptional circumstances.

Ignorance: A Case History

The ur-story for this notion is Marlys Witte's battle with the University of Arizona throughout the 1990s in order to get funding for a course for undergraduate medical students entitled "Introduction to Medical and Other Ignorance", affectionately known by her students as "Ignorance 101". Witte's idea was to initiate students into medicine by explaining to them that rather than giving them "misinformation" about their subject she ought to say that despite the 10 pages in their textbooks on pancreatic cancer, it would be better to understand that "we just don't know very much about it" (Ridge, 1997). Such was the resistance to Witte's proposal to explore what is *not* known in medicine that a foundation director complained that he would rather resign than fund a course of this nature (Ridge, 1997). "Ignorance 101" ran and turned out to be a popular course (it's still running three decades later), but the fact remains that it's uncertainty that leaves it instinctively unjustifiable to administrators.^{xlv}

Witte, now Professor of Surgery and Director of Student Research at the University of Arizona, took her inspiration for designing a course on ignorance from her supervisor, Lewis Thomas at NYU. Lewis wrote:

The greatest single achievement of science in this most scientifically productive of centuries is the discovery that we are profoundly ignorant. We know very little about nature and we understand even less. I wish there were some formal courses in medical school on medical ignorance, textbooks as well, although they would have to be very heavy volumes.

(quoted in Witte et al., 2008, p. 251)

Given Thomas' idea for a course on medical ignorance, Witte's response was to set up what is now a curriculum on medical ignorance (CMI) and a summer school at the University of Arizona. The curriculum aims are to:

1. Gain a more comprehensive understanding of the shifting domains of ignorance, uncertainty, and the unknown.
2. Investigate the philosophical and psychological foundations of disparate approaches to learning.
3. Trace the development of ideas and methods in basic clinical medical science.
4. Develop a mastery by in-depth multi-dimensional explorations of selected and timely medical topics.

The course is designed, moreover, to reinforce positive attitudes and values surrounding curiosity, humility, ignorance, and skepticism. Students are asked to keep "ignorance logs", to continually ask questions about what they don't know – the unasked questions, the unanswerable questions, and the unquestioned answers.^{xlvi} Creativity and conversation are core elements of the course with the intention that students open up a continuous dialogue amongst themselves about the limits of knowledge and understanding. The belief is that, however counterintuitively, ignorance can give hope as well (see also Witte et al., 1991).

Witte's idea is to counter the assumption "held in Western thought that knowledge and ignorance are polar opposites" (Witte et al., 2008, p. 252). Enlightenment notions of knowledge as transparent, logical, and goal-oriented is, according to Witte's understanding, often counterproductive for creativity and experiment. Students in Arizona are led to believe that "knowing and not knowing are intertwined and symbiotic" (Witte et al., 2008, p. 252),

that knowledge, as Blaise Pascal observed, “is like a sphere, the greater its volume, the larger its contact with the unknown” (Witte et al., 2008, p. 253). Pascal’s paradox is that the more you know, the more you know you don’t know.^{xlvi}

With these ideas in mind, Witte and her colleagues developed an “ignorance map”, shaped like a question mark, which traces topographical shifts in ignorance and learning. According to this map, there are six shifts in the domains of ignorance:

1. All the things we know we don’t know (known unknowns).
2. Things we don’t know we don’t know (unknown unknowns).
3. Things we think we know but don’t (errors).
4. Things we don’t know we know (tacit knowns).
5. Taboos (forbidden knowledge).
6. Denials.

Each area of the chart referring to a type of ignorance represents its own challenge, and the research areas that have questions concerning the upper areas of the chart –the questions that have been questions for quite some time – are questions that need the most development.

The central question for Witte and her colleagues at CMI Arizona is how to teach ignorance, that is, how to get students to accept the failures associated with their non-knowledge, particularly in the area of medicine. “Small children are prolific questioners. As they progress in school, however, most get the message not to ask questions, and universities and medical colleges too often reinforce this” (Witte et al., 2008, p.259). In contrast, the task at CMI is to reinforce the demand for questions with the expectation that the question can be more important than the answer. The point, as Witte and her colleagues see it, is to have students readapt to a questioning process, a process that was natural to them as children but that has been forgotten due to rote and restrictive protocol. “To help students relearn it (the ‘uncorking’ of questions), we first solicit as many as possible from the student regarding a series of specific medical topics, for example, AIDS, breast cancer, gene therapy, obesity, organ transplants, stem cells, or artificial hearts. This releases inhibitions, leading to a barrage of questions” (Witte et al., 2008, p. 259). Steering away from a Socratic method of question and answer, “the CMI expects the *student* to ask the questions and to pursue them”

(original emphasis – Witte et al., 2008, p. 259).

Since the method of the CMI is questioning, the ethos behind the project is to develop in the student a conscious awareness of ignorance and the limits of knowledge. The hope is also that, as a practitioner in the field of medicine, the graduate will respectfully acknowledge their own ignorance and in the process understand that fear of non-knowledge, if it is unexpressed or hidden, can even be dangerous in the field.

A key insight for Witte and her colleagues is to disregard the university as a “knowledge factory” and replace that designation with an “ignorance commons” (Witte et al., 2008, p. 259). This seems more than a linguistic shift. It seems to suggest that other forms of learning exist that don’t specify goal-oriented agendas, that “shifting domains of ignorance” can possibly “improve skills such as questioning and collaborating to recognize and deal productively with ignorance”, so that “[p]ositive attitudes and the values of curiosity, scepticism, humility, optimism, and self-confidence [can be] reinforced” (Witte et al., 2008, p. 260).

Queer Failure

Since ignorance doesn’t sit well with Enlightenment notions of truth or reason, or neoliberal concepts of investment and return, we can’t be optimistic about its future as a pedagogical strategy. The current ignorance of ignorance, according to Henry Giroux, is often maintained by administrators instinctively reverting to a culture of unreflective models and protocols:

Today, in the age of standardized testing, thinking, and acting, reason and judgement have been thrown out the window just as teachers are increasingly being deskilled and forced to act as semi-robotic technicians good for little more than teaching for the test and serving as a reminder that we are arriving at a day when the school curriculum will be teacher-proof.

(Giroux, 2011, p. 126)

Judith Halberstam’s exciting work in *The Queer Art of Failure* represents a sustained attempt

to imagine alternatives to Giroux. Halberstam's goal is to envisage ways of knowing and being in the world that "stand outside conventional models of success" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2) by critiquing the kind of capitalist and heteronormative values that pitch reproductive maturity and wealth accumulation as the litmus test for successful living. In a later chapter we will see how Gert Biesta espouses a "grown-up-ness" (Biesta, 2017, p. 4) in education, a non-egocentric maturity that values its place in the world by becoming a subject among others. In her book on failure, however, Judith Halberstam envisages an alternative to entrenched ideas about education antithetically as a form of "childishness". "Under certain circumstances", Halberstam claims, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). In such contexts, distinctions and clear boundaries between maturity and immaturity, adult and child, normal and abnormal are constantly being challenged. Behavioural norms are disintegrated and the ability to be creative is heightened through what Halberstam calls the renewed "anarchy of childhood" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2).

Halberstam's point is to illustrate how contemporary Western society has promoted a narrow "success narrative" as the cornerstone for human happiness. "In my book", Halberstam argues, "this resistance [to "disciplinary forms of knowledge"] takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 12). Furthermore, Halberstam claims, "stupidity could refer not simply to a lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowing and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 12). Hence Halberstam's reflection on what she calls, after Stuart Hall, "low theory" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 15) and the quest for something different from the tried and true:

Any book that begins with a quote from *SpongeBob SquarePants* and is motored by wisdom gleaned from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Chicken Run*, and *Finding Nemo*, among other animated guides to life, runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Yet this is my goal. Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous,

promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as in other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. Training of any kind, in fact, is a way of refusing a kind of Benjaminian relation to knowing, a stroll down uncharted streets in the ‘wrong’ direction; it is precisely about staying in well-lit territories and about knowing exactly which way to go before you set out. Like many others before me, I propose that instead the goal is to lose one’s way.

(Halberstam, 2011, p. 6)

Apart from its evident provocation to think differently, Halberstam’s real insight is surely the call for a language and theory (“low theory”) capable of realising new peripatetic modes of thinking, a watchful waywardness that flies in the face of outcomes politics and comes up with alternative knowledges. This might be thought of as a form of unlearning, since it establishes wandering as its central tenet, and risk and failure as its stimulus. In order to see change, Halberstam is arguing, “we have to untrain ourselves so that we can read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 11).^{xlviii}

Low theory might be a way in to these questions, but what’s really interesting about it is that it might also, of course, be a failure. How spectacular a failure is the real issue. Halberstam gleans this understanding of low theory from Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci and its inspiration from Rancierian emancipatory tactics. Low theory refers to the idea that whenever there is something called high theory there is, by implication, also some form of low theory below it (Halberstam, 2011, p. 15). Low theory represents the abject other of theory; it “revels in detours, twists, and turns through knowledge and confusion... it seeks not to explain but to involve” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 15). To think of theory as a process of involvement rather than a practice of explication is exciting and provocative. Once one

begins to think of the performative side of theoretical practice then it is easy to equate it, as Halberstam does, with a powerful counterhegemonic desire for ideological critique and social change.

Part of this desire is undoubtedly a desire to push the boundaries of civil disobedience and rational commentary so far that random alternatives might come about and surprise us. By queering theory again and again, and seeing in it counterhegemonic, anti-capitalist, antiauthoritarian, and non-traditional proclivities for alternatives, Halberstam's arguments foster a real desire for change, goading readers into reflecting on what is given as normal, what we think is common sense, and why we want it. Valuing that which would be considered failure is a way of resisting that norm, a way of highlighting the inherent injustice of common sense power formations telling us how to live and think, and why.

Part of this provocation, for Halberstam, is the understanding that all types of theoretical formations, queer theory included, reify thought when they are looked up to as high theory. Theory works when it challenges thinking, when it involves, pricks, spurs, and stimulates. It only works, accordingly, when it has a purchase on our world, when it challenges us to see connections not often explicit elsewhere. This kind of reading speaks to teachers and students because it challenges them to read their world even more critically and asks them to find new vocabularies of resistance. "Queer studies", Halberstam claims, "offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems. What Gramsci terms 'common sense' depends heavily on the production of norms, and so the critique of dominant forms of common sense is also, in some sense, a critique of norms" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 89).

As to the question posed earlier, these alternatives are indeed desirable but are not justifiable. Halberstam's understanding of failure as an exciting alternative to entrenched narratives of success and progress proposes an alternative that stalls the system by refusing to acquiesce to its demands for conformity and trust. The form is both liberal and ironic, and as such eschews the language of justification. Not necessarily a bad thing, it simply refers us back again to the position of hope: "The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It loses, and in losing it imagines other goals

for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88).

The New Education

Up until now I have been focusing on failures in theory and practice, on what happens in the classroom and what progress can be made. But what about the failure of the institution itself? It would seem in these dark days of corporate reign that education as a public good has been almost obliterated by the systematic deployment of privatization and deregulation tactics by market-driven mentalities designed to sweep away any form of civic good in favour of private interest and greed. Though a number of critics have been acutely aware of and vocal about these trends for the past four decades, little has been done to ensure basic rights for teachers or university lecturers in their jobs. In fact, in the US alone, almost half of all courses currently being taught are being taught by adjunct, part-time faculty, most of whom are making in and around minimum wage for their efforts and will be unlikely to see tenure in their careers. Though even this is hard to track because universities interestingly aren't required to publicise information on their adjunct faculty (McKenna, 2015).^{xlix}

This decline in workers' rights has been evident since at least the 1980s in the US and Great Britain through extremist economic policies installed by the likes of Reagan and Thatcher. The shift from community awareness and civic responsibility to personal interest and competitive gain is most evident in Thatcher's almost unbelievable claim that people ought to look after their own interests and forget about the community altogether: “there is no such thing as society... There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no governments can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first” (Hurst, 2006, p. 26). Thatcher and Reagan's interests in free markets and an economic Darwinism, driven by the radically capitalistic economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, have eroded job security and widened the gap between the wealthy and the working poor (Harvey, 2005). The financial crash in 2008, brought about by these same policies, rather than causing the dismantling of these economic models has only bolstered and strengthened them, and the effects have been felt all across Europe and the US. Austerity plans in Ireland after the crash, for instance, saw the reduction of new second-level teachers' wages drop by 20% while the Haddington Road and Croke Park agreements simultaneously

increased working hours for teachers, lectures, police, nurses, and civil servants without compensation (Burns, 2017). Despite a token 1% pay raise in 2018 to address a two-tier pay scale now in operation in Irish schools, those wages have not been restored nor will they likely be restored any time soon.

In her recent book, *The New Education*, Cathy Davidson investigates the current failures in third-level institutions in the US and how this inevitably leads to a loss in direction, not only for the current generation of teachers but also, inevitably, for the next:

Traditional-age college students who were born after the age of the internet have spent their entire lives in an ecology of a disappearing disrupted, distributed, disturbed, and disturbing economy. They have watched entire industries and professions change, shrink or disappear: the music business, journalism, banking, law practice, entertainment, retail, college teaching. For the Uber generation, which has been called “Generation Flux”, the new normal is contingent, on-demand, part-time labor. Many students expect to have jobs with no benefits, no insurance, no assurances, to pay expenses out of pocket, to have no promise of advancement or futurity. They see this diminished form of work in the adjunct professors they encounter: students are guided through their college journey by professors who have no job security; likely, neither will the students when they graduate.

(Davidson, 2017, p. 12)

The situation does not bode well for a prosperous future. Beyond the economics of it all, Davidson’s understanding of a generation in flux is a generation of students and teachers whose goal as professionals and scholars is *adaptability*, the understanding of which comes via business models of impermanence and sudden changes in the market. Since the world is in a constant state of flux, the future for education is to produce students who are comfortable with changing ideas, careers, opinions, understandings, and specialisms. Students in universities and schools today ought to envisage a future of uncertainty and prepare to change careers multiple times throughout their working lives. This means universities and schools

would need to provide broader, interdisciplinary models of thought if they are to prepare their students for a world of pure uncertainty. But “the goal of higher education is greater than workforce readiness”, surmises Davidson, “It’s world readiness” (Davidson, 2017, p. 15).

Davidson’s model sees the university as a microcosm of the world at large, so much so that the function of the university ought to be outward looking. Universities, in this vision, provide a public good by helping students become malleable and adaptable to the broader world and to use what they gain from their education for their life enhancement. In this vision the “old education” of lectures and standardized testing in increasingly specialized fields needs to recalibrate to become reflective of reality.

For Davidson, the real education starts after the termination of the contract with the institution. This future-focused understanding of the benefits of a liberal education directs attention to what may or may not be gained from scholarship and learning. That the education one receives in college for specialised fields like journalism or technology or entertainment or retail or even education itself may change immediately after graduation is a real concern. The pace of radical change in society today is so hyper-dynamic that one can never say with absolute confidence that the training one receives from a three- or four-year course will be at all relevant afterwards. Hence the necessity to incorporate the question of uncertainty as a guardrail against obsolescence within the event of learning. A realistic view of the world is that we don’t know what will be happening when we graduate. We don’t know what skills we’ll need. But we need to prepare nonetheless, the best way we can. Perhaps a lot of anxiety would be dispelled, to recall Theodor Adorno, if we were all able to face up to these anxieties from the beginning. If students become aware of the importance of adaptability, then they might understand the reality. No one knows what form of adaptability is needed. That can be an enabling beginning.

A vision for a university like this seems like a benign endeavour but it ought to be aware of its own conception of success. Generation Flux is still a success model, albeit a much more preferable one to the one we have now, and so, according to Halberstam and others, adheres to a notion of competition, of winners and losers.

Davidson's vision of a university understanding the dynamic nature of scholarship is intriguing. It decentres the idea of niche specialisation in a world where specialisation needs a little more plasticity, as to echo Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of the modern world, uncertainty is pervasive and unrelenting (Bauman, 2000). My argument with Davidson is simply this: how easy to go from student *adaptability* to worker *disposability*? Who does this adaptability really serve? Is it going to serve students' existential awareness or neoliberal corporate assumptions concerning short-term human capital investment? It seems to me that Davidson is compelling but ultimately a failure on this crucial point.

Henry Giroux considers this kind of disposability in an entirely different light in his book *Dangerous Thinking in the Age of New Authoritarianism* (2015), where he claims that "disposability has become the new measure of neoliberal society in which the only value that matters is exchange value. Compassion, social responsibility, and justice are regulated to the dustbin of an older modernity that now is viewed either as quaint or a grim reminder of a socialist past" (Giroux, 2015, p. 163). Bauman prophesied this even earlier in *Liquid Modernity*: "'Flexibility' is the slogan of the day, and when applied to the labour market it augurs an end to the 'job as we know it', announcing instead the advent of work on short term contracts, rolling contracts or no contracts, positions with no in-built security but with the 'until further notice clause'. Working life is saturated with uncertainty" (Bauman, 2000, p. 147).

Reading Bill Readings

The classic text for thinking about the failure of institutions of education, as has been argued in the last chapter, is Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*. It is worth seeing again how Readings envisioned the failure in the university for present purposes.

Published posthumously in 1996, after the very young Readings lost his life in a plane crash in 1994, *The University in Ruins*' prophetic arguments are uncannily relevant to what is still happening in our institutions today – and not simply at third level. Readings' understanding of the institution, to my mind, still offers the most thorough and engaging conception of its function and possibility. In this section I will consider how the institutional and pedagogical failures discussed in the prior readings of Firestein, Halberstam, and Davidson can be

employed to see how failure, ignorance, abnormality and queerness can be powerful forms of resistance, helpful in reimagining our own teaching practices.

What is the value of education? This is Readings' driving question in *The University in Ruins*. To whom or to what is the teacher, the student, the institution accountable now? (Readings, 1996, p. 134). That the term *value* has an economic overtone in Readings' question is not fortuitous either, since he constantly toys with the idea throughout the book that *value* for different people means different things. So the value of education resides entirely with how you understand the semantic context of that word. What is valued in education is a question that ought to remain open.

The university, claims Readings, is in ruins because its principle agenda is no longer the inculcation of culture but excellence, an empty self-perpetuating signifier designed to justify the necessity for bureaucratic administration (Readings, 1996, p. 21-43). Excellence is meaningless but measurable, tied to a language of success and failure it allows for administrative policing in a post-historical, post-ideological institution (Readings, 1996, p. 152). Value in such scenarios becomes bracketed and evaluation provides definite answers that perpetuate the system's goal to become more excellent by degrees (Readings, 1996, p. 32-33). Administrative function then becomes central because the idea of excellence is substantiated by a bureaucratic logic of accounting and accountability (Readings, 1996, p. 32). The university, claims Readings, is not going to discover a truth that will save the world, nor is the world going to save the university (Readings, 1996, p. 47-48). The point is that the university is an institution like any other that is never going to blend seamlessly with the world outside of its walls. Its justification as an institution of value depends on the investments scholars and students make to what Readings calls "Thought" with a capital "T" (Readings, 1996, p. 159).

Thought is a word chosen to undermine a quasi-transcendental impulse to make it intelligible and quantifiable like the word *excellence*. Unlike excellence Thought resonates with a desire to think about what's happening without the attending need to justify it with a success or failure model. Thought is an "empty transcendence" because it pushes pedagogy to think about its relationality and obligation to investigation and discovery without goal, agenda, or

victory. The value Readings ascribes to the university and to education as a whole is one that does not prioritise success and failure models, rather an obligation to Thought, and an assertion that any deliberate claim to understanding what happens in the scene of pedagogy is going to have an ethical or rhetorical weight (Readings, 1996, p. 159). In other words, saying what Thought is unduly narrows down its possibilities. Perhaps most interesting in this question of Thought is how it can come about in the actual scene of teaching. Readings' suggests "decentering teaching", because, "it begins with an attention to the *pragmatic scene of teaching* [sic]. This is to refuse the possibility of any privileged point of view so as to make teaching something other than the self-reproduction of an autonomous subject" (Readings, 1996, p. 153). If the goal of education is to produce autonomous subjects capable of independent judgement and self-informed decision-making, then its obligation to Thought has abruptly ended. Readings' point is to understand that education is an obligation not an attainable goal (Readings, 1996, p. 154). If it becomes a goal then it has abdicated this obligation and no longer thinks. To say then that one *is* educated or one *is* a teacher is at odds with this picture.

Readings, at one point in his argument, shares "that these reflections are written from the point of view of someone who is, professionally, a teacher, though he does not know in any absolute sense what is the signification of the name teacher" (Readings, 1996, p. 160). This is essential for coming to terms with what Readings is trying to say. He is trying to understand an obligation that remains to Thought, which he imagines, in his wonderful phrase, as "an accountability without accounting" (Readings, 1996, p. 154). Being a teacher is not fully recognisable as a singular vision because it is caught up in a dynamic relational model where subjectivities are never stable or fully realisable (Readings, 1996, p. 154). Readings in moments like these is ushering a weak pedagogical model into his argument via the understanding that pedagogy is more appropriately thought of as an interruptive process of unbecoming, unknowing, and unlearning (see also Biesta, 2013, p. 15-19). This is apparent in how he views communication in the classroom.

"All consciousness", says Readings echoing Wittgenstein, Derrida, and others, "is consciousness of language in its heterogeneous multiplicity" (Readings, 1996, p. 156). Communication is never a straightforward process; what we say gets channelled through our

own and the other's understanding of the world. Every teacher will tell you that they have felt at times frustrated by their inability to confer their ideas, that they have tried and failed to be clear. Communication in such instances fails, or, in Austinian terms, "misfires" (see Miller, 2001).

Readings' solution to this scene is to approach communication through a Bakhtinian dialogism, where dialogue functions to underscore the difficulties with knowing how what we say is interpreted contextually or experientially by the other (Readings, 1996, p. 155-156). Bakhtinian dialogism keeps in mind that communication is *interdiscursive* rather than *intersubjective*, that the words and meanings don't remain the same for the addresser or the addressee and that inner words compete with one another: "Thus, to recognise the addressee is to inscribe within discourse a radical aporia. It is to speak in a way that respects what might be called the abyssal space of reading by the other: the fact that we never know to whom our words may speak. Teaching, then, is not primarily a matter of communication between autonomous subjects functioning alternately as senders and receivers" (Readings, 1996, p. 156). Understanding this does not mean thinking of teaching as a complete failure to put your point across, it merely means that when we speak or read or communicate in any way in our classes we can't be sure how we are interpreted. Furthermore, this means that what we do has an ethical charge to it. It means we must take responsibility for what we do and say even though we don't know what we say and do in our speaking at the base level of hermeneutic understanding. We may think we are teaching; we may think we are teachers, but we can never know for sure what is happening *in* what is happening. That is the event and the failure at the heart of our understanding:

There is some other in the classroom, and it has many names: culture thought, desire, energy, tradition, the event, the immemorial, the sublime. The educational institution seeks to process it, to dampen the shock it gives the system. *Qua* institution, education seeks to channel and circulate this otherness so that some form of profit can be made from it. Yet shock arises, since it is the minimal condition of pedagogy, and it opens a series of incalculable differences, the exploration of which is the business of pedagogy. Education, as *e-ducere*, a drawing out, is not a maieutic

revelation of the student to him- or herself, a process of clearly remembering what the student in fact already knew. Rather, education is this drawing out of the otherness of thought that undoes the pretension to self-presence that always demands further study. And it works over both the students and the teachers, although in a dissymmetrical manner.

(Readings, 1996, p. 162)

Readings' understanding of education as event is compelling and interesting because it sees teaching as an obligation without finality – an accountability without accounting. This is both extra-institutional and intra-institutional because it works to teach us time and again that something can and does happen in our classrooms. To say that shock is the “minimal condition of pedagogy” envisages, yet again, a form of interruption. I would call this form another failure, a necessary one, because it is our failure to see it coming that makes all the difference.

The Prodigy (example)

In each of the examples I have given above there is a type of failure: for Firestein and Witte the failure to understand provokes the ignorance that explores; for Halberstam the failure to conform opens the way to alternative knowledge; for Davidson the failure of the system induces adaptability; and for Readings the failure to quantify and qualify education welcomes the other into our classrooms. We can better understand pedagogical practice, ethical relations, and thinking through actual narrative examples (see Dunne, 2013).¹

The final narrative example here is from Hermann Hesse – one of our best authorities on the subject of failure. The vast majority of Hesse's work has failure as its overriding thematic compulsion. For example Harry Haller in *Steppenwolf* – the sixties counterculture's sacred text – whose midlife crisis is a form of life-failing, the eponymous Peter Camenzind (failed lover and poetic nomad); the gullible Emil Sinclair in *Demian*; Joseph Knecht, the Magister Ludi in *The Glass Bead Game*; and, of course, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, both mere fragments of one another. Each of these texts combines an adolescent zeal for knowledge and discovery with elements of romantic mysticism, dreamy wistfulness, and ultimately

confessional failure. In each spiritual awakening there's the precursor moment of spectacular failure leading to a radical realisation about existence and the far-reaching possibility of transcendence. Hesse's contempt for the mindlessness of bourgeois life again and again conflates the bildungsroman with the picaresque and leaves the reader weighing the worth of the struggle.

In this case I will look at Hesse's novel *Beneath the Wheel* [*Unterm Rad*] (1906), republished and bizarrely retitled *The Prodigy* in the 1957 translation.

The Prodigy is a kind of anti-bildungsroman in that it's really a story about an imposed accelerated maturity and its dire consequences. Hans Giebenrath is a sensitive, gifted child from a small Swabian town with few distinguishable qualities. His father, Joseph, is a small local businessman with an eye on his son's future as a seminary scholar and future priest or lecturer. The boy's intelligence and academic acumen are quickly realised in his school and he's picked up by several local teachers and vicars. Each of his mentors takes care to instil in the boy the rudiments of careful and deliberate scholarship, Greek and Latin grammar, mathematics, and sober reasoning skills. Beyond school, the boy's education is picked up by various ancillary tutors in his core subjects as he's prepared to take the *Landexamen* entrance exam for a prestigious theological college in Stuttgart.

Hesse's flair in this novel is to understate the significance of the father in the instruction and control of the child. Instead, what the reader understands in the opening section of the novel is that the child's immersion into academics is a group enterprise, with ostensibly well-meaning individuals from all over town offering instruction and support. Underlying all of this forms a layer of subtle social criticism that only really makes itself clear at the end of the book.

The boy's childhood activities are gradually whittled away as he sinks deeper and deeper into his lexicons, grammars, and mathematical textbooks. He is told that he will have to give up fishing (the central boyhood activity and means of escape in his life) until he has finished his exams. This is all subtly pitched against the boy's broad Wordsworthian recollections of joyous hours by the river. So as his studies increase, his childhood retreats. The gradual depletion of his ability to enjoy the activities that make a childhood fruitful are deftly woven

throughout the novel. The reader's awareness of the boy's descent into an unacknowledged despair is so intricately crafted, that by the time Hans reaches his elite academic seminary we gather that his alienation is already really complete. The subtlety of all of this is that the loss is unacknowledged because the boy is unreflective on the existential worth of his studies. He follows his father, teachers, and priests without question. The narrator insinuates delicately and obliquely that the reasons for their pride in the boy's success is entirely selfish, if also unacknowledged. There are moments when these hints become more pronounced, such as when Hans is left off at the Cistercian monastery of Maulbronn – his new boarding school – and we have the detached narrative voice insightfully comment on the parents' parting smiles: "Proud and praiseworthy feelings and high hopes filled their breasts, and it did not occur to any one of them that he was exchanging his child for financial advantage" (Hesse, 1961, p. 56).

Hans settles into Maulbronn life as a gifted academic among equally gifted academics until he meets Hermann Heilner, a rebellious and precocious child given to breaking all the rules of the college. Hans quickly becomes guilty by association and watches his teachers' regard for him dwindle. The friendship Hans strikes up here is the only real friendship he will experience in his life. That friendship will end as soon as Heilner is expelled from the college. Hans will subsequently experience failure in love and in school as his complete nervous breakdown ensues.

The Prodigy then is an excellent example of the loss of childhood through academic imprisonment. It's ultimately a novel about the repercussions of a society's unreflective commitment to push children through fruitless competitive examinations and the inevitable despair that coincides with the belief in advancement at all costs. Hans is ultimately crushed by the people around him. As sensitive as he is in the novel, he realises that failure is met with disdain and shunning. The very people who offer help and companionship when he succeeds abruptly take it away when he fails. The climate of the novel is delicately insightful about the overriding consequences of a life spent trying to be the best student you can be. It is a searing critique of the values of the institution over the values that make us human – hence the original title: *Beneath the Wheel*. Hans is doomed from the beginning and it is only in the last lines of the novel, as the boy is buried, that one of his early mentors tells his father

how they have effectively driven him to suicide. Looking at the teachers and priests by Hans' graveside, Flaig, the local shoemaker, has a sudden realisation:

'There's a few of the gentlemen,' he said in a quiet voice, 'who have helped to drive him to this.'

'What?' said Giebenrath and stared frightened and incredulous. 'In the name of heaven, how?'

'Don't worry neighbour. I merely meant the schoolmasters.'

'How do you mean exactly?'

'Oh, nothing. Just that. And you and I as well – don't you think that perhaps we failed that boy in many ways?'

(Hesse, 1961, p. 157)

One of the mantras of teachers in the modern classroom is that we ought to do everything to "help the students do well in their exams". Teachers invariably think when they say things like this that they are doing the right thing. Hesse's novel is a powerful critique of the blindness and systematic injustice institutionalisation is wreaking on our youth and the sheer unreflective principles it instils in both teachers and students. It suggests that teachers and parents alike are driven by desires that don't fully represent their conscious selves, so that in their best efforts to help they inadvertently destroy. In a system that takes pride in success over failure, where neologisms like "tiger mum" and "helicopter parent" are taking on a savage gravitas all of their own, it seems that we are even less aware of the promises of education than we've ever been. Readers often look at Hesse as romantic and idealistic, but the social critique is scathing and also very contemporary. His critical understanding is as pertinent today as it was at the turn of the last century.

Here he is meditating extensively on teacher-student relationships:

There is in fact nothing that horrifies the schoolmaster so much as those strange creatures, precocious boys in the already dangerous period of

adolescence. Further, a certain element of genius had already seemed unwholesome to them in Heilner, for there exists a traditional hiatus between genius and the teaching profession and any hint of that element in schoolboys is regarded by them with horror from the very first. As far as they are concerned geniuses are those misguided pupils who never show them any proper respect, begin to smoke at the age of fourteen, fall in love at fifteen, go to pubs at sixteen, read forbidden books, write scandalous essays, stare at their teacher with withering scorn and are noted down in the school day-book as trouble-makers and candidates for detention. A schoolmaster would rather have a whole class of duffers than one genius, and strictly speaking he is right, for his task is not to educate unusual boys but to produce good Latinists, mathematicians, and good honest fools. Which of the two suffers most, the master at the hands of the boy or conversely, which is the greater tyrant or tormentor and which of the two it is who destroys and profanes, partially at any rate, the life and spirit of the other, it is impossible to judge without thinking back to one's own youth with anger and shame. But that is not our present concern, and we have the comfort of knowing that in true geniuses the wounds almost always heal, and they become people who create their masterpieces in spite of school and who later, when they are dead and the pleasant aura of remoteness hangs over them, are held up by schoolmasters to succeeding generations as exemplary and noble beings. And so the spectacle of the perpetual battle between regulation and spirit is repeated in each school in turn, and we continue to watch the State and school eagerly occupied in nipping in the bud the handful of profounder and nobler spirits who grow up year by year.

(Hesse, 1961, p. 85)

This is all very reminiscent of Mark Twain's famous pronouncement that he never let his education get in the way of his thinking, but there is a still darker side to these encounters as Hesse imagines it. Failure, for Hesse, is understood as a reciprocal process where the master

fails the student and the student the master; just as the educational institution itself fails everyone in turn. So by the end of the affair everyone is distraught. The power dynamic that keeps the student and teacher in their respective positions is unshakable in the last, since the students need to be the students and the teachers the teachers.

Where Hesse's understanding of this relationship is perhaps most fascinating is its contemporary pertinence. These issues are still the burning issues of today, perhaps even more so since the turn to micro-managerial protocols in contemporary schooling. The move to standardized educational discourse with more protocols, outcomes, and guarantees of trajectory and success increasingly alienates students whose understanding and questioning, agency and singularity, will not conform to or confirm the system's validity. And it is an airy validity based on corporate models of success and failure. Where is the spirit of education, Hesse is asking, if not in the student?

The system, it would seem, has a built-in claim on the trajectory of thought, even when that thought is most radical and nonconformist. "Radicalism sells well in the University marketplace", says Bill Readings: "Hence the futility of the radicalism that calls for a University that will produce more radical kinds of knowledge, more radical students, more of anything. Such appeals, because they do not take into account the institutional status of the University as a capitalist bureaucracy, are doomed to confirm the very system they oppose" (Readings, 1991, p. 163). The real failure is that the teachers, students, and administration don't understand their own positions in the journey. Teachers fail their students because they don't reflect on what the system is doing to them or their students. Administrators fail their students by failing to understand that the outcome is crippling and leaves no room for the event or for ignorance or failure itself. Students fail most when they succeed in this model. The only winners are the losers, it seems, those who fail honestly, deliberately, sensitively, with a view to making things better.

Event

“I don’t know,” *je ne sais pas*, signals a situation. In what I have elsewhere called its *restance*, remanence, the poem always speaks beyond knowledge, *au-delà du savoir*. It writes, and what it writes is, first of all, this very fact, that it is addressed and destined beyond knowledge.”

(Jacques Derrida)

Introduction

Before entering into a discussion of what this thesis understands in terms of the “event”, it is important to make a comment on the style of what follows, since the style here will at times seem somewhat unconventional. To speak about the event and literature through the philosophies of both Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, is to enter into a dialogue with two styles that can seem at times hyperbolic, obscure, repetitive, mystifying, or otherwise excessive. In other words, how these philosophers comment on the concept of the event is also an important aspect of what they are saying. To understand this, it is claimed here, is to understand that *how* something is said has a performative force and can radically effect the meaning of what *is* being said.

To speak in terms of literature specifically, this thesis has been arguing that thinking about literature through the concepts of unlearning, ignorance, and non-knowledge can be productive for thinking about why literature matters and how we can justify teaching it. It has also been claimed that thinking this way does not imply a nostalgia for some historical moment when literature was the pinnacle of thinking in the university (see “literature” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis). The claim here, on the contrary, and throughout this thesis, is that by introducing a new language into the philosophy of education (event, ignorance,

foolosophy, learnercentrism, etc.) we can perhaps come closer to an understanding about why it matters, what it can do, and how we can teach it.

This dialogue with literature and education can start by reflecting on what can and cannot be said about literary study, or philosophy, or the event, or acts of reading in academic spaces. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015) Rita Felski's makes the following remarks concerning the current understanding of academic discourse and literature:

That the shake-up of the canon in recent decades and the influx of new voices and visions has altered our perceptions of what literature is and does is indisputable. Yet it hardly follows that such changes are best captured in the idiom of critique—rather than inspiration, invention, solace, recognition, reparation, or passion. Such an idiom narrows and constrains our view of what literature is and does; it highlights the sphere of agon (conflict and domination) at the expense of eros (love and connection), assuming—with little justification—that the former is more fundamental than the latter. Anyone who attends academic talks has learned to expect the inevitable question: “But what about power?” Perhaps it is time to start asking different questions: “But what about love?”

(Felski, 2015, p. 17)

To speak about love is to speak against the chorus of academic discourse, according to Felski; to be affected by something, she is arguing, is common, but to speak about being affected can leave one vulnerable to attack and to a series of preconscious or prescribed responses. Intimacy in literature classes and seminars has also been a subject of some controversy, as it is claimed that modernist literature is often put on a pedestal and raised to the status of “the only revelatory event” that poststructuralist theorists know about (Bowman, 2016, p. 142). Perhaps, the argument goes, this is a fantasy or a fetish we should unlearn?

However, there is another argument for looking at philosophy and literature in terms of love. The *Oxford English Dictionary* understands the etymology of the word “philosophy”, for instance, as “love” of wisdom. Literature also, of course, takes love as a central theme, so

why, the resistance? Both Derrida and Caputo, whose works follow in this chapter, also write a great deal about love (Dunne, 2017; Kamuf, 2000; Kofman et al., 2005; Othuis, 2003). The literary example provided at the end of this chapter to describe the themes of love and event in education is also variously described by critics as a book about love (McGahern, 2002; Woolley, 1986).

Event

Penguin Books have in recent years been releasing a series of pocket books designed to get readers thinking as they make their commute to and from work. These portable volumes appear in an elegant series called *Philosophy in Transit*. These are bitesize, commuter-friendly books written in an accessible and easy style by top contemporary philosophers. Slavoj Žižek's contribution is entitled *Event* and meanders through that theme in a series of six short chapters referred to as "stops". As expected, Žižek is witty and surprising along the way, combining incisive political critique with sparkling philosophical aphorisms, reference to pop cultural icons, sporting heroes, and a thrilling smatter of lurid quips and quirky anecdotes. Effectively, *Event* is an introduction to what Žižek calls the "conundrum of definition" and the "illimitable risk" of event by way of Buddha, Hegel, film noir, Kierkegaard, Freud, Britney Spears, and of course the compulsory Lacanian forays into the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.

The blurb on the back is of particular interest here and will open up a conversation about event in philosophy (by way of Jack Caputo) and literature (by way of John Williams' stunning novel *Stoner*). I am calling this a "quasi-concept" in order to immediately draw attention, not only to the difficulty of its definition, which is unquestionably mired in mist and fog, but also to the possibility that we might actually be wrong about it from the very beginning; and that might be really, honestly, all we can say about it. Whatever it is we may think we know about this topic becomes questionable from the moment we investigate it. If there is one thing the philosophers have taught us about this topic it is that with this we are all borne back ceaselessly into a past that offers us little respite, little sanctuary, and little

real understanding. The blurb on *Event* reads as follows:

What is really happening when something happens?

In the second in a new series of accessible, commute-length books of original thought, Slavoj Žižek, one of the world's greatest living philosophers, *examines the new and highly contested concept of event.*

This statement is somewhat problematic, since the concept of event is not new. In recent philosophy alone it is a major theme in Alain Badiou (2005), Maurice Blanchot (2015), Michel Foucault (1972), Giles Deleuze (1990), Emmanuel Lévinas (1998), Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), Henri Maldiney (2007), Claude Romano (2009, 2013, 2015), and Jacques Derrida (2001), to speak only of a few key figures.^{li} Before those, one would have to include Nietzsche (especially his *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra*), Heidegger (on *Ereignis* for instance), Kierkegaard (on irony), Augustine, Aristotle, Plato, Heraclitus, and so on.

Given the entire history of thinking in this area I can limit myself here to only what John D. Caputo (via Derrida) has been saying about the event and argue why I think this is quintessential for a productive rethinking of present circumstances in pedagogical theory and practice, especially, as has been argued, in light of current neoliberal agendas within schools and universities. What is of concern here is how Caputo has been speaking of the event as a peculiar pedagogical predicament. So the leading question is: Why is the event consistently a pedagogical dilemma? Why does Caputo keep coming back to teaching? God teaching St. Paul (by pushing him off his horse), Jesus teaching his disciples, Derrida teaching Caputo, Caputo teaching his own classes. Why does Caputo infer that the question of the event, precisely *what happens*, and we remember Derrida says “Deconstruction is what happens” (*C'est qui arrive*) – which is the event: deconstruction is an event, a gesture towards the impossible – why always does it come back, detour after detour, counterpath after counterpath, to the question of what happens when we teach or think about teaching? (Derrida, 2001, p. 82).

As a literature teacher thinking through literature, through stories, poems, and plays, the

hypothesis here is that perhaps the best way to see how events take place (replace or displace) in teaching and reading is through narrative examples (Goodson, 2010). Thinking through learning outcomes, trajectories, subject planning, goals, or objectives or even understanding or knowledge does not preclude the event; however, to say that events happen all the time is equally erroneous, if this is taken from a Derridean perspective (see “event” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis). To presume to know what your students are getting out of the promissory note of education can be murderous, as Avital Ronell avers (Ronell, 2004, p. 63).^{lii}

What often becomes important in literature classes, this chapter claims, is *not* knowing the learning outcome, *not* knowing where you’re headed, *not* knowing why or how what you’re reading or teaching is important. Not knowing the importance, in point of fact, is what is important – the inutility of the act of reading, what Derrida would refer to as *destinerrance* (Miller, 2009, p. 28).^{liii}

As my example of why this is always the case, I take John Williams’ novel *Stoner*, which *The Sunday Times* describes as “The greatest novel you’ve never read” (Williams, 2012). I argue that *Stoner* is an exemplification of how teaching as event might be imagined in fictional discourse and that that novel is a literary dramatisation of the arguments Caputo’s philosophy on the event has envisioned.

Here is Caputo’s understanding of the event – in five points:

1. “An event is not precisely what happens, which is what the word suggests in English, but something going on in what happens... it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present”.
2. “Accordingly, I would distinguish between a *name* and the event that is astir or that transpires in a name. The name is a kind of provisional formulation of an event, a relatively stable if evolving structure, while the event is ever restless”.
3. “An event is not a thing but something astir in a thing”.
4. “Words and things are deconstructible, but events, if there are any such things, are

not deconstructible”.

5. “In terms of temporality, events, never being present, solicit us from afar, draw us on, draw us out into the future, calling us hither. Events are provocations and promises, and they have the structure of what Derrida calls the unforeseeable ‘to come (*à venir*)’” (Caputo, 2007, p. 47-48).

In more recent books like *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, *The Weakness of God*, and *The Insistence of God*, Caputo continually refines his position on the event. But more often than not what gives itself over in his repetitions is a resonance of the miracle of iterability – the other in (insisting in) the repetition of the same.

“Education”, says Caputo, “is an event”. If you are to take him at his word then this name harbours something within it, a desire for some other, for something otherwise than being and beyond essence. Education, like love, the gift, justice, responsibility, is a quasi-transcendental in the Caputo universe, a provocation to thinking, even an incitement to riot.^{liv} What often gets lost in this word, as what often gets lost in the God of onto-theology, is Augustine’s question: “*Quid ergo amo, cum deum meum amo*”? [What do I love when I love my God?]. How easy to transfer this over to the most pertinent question for us today? “What do I love when I love education”?

For Caputo, the answer to that question is that we are in love with the weak force of a promise. The promise “to come”, that something might come, something that we can’t foresee. It is what is *going on in* the classroom, not what we think *ought* to be happening or even what we think *is* happening that’s important. Education is therefore like “a desire beyond desire”, a desire that we don’t fully understand, nor should we even. Education is haunted by the promise not of the “future-present” but of an “absolute future”, the future that we cannot plan (Caputo, 2012, p. 23-34):

But, the truth is that we serve the event, are in bonds to the event, and we are not a “master,” just as we are not a “doctor” of the event but a patient. But confessing such non-agency, receptivity and non-knowing is not a recommended course at a job interview or a conference presentation and it

is not a path to tenure. At such times we are expected to be upright bodies not beings of flesh. The best advice I can give you on this point is this. For a long time, at least, this confession may be permitted only as an aside (an apostrophe) when for a moment, an *Augenblick*, in the midst of a lecture or a dialogue one notes, by the way, just in passing, as if this were not a serious point, almost as if we were joking (the comic as the incognito of the religious), that none of us know who we are. Then we get back to “business”.

(Caputo, 2016, p. 15)

Caputo’s claim is not that educators ought to acknowledge the limitations of what they can and cannot do, but that they actually need to become aware that what they do is unthinkable, even impossible, as Freud suggested before him (Britzman, 2010). Perhaps, and it is always a question of perhaps for Caputo – his pun is *peut-être* against *l’être* (“being” against “may-being”) – there can be a new metapedagogy of failure and non-knowing to springboard effective, alternative, radically underexplored kinds of learning.

If the teacher is not a master then what is she? To summarize a little then, Caputo’s argument is that good teachers are conjurers, magicians, people with the uncanny ability to let thinking happen, to let events take place (see “event” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis). They are people who welcome the event by saying come, *veni foras*, or *oui oui*. “To learn”, says Caputo, “is to unlearn what we think we know and expose ourselves to the unknowable. Teaching and learning alike are a matter of allowing ourselves to be spooked” (Caputo, 2012, p. 34).

The art of good teaching is not about becoming a master but, much more radically, about unbecoming one, unbecoming one-self, becoming ignorant, unlearning. You have to give yourself over to the possibility, as impossible as it may sound, to being spooked into an educational experience, to being haunted by the ghost of a chance of getting it right, to seeing it right even, perhaps especially, if that seeing it right means getting it wrong. We educators must learn to say “stay, speak, I charge thee” to the spirit of education, the spirit that comes

unannounced and seeks an impossible hospitality.

Stoner's Love

I'll return to questions of unlearning and weakness in due course, but I turn first to a single moment in John Williams' 1965 novel *Stoner* under the auspices of this leading idea. The novel is experiencing something of a rebirth at the moment and has very recently found a considerable readership, becoming a bestseller across Europe 50 years after its initial publication.

First published in England in 1972, the novel quickly went out of print after a poor run; and this despite C. P. Snow's glowing review and repeated refrain in *The Financial Times*, "Why isn't this novel a classic?" The novel was simply forgotten for several decades. It wasn't until 2003 that it reappeared as a Vintage Classic in England with a fine introduction by John McGahern and became a *New York Review of Books* Classic in 2006.^{lv}

The novel begins with the wonderfully pointed and concise rendition of a life lived in an academic world that really neither cared for nor wanted the eponymous William Stoner. In just over one paragraph on the opening page the entire story is really summed up:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of eighteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. The manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: "Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues."

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual

question.

(Williams, 2012, p. 3)

In superb limpid prose Williams chronicles the life of William Stoner from his humble beginnings on a farmland in remote Missouri, through his undergraduate, graduate, and teaching career, through an unhappy marriage, his failure as a father, a brief love affair, and finally a muted death.

Later, when Stoner first arrives at the university, he begins a course of study in the School of Agriculture but must also take a survey course in English literature. Difficulties immediately arise for the young student as he finds this course remarkably different from his other studies. He describes these as disturbing and disquieting in an inexpressible way. There follows one of two astonishing moments in the novel where the subjects of teaching and learning are handled with remarkable sensitivity and depth.

Here's what we know of Stoner's touching moment: Stoner sits and listens to his professor as he recites Shakespeare's sonnet 73: "That time of year thou mayest in me behold" and is awestruck. He listens and watches his professor read it from his textbook. Then his teacher drops the book and recites from memory:

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long

The professor directs a question directly at Stoner: "What does this sonnet mean?" Stoner draws a blank. "Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; Do you hear him?" Unable to speak, Stoner mutters: "It means". He then repeats this: "It means".

The moment is simultaneously traumatic and surprising.

Stoner's response is obviously a failure. But it seems like the most honest failure. His failure, ignorance, and the traumatic moment of his unknowing, of his forgetting, conclude in an awareness that he cannot even express to himself or to us. It is that moment that is most life-changing for Stoner and, by extension, the close reader of this novel.

Aberrancy

If, as McGahern argued, this novel is a novel about love, then it is a novel about the love of unlearning, of touching a void or vacuum where meaning is hollowed out and where the yearning for meaning meets the love of learning, where an-other kind of learning is espoused, the kind of learning that encounters in the alterity of meaning the announcement of an-other learning, a learning without learning, a prosthesis of knowing.

In reading literature up to this point Stoner has been struck by the absolute inutility of it all: "He read and reread his literature assignments so frequently that his work in other courses began to suffer; and still the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did" (Williams, 2012, p. 9). Behind "their flat, dry meaning", Stoner hopes to find a "clue" to allow him to unravel the mystery of meaning, to unlock the hermeneutic ideal, the one Truth. He longs for the moment of epiphany when he can find the use for what he is doing, when he can effectively look behind the words and discover some transcendental signified, some ur-referent about which his learning is directed. Stoner's belief is that this can in some way be taught. That he is missing, in his lectures, up to this point an instruction. He is searching for a reassurance that there is some underlying rationale to be found beneath the veil.

It's an effect of language, says Foucault, echoing Nietzsche, that it gives rise to a dual suspicion. On the one hand we are suspicious that there is an underlying truth behind appearances, that we merely lack the interpretive apparatus to see it. "Language doesn't say exactly what it says [*le langage ne dit pas exactement ce qu'il dit*], so we are often wary that we are missing some underlying sense". This is not a new insight, the Greeks referred to this dyad as *allegoria* and *hyponoia*. The title of Paul de Man's great work on close reading, for

example, *Allegories of Reading*, is an extended meditation on this point and what he calls language's "aberrancy". On the other hand, there is the effect of language that overflows itself; the contention that language is more than simply verbal expression and that it hyperbolically exists in non-linguistic forms: "it might be that nature, the sea, rustling trees, animals, faces, masks, crossed swords all speak" (Foucault, 1989, p. 59).

Indeed, but why should we stop there? The list of course is interminable, for the question of reading, like language, cannot be closed off all that simply. Interpreting two magpies as good luck may be a superstition that is easily identifiable as such, but acknowledging that we are inevitably prey to imposing on the faces of those we meet in public the private narratives of our own suspicions is more difficult to inculcate. Or, for present purposes, that it is impossible for us not to read into the descriptions of Williams' characters (despite the "Plain Style") their unrepresented, unrepresentable, deeper psychological sentiments, intuitions, and motivations. Seeing this, as we may occasionally do, enables a reading that is more attuned to the dangers implied by Foucault's speculation than mere acceptance. That is, it's all too easy to accept the difference and forget about it, but it is a central question that *Stoner* throws into the light of day, both stylistically and thematically.

Such is the case with Stoner's splendid misreading of Edith, whose initial personal disclosure (her "plea for help") of her stilted formal education, unloving parents, and sterile adolescence, strangely pre-empts his love for her. Novels often represent scenes of falling in love hyperbolically. It is a trait readers can become used to, but one that keeps readers alive, delighted, and enthralled nonetheless. Though to read Lawrence's extensive sentimentalizing is to be aware of its mawkishness, readers can still be drawn in by what F. R. Leavis was wont to call its "vitality".

It is the power of love to bring us deeper into the richness of a narrative, even if that richness is poorly constructed or overwritten. In the case of *Stoner*, however, that moment is bizarrely rendered, almost reversed, to the point that the reader is left wondering how and why that love has come about at all. Edith's personal disclosure is mechanical and functional. We are told that Stoner's awkward attempts to engage her in phatic conversation have failed and that

he is getting up to leave, whereupon Edith delivers the story of her life in sentences that run on interminably “without inflection”. Stoner’s recollection is that during the hour and a half they spend together that December night Edith tells him more about herself than she ever will again. “And when it was over, he felt that they were strangers in a way that he had not thought they would be, and he knew that he was in love” (Williams, 2012, p. 53). It is precisely because Stoner does not understand that he falls in love with Edith. This is a salutary moment for teachers who view love as their calling, for Stoner’s love is not returned. Though they marry, his misreading of Edith’s plea is wildly mistaken. Ironically, he falls in love with a stranger who will remain a stranger. The hospitality he shows to his beloved in falling in love transforms him into a host for a parasite. He falls into the unknown and is captured by it, enraptured and ensnared. In a way his blindness, his failure to understand that not understanding is not always a benign occurrence, unlike his failure to understand literature (which becomes his *love* for literature), results in his catastrophic marriage.

Weak Teaching

What do we learn about teaching from reading *Stoner*? Williams spoke about the novel as an exercise in trying to come to terms with teaching, of figuring out how to do it effectively (Woolley, 1986, p. 11). In the novel’s purview, teaching is a queer thing, in the sense that it has to do with something beyond knowing what one is doing. There is a sense of the job of teaching, which is the sense Stoner has, of the “tradition”, but there is also the love of the thing: “It all grows out of the love of the thing. The lack of love defines a bad teacher” (Woolley, 1986, p. 14).

Saying that effective teaching is love is a little like Caputo’s little apostrophe: you don’t say that in a job interview. You should just get down to “business”. You should know the program, the task at hand, the learning outcomes, the key objectives. And yet, as Nancy puts it in an eloquent discourse on the subject, “Philosophy never arrives at this thinking – that “thinking is love”, even though it is inscribed at the head of its program, or as the general epigraph to all its treatises” (Nancy, 1991, p. 86). If we accept this treatise, then we must reconsider that the task inscribed in the philosophy of teaching is the thinking of love, of what it is to love one’s task. At the heart of teaching is weak thinking, a subjunctive mood:

What do I love when I love my teaching? What do I love when I love learning? What is my pact with the impossible? Would it be possible to even think love as a response to this predicament of understanding? It is weak because it cannot answer these questions.

Conclusion

“Learning starts with unlearning [*Entlernen*]”, as Werner Hamacher points out. “We gather ‘around’ the suspension of all knowledge, ability, and action. It is only this ‘suspension’ which is between us, and *out of* which we become we” (Hamacher, 2004, p. 171). This chapter has been interested in the concept of the event in terms of not knowing. It has taken seriously the ideas that perhaps there is a realm of non-knowledge from which the logician is banished. Perhaps this can lead beyond thinking predictably and can teach us that being suspended by or in the event of learning is what really matters. What really matters, according to Caputo and Derrida, is *astir* in the event.

Untology

Introduction

What does it mean to be un? This is not my question; it's Jacques Rancière's. In what follows I will assign myself the simple task of explaining this turbulent little prefix and of recounting what this "un" connotes in Jacques Rancière's work. More specifically I will tease out what this "un" means in view of his prodigious writings on the politics and practice of education, of what it means to teach, to learn, and to fail to do either. I will tease out, in the aftermath of critical thinking, what it means to know that one does not know what one is doing when one conscientiously engages in teaching and learning, and how that uncertain knowledge (that un-knowing knowing) can initiate an emancipatory awareness of what is often referred to in Rancière's work as "dissensus".

In short, I want to put Rancière to work. I want to use his arguments around education, emancipation, and what he calls (after Joseph Jacotot) "universal teaching" in order to install another question into arguments about what constitutes critical pedagogy and consequently critical thinking. This question is a question concerning learning, or to echo Martin Heidegger, a question concerning what is called learning. In doing so, and by the fraught logic of synecdoche and substitution, I will use by way of example Rancière's influential and exceedingly strange 1987 text *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, his elliptical short essay on what it means to be "un", and a well-known short story by American writer Charles Baxter about another ignorant schoolmaster entitled "Gryphon".

My argument, in what follows, is that each one of these texts directly explores a very real pedagogical crisis, the kind of crisis every teacher can expect to encounter, though for a myriad of reasons few of us are actually facing up to. The problem has to do with how teaching (at all levels) has become a vehicle for formulaic response and expectation, learning trajectories, strategies, goals, and outcomes; how it has become a self-prophesising desiring machine for industrious neoliberals bent on accountability and success. I need not give examples here. Educationalists have for a long time now been calling this the "new managerialism" and lamenting the outrageous fact that education and training are now invariably thought of as synonymous with one another (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015; Lynch

et al., 2012; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Ginsberg, 2011; Childress, 2019).^{lvi}

My hypothesis here is that there is another way of thinking about education that is *not* training and qualification, a way of thinking about education as an undoing or unbecoming – a way of thinking of education, that is, as unqualified, unaccountable, unquantifiable, or difficult. This thinking begins to see education as something beyond knowledge, what Aristotle called *phronesis* but didn't understand.^{lvii} It begins to see it as a type of *unlearning*.

The thought of unlearning, once it becomes salient, noticed for the first time, glimpsed at the precipice of understanding, cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is the very thought of education itself. Not simply forgetting or a form of stupidity or, as a new car ad has it, “letting go of what you know”.^{lviii} It is, on the contrary, the thought that something might happen to turn our heads around and unmake the very notion of who we are. That something might come out of the blue, so to speak, something simply unexpected, unforeseen and therefore unforeseeable. And it is this logic (the quasi-logic) of the “un” that makes all this difference. If education, as is being claimed here, can be a form of unlearning, then it becomes important that we know what we mean when we say “un”?^{lix}

Understanding the Question

Permit me then to unravel this “un” a little. The question of what it means to be “un” is first asked in Jacques Rancière's address to the Cultural Studies Association of Australia in the Great Hall of the New Parliament House, Canberra on 7 December, 2006 (Rancière, 2007, p. 559-569). In his parliamentary address Rancière is responding to a question put to him by the association about what it might mean to be “unAustralian”. Not being an Australian citizen himself and not knowing what being an unAustralian entails exactly, since he is neither Australian nor strictly speaking unAustralian (a pejorative used to describe non-indigenous inhabitants), Rancière focuses on the issue of the “un” itself. In doing so, he winds his way through a series of interesting rhetorical reversals and reprisals that stage the question as a kind of linguistic performance and a convoluted experiment in counter-identity, difference, mono-identity, and non-identitarian politics.

In a characteristic lapidary statement, the “whole of politics”, he claims, “can be encapsulated

in such little prefixes as ‘un’” (Rancière, 2007, p. 559). If politics is about inclusion and exclusion, spaces and identities, then the “un” is a useful prefix for thinking through tired binarisms of right and wrong, proper or improper, near or far, indigene or alien, sense or nonsense, knowing or not knowing, intelligent or ignorant, and so forth. Not being qualified to speak on these matters is something of a blessing in disguise for Rancière, since this allows him to focus on questions of dissensus that frame party political interests in designating this linguistic invention as either an affirmative identity marker or a derogatory slur.

It is really all about who gets to say what it means to be “unAustralian”, which makes it a question of power over meaning. From the political right’s point of view being “unAustralian” means wilfully rejecting nationalistic codes, customs, practices, and ideals cherished by the populace at large. It means rejecting a heritage you are entering into and conscientiously choosing to be an outsider. It means biting the hand that feeds you and being downright unneighbourly. From the political left’s point of view the designation refers to someone courageous enough to challenge traditional narrow-minded triumphalism in order to re-appropriate the language of the aggressor for a benign use. Like the “queer” in queer theory, being *un*Australian becomes reappropriated as something to be proud of and to celebrate. Rancière’s own position is neither, since his argument turns on his ability to reject both simultaneously in order to examine what he refers to as the “anarchic moment” of an *un*-space, whereby the right and left approaches are strained in asymmetrical relation.

How is this possible? Rancière is literally “un-qualified” to speak about this topic and yet this un-qualification is the perfect qualification. It’s the political space of what he calls “un-being”. In Rancière’s words “political subjects are unstable beings, constructed through processes of dis-identification”; they are beings that arrive as “supplement[s] to the social distribution” that cannot be identified as subject to the police order. Political subjects are neither/nor, both/and, therefore unlikely subjects.

A police logic, Rancière claims, “aims to fix what is visible and what is not, what is given and what is not, what can be said about that given and what not, etc”. It wants us to see that there are only two sides to the coin. For Rancière, in contrast to his old master Louis Althusser, the police order is not the law that interpellates (brings us in) but the law that

disperses, that pushes us away saying “Move along. There’s nothing to see here!”^{ix} It is a law that says the sensible is circular and that identity is a given, that the world can be ordered, that it can be understood, stabilised, reified, put in its place; or better, it says that the world is already in its place, so there’s no need to be concerned or ask questions about it. There’s no reason to take a second look. So let’s just move on.

Of course we shouldn’t move on. Nor should we assume that there’s just two ways to look at the problem. We need to resist the impulse by asking the questions that concern us here: What do we *actually* mean when we say “un”? And how does “un-being” reflect the dissensual logic of the political subject? If Rancière’s essay plays on the various possibilities of what it might mean to say “un”, then it is imperative for us to understand exactly how he comes to use this expression so we *can* move on, even, perhaps essentially, if that trajectory means moving back against a conventional (police) logic of understanding itself.

Strange Little Etymologies

Here’s how our conventional understanding operates. “Un” in English is conventionally understood as a negation appearing before adjectives, past and present participles, adverbs, nouns, and some verbs. Its etymology can be traced from roots in Old and Middle English, Old Saxon, High German, and variants in other Indo-European languages. Sometimes expressed with a hyphen, sometimes without, it can also be italicised and hyphenated simultaneously for emphasis, depending, it would seem, on the whim of the author. *The Oxford English Dictionary* recounts – one assumes without the attendant irony – that since the nineteenth century the use of the prefix has become so freely applied to almost any adjectival or participial formation that its employment is “almost unrestricted”. This is hilarious. In proffering a semantic range for this slippery little prefix, the logic of the “un” undoes the very possibility of the restricted denotative sense of its employment.

Bizarrely, anyone who spends even a few cursory moments reading the *OED* entries and examples on the “un” prefix will quickly realise the absurdities with which these entries cannot but become entwined. Examples are a series of what are called “unimportant modern examples”. These are a “severely restricted selection... that could be indefinitely increased by the addition of less noteworthy material”. Some of the linguistic wonders that follow this

are “unbitchy”, “uncrotchety”, “uncuddlesome”, and “undressful”. Reading this is like reading Lewis Carroll – beautiful and absurd. And what exactly are these *less* noteworthy examples that the *OED* deemed it necessary to avoid? Nonetheless, once the idea that *un-* words can be “indefinitely increased” becomes salient then any listing becomes totally arbitrary, any word just another word, another placeholder for a continual chain of new entries. Any word in the language could potentially become one of these “less noteworthy” entries.

Notwithstanding these variants and the arbitrariness of the *OED*’s selections, the “un” prefix is alternately employed as an intensifier (as in “unloose”), a privative denoting loss or removal (unharness), a contrary (“untidy”), or a reversal (“untangle”). The reality however is that once we come to read closely the actual functioning of the “un”, we come to see that it does not *simply* negate, nor does it *simply* reverse or *simply* intensify either. Words in the “un” form operate against the logic of non-contradiction by harbouring tensions, displacements, uncertainties, slippages, and oscillations that carry over from their initial constructions. In his classic essay on “The Uncanny”, for example, Freud, who is at great pains to follow this etymological logic, even tells us that “the prefix ‘un’ is the token of repression” (Freud, 1990, p. 368).

The Dissensual Logic of the “Un”

Reading things in this way helps us to see why words in the “un” camp are equivocal, why they shimmer between positive and negative forces, and why they extend the semantic range by becoming both/and, neither/nor. These words are what J. Hillis Miller calls elsewhere “double antithetical prefixes”.^{lxi} These prefixes recall a supplementary prosthesis in the etymological origin of the word, the word’s origin as a tension between contradictory concepts. The tension is between the mute word and the politics of its performance.

The prefix “un” has no meaning in its own right. Grammatically it must attach itself to a root word in order to attain a meaning from its counterpart. Using it as a word means creating a neologism, a little language event displacing the sensible by inventing an *unqualified* language. It is therefore a linguistic confirmation of what Rancière calls dissensus: “There is dissensus when we don’t know how to designate what we see, when a name no longer suits

the thing or character that it names, etc. A dissensus is thus an aesthetic matter. It is a matter of poetic invention” (Rancière, 2007, p. 560).

This is a strange move in an essay entitled “What does it Mean to be Un?” What Rancière does is refuse to settle for a direct understanding of the “un”. He refuses to settle for any particular meaning of the “un”, thus resisting his own title and the possibility of creating a master trope. Instead, what we get is a process of dis-identification and poetic invention, a way of conceiving heterogeneity that does not ascribe to it an ontological power, some kind of given that allows us to become comfortable with it (Rancière, 2010, p. 212). We should not be comfortable with this term. In fact, we should be distinctly uncomfortable with it. We should be *uneasy*, unsettled, unappeased. What is created is a kind of untology, a marker for a politics of dissensus in process, a manner of speaking that is not simply descriptive but engages politically and performatively with the strictures of its own discourse. How this is possible is given in the following remarkable paragraph:

It appears that the dissensual logic of the *un* is more than ever caught between the consensual logic of identity and a logic of radical and irredeemable otherness. Its emancipatory potential has more than ever to be disentangled from a ‘critical’ tradition that has become the sophisticated version of the dominant order. It is not so easy to be *un*. It is not so easy because, in a sense, it is too easy: we have wonderful tools and methods for reading images, deconstructing discourses, unmasking the fallacies of the media, etc. We easily settle into comfortable relation with an enemy whose messages have no secret for us. Perhaps we should lose some of this comfort and ask ourselves what exactly we are doing with this smooth running critical machinery: are we framing a world of idiots where we play the part of the smart guys, or are we framing spaces for the manifestation of the *un*-qualified, which is to say, the capacity for anybody?

(Rancière, 2007, p. 569).

This paragraph needs quite a bit of unpacking. Dissensus does not indicate a simplified mosaic of difference in Rancière's writings, a democracy made up of peripheral singularities. Nor does it indicate a form of consensus – Australian or non-Australian for example. Instead, as we have seen, this “un” suggests something at odds with the very way we come to understand ourselves and the languages we have to describe our worlds and our power to act within those worlds. It's like a glitch in our linguistic matrix. The “un” symbolizes an anarchic power always ready to disrupt and disjoint the possibility of qualification. “Politics means the supplementation of all qualifications by the power of the unqualified” (Rancière, 2010a, p. 53). It means this because there is “no good reason why some men should rule others”, no inherent quality that separates the sovereign from the subaltern.

There is no reason either why the “un” should become a “critical” master machine that serves only to separate the dumb masses from the ruling elite. The “un” can only reflect the revolutionary potentiality of an anarchic moment (at any time) to unsettle what is given (from within the given), to undermine the order of things, and to show us that things need not necessarily be the way they are. The “un” undermines any subjectivization and any quasi-transcendental concept of radical singularity (other-ness) because it indicates a desire to consistently undo itself, to consistently question its own position as a position of dominance.

Most importantly the “un”, for Rancière, indicates the “capacity of anybody”, that is to say the ability of anybody to change the current order. Ontology, then, foresees a dynamics of emancipation that affirms the capacity of anybody to do or undo anything, to revolutionise the order from within the system itself. This is a logic of dissensus not consensus. It is also the very premise of the emancipatory spirit of Rancière's writings. *Everyone* has the capacity to undo. *Everyone is equal*. There is no ontological difference in politics, “there is a principle of equality, which is not the ‘proper’ of politics... which has no world of its own, other than that traced by its acts of verification” (Rancière, 2010, p. 213).

“Verification” here means to act, to invent, and to reinvent the truth of things. It pertains to the capacity anyone has to “act out”, to demonstrate, and to make a change in the order of things. The word “proletarian”, Rancière tells us in “What does it Mean to be Un”, stems from an old Roman juridical category meaning “those who make children”. It originally

referred to people who were excluded from the symbolic order of the political world by being enslaved in a domestic world of reproduction. These were the powerless and the uncounted. In the nineteenth century its meaning was the same before the excluded proletariat revolutionised its meaning through rebellion, through the exercise of a power they were not supposed to possess. Thus “proletarian” became a name “for the inclusion of the uncounted qualification of the un-qualified, for the inclusion of the capacity of anybody at all” (Rancière, 2007, p. 564). Taking this seriously means a further act of verification, another *undoing*, which I will render below through an act of reading.

Unqualified to Teach

I have said that my goal is to show how thinking about the power of the “un” can help us to think through the scene of teaching. One way to do this is to think about what it might mean to be “*unqualified*” to teach. If there is a question of what it means to be qualified or unqualified to speak then it certainly finds its crucible in the practice of teaching.

The whole edifice of teaching and learning revolves around a series of expectations and contracts, spoken or unspoken, between students and teachers. Students expect their teachers to be knowledgeable in their fields, to know their subject areas well, to be up-to-date in their own research, competent, and confident in what they do and say in the classroom. They invariably expect a procedural relationship based on higher learning and a mutual respect for the subject matter, and, increasingly, for the learning outcomes and the strategies that will get them there. They expect their instructors to have obtained relevant qualifications issued by renowned higher authorities, academic credentials that ensure their instructor’s experience, and the wherewithal to perform the task of teaching what they teach. Much of this relationship is based on trust. This trust is based on tradition, practice, and prejudice. Students expect a return on their efforts. They expect results; and why shouldn’t they? They pay for them.

Perhaps a central question can be posed in relation to this idea of qualification: can teachers be *unqualified* to teach in a more abstract way? That is to say, can there be a benefit to thinking about qualification as a process that is always to come, rather than thinking of it teleologically? Does it benefit teachers to think of their profession as one of continual

learning and unlearning? These questions are not designed to be outrageous but to interrogate what seems to be a truth borne out of experience. The only way to make sense of these questions, this thesis claims, is through stories of what happens in teaching. The focus here is, therefore, through examples of teachers teaching. In what follows there are two examples of this: Joseph Jacotot, a real teacher, and a “Miss Ferenzi”, a fictional one. These examples are not designed as abstract theoretical claims but examples of real practical dilemmas.

Perhaps most teachers have felt at some stage that there is a limit to qualification, that no teacher is ever *qualified enough* for the job they do. Daily learning outcomes, strategic goals, research targets, and so on, may focus talents and allegiances to, say, career-enhancement, job security, obligations to “be there” for students, or professional development and research practices. However there is also a sense that teaching through inherited doctrines of correctness, of outcomes models and designs, can curtail students’ freedom to think. “The freedom to think”, as Jonathan Neufeld has argued, “is the freedom to let thinking happen rather than forcing it into its outcome. This allowance is synonymous with letting learning happen rather than forcing it into outcomes” (Neufeld, 2012, p. 61-76). The freedom to think – what might be called “emancipated thinking” – insinuates the freedom to think *without qualification*, the freedom to reconfigure, redesign, or undermine the learning agenda at the moment thinking happens. This does not mean introducing risk into the equation. It might be that the risk is always already there. To follow Rancière, thinking like this, could mean knowing the difference between emancipation and stultification.

Gryphon Door

Charles Baxter’s “Gryphon” is a macabre vignette about substitute teachers, a short story about the surprise and event of teaching told from the perspective of a naive and impressionable child. It tells us about Miss Ferenzi (the substitute) who turns up to school one day and amazes her new fourth-grade class with outlandish tales of her familial connections to esteemed royalty and famous composers. The story also tells us about Miss Ferenzi’s extraordinarily peculiar teaching strategy of replacing knowledge with “substitute facts” (Baxter, 1990, pp. 223-240). Her approach to teaching is what we might call a hyperbolic antidote to the kind of instrumentalist teaching envisioned in Henry Giroux’s

(2012, 2014) account of current pedagogical practices and something of a challenge to Jacques Rancière's five lessons of emancipation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

"Gryphon" is told from the perspective of a suggestible nine-year-old narrator who is intermittently perceptive and also betimes exquisitely naïve to the tallest tales of his enigmatic substitute teacher. As always with child narrators, there is a certain allusiveness to the manner of expression. One must read between the lines a little to get the full picture (see Bennett, 2015). Even then there is a faint impression that the narrator is always missing something worth knowing.

The substitute teachers that ordinarily serve the children's needs at the rural Michigan Five Oaks school in moments of crisis come from a small pool of local unemployed community graduates comprising four busy mothers. So the appearance of Miss Ferenzi marks an abrupt transition for Mr. Hibler's fourth-graders. Our narrator describes Miss Ferenzi with fine hair woven into a chignon falling over the nape of her neck, gold-rimmed glasses and marionette lines descending vertically from her mouth to her chin. Her age is indistinct – "an adult is an adult" – and her overall aura is one of surreality. Like something from *Pinocchio*, the children are awed by her overall unearthliness and artificial features.

Bored by the strictures of Mr Hibler's lesson plans and the conventionalities of the text book, ironically entitled *Broad Horizons*, Miss Ferenzi asks one of her students to go through the six times tables. After failing to correct him at six times eleven is sixty-eight, another student informs her of the matter. To which she replies, "But, and I know some people will not entirely agree with me, at some times it is sixty-eight":

"In higher mathematics, which you children do not yet understand, six times eleven can be considered to be sixty-eight." She laughed through her nose. "In higher mathematics numbers are... more fluid. The only thing a number does is contain a certain amount of something. Think of water. A cup is not the only way to measure a certain amount of water, is it?" We were staring, shaking our heads. "You could use saucepans or thimbles. In either case, the water would be the same. Perhaps," she started again, "it would be better for you to think that six times eleven is sixty-eight only

when I am in the room... Because it's more interesting that way," she said smiling very rapidly behind her blue-tinted glasses. "Besides, I'm your substitute teacher, am I not?" We all nodded. "Well, then, think of six times eleven equals sixty-eight as a substitute fact".

(Baxter, 1990, p. 227).

After another one of her students protest, Miss Ferenzi argues that six times eleven will be sixty-six again when Mr Hibler returns, "you can rest assured. And it will be that for the rest of your lives in Five Oaks. Too bad, eh?" Her glib response is unsettling to most of the class but to our young impressionable narrator there is a noticeable change in the way he views the substitute and takes this "substitute fact" on board. This is noticeable in the manner of the descriptions that follow and later when he feels the need to defend some of her downright crazy assertions: such as the pyramids being repositories for cosmic powers, the pharaoh's scrolls being novels for post-mortem vacations, that the Egyptians were the first to discover that dogs, when they are sick, will not drink from rivers but hold their heads up and jaws open to catch the rain only, and that the titular gryphon (half lion, half eagle) was encountered by her, personally, at a circus in Egypt on her travels.

Our narrator calls these tales "fabulous", unknowingly combining his awed and inspired emotional responses with his naïve regard for the mythical elements in these stories, as only a child could do. This is a touching element to Baxter's story that serves to set up the drama of the concluding pages, which sees Miss Ferenzi produce a pack of tarot cards and subsequently tell a young boy who draws the death card that he will die soon. She is subsequently fired and leaves the school ignominiously later that afternoon.

Why "Gryphon" Is Un-like *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

Jacques Rancière's extraordinary little book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which I will return to and investigate more fully later, claims that the most important quality of a schoolmaster is the virtue of ignorance. Rancière's book tells yet another little story about an exiled teacher, Joseph Jacotot, who leaves France in the 1820s in order to teach French to a group of students whose language (Flemish) he does not understand himself. Finding a bilingual

edition of *Telemaque*, he tells his students, through a translator, to read half the book using the translation and the other half quickly, and to write in French what they thought. Jacotot is amazed to find out that the students can write quite well and have learned more than he can have taught them.

Jacotot's conclusion is that "There is no one on earth who hasn't learned something by himself and without a master explicator" (Rancière, 1991, p. 15). This is what "universal teaching" is. It is the revolution in pedagogy that nobody wishes to recognise: that everyone has the capacity to learn by themselves. As Jacotot explains, one ignorant person can become to a second ignorant person the conduit to an emancipatory logic of intellectual freedom. The distance between the master explicator and the subaltern student is only one of wills. The master gives an example and the student wants another and the explanations multiply so that the distance between the explanation and what is learned is never breached. "Essentially, what an emancipated person can do is be an emancipator: to give, not the key to knowledge, but the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself" (Rancière, 1991, p. 39).

When we think of models of teaching like this we often think about maieutic models, such as the Socratic dialogues, whereby the teacher draws out what the student already knows by asking a series of leading questions. In this model the teacher is the smart guy and the student the ignoramus. Or we may think of Kant's famous "*Sapere Aude!*" ("Dare to know!") in "What is Enlightenment?" These models are not what Rancière or Jacotot meant by an emancipatory logic of teaching. For both Rancière and Jacotot, the teacher must begin from the premise that there is an equality of intellects, the capacity of anybody. This reciprocity is at the beating heart of the ignorant schoolmaster's approach to the scene of teaching and learning. One must believe in that equality and venture out into the unknown: "This is what opens the way to all adventure in the land of knowledge. It is a matter of daring to be adventurous, and not whether one learns more or less well or more or less quickly. The 'Jacotot method' is not better; it is different" (Rancière, 1991, p. 27).

What does it mean to be *unqualified* to teach? Is there a strategy for considering qualification in an absolute sense? Rancière's strategy is to avoid any such hierarchy by resisting the

impulse to dominance of one system or method over another. Indeed, this is why we see that the “Jacotot method” is placed under inverted commas above. Emancipated learning would have to form a self-resistance to the dominant forces of any methodology. This logic would only replace one dominant order with another. However, the “un” resists itself, as we have seen. That is its powerless power. It resists the qualification to rest easily on its laurels.

Thinking and teaching can be a practice then of what I am calling *unlearning*. It can signal one’s ability to undermine any method of teaching and learning, at any given opportunity. It can suggest, also, the ability to forget, to not know and know that this not knowing is not, strictly speaking, a failure. It can signal a way out of the systemic, conventional means of teaching and learning within the institution and signal the dissensual, the anarchic, the perverse, the “un”. This power to unlearn undermines itself as a figure of power but not, importantly, of resistance. Unlearning can resist the impulse to settle into a methodology or a dominant superpower.

Does Miss Ferenzi offer us an example of a teacher of power? Does she act and speak along the same lines as, say, Miss Jean Brodie in Muriel Spark’s examination of fascist thinking in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*? Is she a teacher who imposes herself on her students and attempts to submit their wills to her will? Not at all.

Miss Ferenzi is unqualified to do this in various senses. As a substitute teacher she does not have the same authority and knowledge of the students that Mr. Hibler has had in the classroom. She does not represent the institution. She is therefore, like the exiled Jacotot, not subject to the same restrictions, traditions, or expectations as her counterpart Mr. Hibler. Miss Ferenzi, figuratively speaking, does not even speak the same language as her forebears.

Unlike the other substitute teachers the fourth-graders experience in Five Oaks, Miss Ferenzi occasions an opportunity for her students to think. Through her unconventionality, she questions the conventions in which the students are immersed. She makes them think about why we have to think the way we do about numbers and about the world around us. She shows the students that the limits of their language are the limits of their worlds, as Wittgenstein would have it. She is something of the classic, romantic model of the emancipatory teacher. Though she is also a dark interpreter of this tradition. Her students do learn from her. They

learn that she “lies” about things; that there are expectations from a teacher, both explicit and implicit. They also learn that her methods are ultimately immoral and destructive.

But our narrator learns much more. He learns, partly through his own misguided credulity, that she is creative with the truth. He learns that her stories are “fabulous” (fables). The gryphon of the story is both worldly and otherworldly. It is a symbol of the mystical elements here on earth, of how a combination of things from this world can project us into another realm of thought. In this, Miss Ferenzi is both of this world and out of this world. She is unrealistic, which makes our narrator really think for the first time. In not doing her “job” she does a *better* “job”. *She risks thinking*. This is resisted by most of her students. She gambles, unknowingly, on the possibility that they will learn something worth learning. But she is ignorant of the outcome just as she is ignorant of the syllabus. This is also Jacotot’s plight. The risk is taken in both cases.

The Rhetoric of Madness

Miss Ferenzi is certainly eccentric, as is Jacotot. She is eccentric enough to challenge any reader’s confidence in her sanity. Her theatre is the classroom and her rhetoric is the rhetoric of madness. She is given to the poetic invention of the truth. She undermines reason at any opportunity, knowing full well that the students will lapse back into the drudgery of the national curriculum once she leaves. This is indeed the case with the conclusion of the story that sees Mr. Hibler’s class in a packed room with another Dickensian Gradgrind character churning out hard facts to memorize. No more substitute facts. Just facts. No more unlearning, just learning.

Rancière’s claim in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is that the power of rhetoric, seen as an art of reason and persuasion, “annihilates reason under the guise of reason... Rhetoric, it is said, has war as its principle. One doesn’t seek comprehension in it, only the annihilation of the adverse will” (Rancière, 1991, p. 85). For Jacotot the will is the way to emancipation. The same cannot be said for Miss Ferenzi as her will dominates the classroom. Such is the structure of the teaching engagement and the primacy of the disciplinary system, which she

uses to undermine some of her detractors in the class. Nothing, in a sense, can be done about this because the majority of her students do not have the will to engage with her ideas. For Jacotot, by contrast, he does have students who are willing to learn. They learn by themselves, so they don't need Jacotot. He doesn't will anything.

Nevertheless both teachers do emancipate by getting the students to think for themselves. Much more so in the case of Jacotot than in the case of Ferenzi. Jacotot's teaching is patient, distant, open, understanding, and benign.^{lxii} Ferenzi's is dynamic, irrational, poetic, and, as her name suggests, frenzied, perhaps even pathological. She undoubtedly personifies the madness of the rhetorical gestures she employs in her teachings. The ultimate difference then between the two teachers is one of rhetorical strategy. For Jacotot, "Rhetoric is speech in revolt against the poetic condition of the speaking being. It speaks in order to silence. *You will speak no longer, you will think no longer, you will do this*: that is its program. Its efficacy is regulated by its own suspension" (Rancière, 1991, p. 85). For Ferenzi, the strategy is to fill up time with talk: "This time there was no pretence of doing a reading lesson or moving on to arithmetic. As soon as the bell rang, she simply began to talk. She talked for forty minutes straight". One imagines Jacotot speaking sparingly and the garrulous Ferenzi expounding on every conceivable topic, while her students sit silent, powerless, and passive.

Conclusion

Permit me to conclude by returning to my original question. I have argued that the power of the "un" prefix in Rancière's work functions to remind us of the importance of thinking of education as a focal point of emancipation. My term for this propensity to think the dissensus of the pedagogical scene is *unlearning*. There is an argument, I claim again, for teachers that may think of themselves as *unqualified* to teach. These teachers are willing to respond to the event of thinking with thinking, with unlearning, as opposed to doctrine or rhetoric. If thinking is the task that lies ahead of us, towards which the thinking being is directed, then it is a task that lies otherwise than being: not ontology but "untology". Thus thinking is less a task for becoming who one is than a response to the reality of one's own unbecoming. It's not *Bildung* in the Humboltian or Kantian sense, but *re-Bildung* in a Derridean sense (not formation but trans-formation); it is less about power over oneself and more about the

weakness of being, of being one amongst others, of being-singular-plural to echo Jean-Luc Nancy.

Unlearning is not some kind of abstract noun or a gimmicky neologism. It is an action word, a verb. Teaching, this chapter claims, can be thought of in the subjunctive mood, as a radical case of uncertainty relying less on the passive resistance to happenstance than on the ongoing pursuit of change, to a thinking that is unrestrained. If dissensus is a word that means anything at all, it is a term that relinquishes the Enlightenment value of reason (as opposed to unreason) in lieu of the value of faith, a faith in the possibility of an infinite dialogue between justice and emancipation and not, as has been argue throughout this thesis, between the consumer and the producer.

The power of the “un”, then, resides in its ability to keep suspended notions of thinking and unthinking, failure and success, winning and losing. It heralds what Jack Halberstam refers to as “oppositional pedagogies” against what Foucault called “subjugated knowledge” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 12). “For thinking is always firstly thinking the thinkable – a thinking that modifies the thinkable by welcoming what was unthinkable” (Rancière, 2013, p. xi).

Love Foolosophy

Love foolosophy is killing
Previous illusions that
I had in my mind about you

(Jamiroquai)

Introduction

In what follows, I want to pursue reading not only as an activity of nonknowing and desire, but as a pedagogical dilemma premised on the teacher's ability to sustain both desire and ignorance as mutually co-productive forces in the scene of teaching itself. I want to see this vicariously through the eyes of the teacher and the students, through the eyes of the pupils and the eyes of the masters: that is, I want to investigate the concept/non-concept of unlearning through the eyes of a teacher who doesn't know what they're doing. Perhaps the greatest myth, the one most difficult to challenge, is that the teacher should be the master and the student the student or – given Gert Biesta's claims – that they should be simply peers (Biesta, 2019, p. 549). On closer analysis, in neither case does it seem plausible or desirable to be fully within either camp.

Is it Possible to Teach Ignorance?

Barbara Johnson opens Chapter Eight of *A World of Difference* with the following provocative and incisive questions: "The teaching of ignorance is probably not what the majority of pedagogues have in mind. It may, indeed, be a structurally impossible task. For how can a teacher teach a student not to know, without at the same time informing her of what it is she is supposed to be ignorant of?" (Johnson, 1988, p. 68). That's a striking thing to say. Why would any teacher want to do that? What could possibly be the benefit of teaching a student not to know something? Johnson is surely right to be sceptical of providing definitive confirmation and claiming that it may actually be impossible to unteach something to your students. Surely, once you have learned something – driving a car or riding a bike – there is an endpoint and no way back.^{lxiii} Someone can't come along and tell you tomorrow that you can't do that anymore. They may say that you're not capable of doing it correctly,

but surely there is a point beyond which they cannot push.

The extraordinary text from which Johnson extrapolates her topic comes by way of Molière's seminal play *L'Ecole des femmes*. The crux of the play is what Johnson calls "a portrait of an antiteacher"(Johnson, 1988, p. 69). Arnolphe, a wealthy 42-year-old had procured a four-year-old girl, Agnes, and kept her under lock and key ever since. His plan is to teach Agnes to be a dutiful and, above all, ignorant wife. Afraid of the cuckoldry sweeping through the city, Arnolphe believes incarceration and proper tutelage will ensure that Agnes will blossom into a delightfully ignorant fidelity to him. Before long, the handsome Horace arrives on the scene and confides in Arnolphe that he has seen a beautiful young girl and intends to pursue her. He informs Arnolphe not realising of course that Agnes is Arnolphe's charge.

What Johnson argues convincingly is that Horace and Arnolphe occupy flip-sides of classical pedagogical norms – the (mimetic) "do as I do" and the (didactic) "do as I say" proclivities. What we ultimately learn from this play about teaching ignorance is that Agnes learns to be clever by the "universal cuckoldry" of being suspended between two competing teachers. It is precisely the ambiguity of the positions (the group pedagogic) she encounters that informs her own insurgent criticism, compelling her to imaginative subtlety and creative deceit.

Hence the necessarily paradoxical conclusion of Johnson's reading: learning takes place most rapidly in the crucible between conflicting teachers, "And what the student learns in the process is both the power of ambiguity and the non-ignorance of innocence" (Johnson, 1988, 83). As it is in Plato's *Phaedrus* (remembering Socrates as the philosopher/teacher of un-knowing) and Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes*, for Johnson,

The question of education is the question not of how to transmit knowledge but of how to *suspend* knowledge. That question can be understood in both a positive and a negative sense, not knowing results from repression, whether conscious or unconscious. Such negative ignorance may be the necessary by-product – or even precondition – of any education whatsoever. But positive ignorance, the pursuit of what is forever in the act of escaping, the inhabiting of that space where knowledge becomes the obstacle to knowing – *that* is the pedagogical

imperative we can neither fulfil nor disobey.

(Johnson, 1988, p. 85)

The peculiarity of what Johnson is saying here can all too easily be glossed over. What she is implying is that teaching ignorance is not a negative procedure. In fact, it is only in the interstices between ignorance and knowing that successful learning occurs. Ignorance is the catalyst for real learning, but it is never practically available to fulfil an obligation to teach in this way. How would we know that we were doing a good job of it? How could we in good conscience fulfil an obligation to teach through ignorance?

In what follows I want to trace the possibilities of a perverse pedagogy that seeks to embrace the nonconcept of ignorance and stupidity as an enabling fiction for creative and effective learning. I aim to do this by following several paradigms of critical pedagogy through literary theory, philosophy, and popular culture in order to illustrate the point that negative teaching is often an unforeseeable by-product of the rational, didactic model. It is my hope that in doing this I might show how the imperative to teach creates an illimitable, inescapable, and ideological power struggle between the individual teacher and the institution that simultaneously controls and grants it its freedom; and that this struggle is paradoxically the benign catalyst for the liberation of ignorance.

A Parable for Pedagogues

There's a kind of salutary instruction in Ezra Pound's parable of Agassiz and the fish for teachers in the humanities in the opening pages of his hilarious *ABC of Reading*. Here Pound tells the story of a hapless student who seeks out a master to finalise his instruction. "No man", says Pound, "is equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish":

A post-Graduate student equipped with honours and diplomas went to Agassiz to receive the final and finishing touches. The great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.

Post-Graduate student: 'That's only a sunfish.'

Agassiz: 'I know that. Write a description of it.'

After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the Ichthus Helioplodokus, or whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family of Heliichtherinkus, etc., as found in textbooks of the subject.

Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish.

The student produced a four page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish. At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it.

(Pound, 1960, p. 17)

A parable is a form of similitude in which something is compared with something else; generally, in biblical narratives this infers a comparison between the kingdom of Heaven and this mean earth, which here below resides. Parables separate the sheep from the goats, according to the late Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, they separate the insiders (those who can interpret them) from the outsiders (those who can't) (Kermode, 1979, p. 23-25). All parables, like Pound's here, require some form of interpretation, some leap, or act of completion in order for us to make sense of them. Doing the latter, of course, requires training.

The paradox of Pound's comic parable acts performatively, as parables do, in illustrating its message: the theme is ostensibly that as responsible teachers we shouldn't solicit our students to scrutinize everything they encounter hyper-analytically; however, in order to catch the parable's double meaning we have to do just that. Thus, the parable in a strange way does what it counsels against by forcing its addressees to search for an *other* meaning. Searching for this *other* meaning then redoubles the narrative force of the argument, obscuring the literal and figurative interpretations simultaneously, hence the dizzying effect of parables in general. "If you can understand the parables, you do not need them. If you need them, you cannot hope to understand them".^{lxiv}

Parables are powerful allegorical figures for viewing the gaps between the learned and the ignorant. With very minor exceptions (from John the Baptist) it is Jesus who teaches all the parables in the Gospels; and it matters greatly who tells the parables, since they have divine force and an underlying moral that can only be uttered by a master.^{lxv} In this we notice the structural binary of master and servant, savant and savage, built into their very structure. In one way Agassiz helps the student to realize that his ignorance is a learned ignorance, a scholarly myopia. He therefore teaches him to be a critical reader, especially of his received ideas, preconceptions, and opinions. On the other hand, Agassiz's teaching pulls the rug out from under his feet. He denigrates the entire history of his learning precisely at the moment when he should be lauding it. Agassiz is the populist pedagogue *par excellence* but he is also the obscure master guarding an esoteric wisdom from vulgar knowledge. His teaching closes the gap between the non-innocence of ignorance and the innocence of learning.

Conscientious teaching, it should go without saying, often walks a fine line between two similar incompatible imperatives: teach your students to be suspicious readers, insiders adroit in a hermeneutics of incredulity and suspicion; teach them to suspect the natural state of affairs, the pre-coded binarism, the heteronormative assumption, the organic unity, the ideological state apparatus; teach them to read between the lines, to be critical of everything, especially those paradigmatic values we find all too self-evident. Alternatively, foster self-reliance and independence, a confidence that one's own reading is apt to dispel the schematic incredulity one has taken to the text in the first place; teach them to build their own knowledge of critical thinking on the backs of what has been said before.

Teach Yourself (Flemish)

Thinking of the role of the teacher in this way forces us to ask a question about the input the teacher can and ought to make in getting her students to learn theory. How can teachers, for instance, get students to understand that critical reading implies a resistance to theory without throwing the baby out with the bathwater? The paradox is partly responsible for de Man's famous essay on the subject ("The Resistance to Theory") being rejected for publication in an MLA volume summarising the work of literary theory entitled *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Language and Literature*.^{lxvi}

Much of the difficulty lies in my use of the word “understanding”, as Jacques Rancière points out in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*:

To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid.

(Rancière, 1991, p. 6)^{lxvii}

Rancière’s book is an effective touchstone for thinking about the significance of Pound’s parable as an allegory of teaching and de Man’s resistance to it. Indeed, his entire book is a parable about the impossibility of the act, so much so that one might say, however hyperbolically, that reading Rancière will teach you nothing about teaching you don’t already know. That Rancière refers to explication “as the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided” is not fortuitous. It proscribes the inefficacy of the scene of teaching itself.

The Ignorant Schoolmaster, which I touched in an earlier chapter, narrates the story of Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840), a lecturer in ancient languages and mathematics at the University of Dijon, who is subsequently exiled and forced to teach in a language he doesn’t understand. Jacotot’s charge is to teach French to a number of Flemish speaking students at the University of Louvain, even though he doesn’t speak any Flemish. Eventually he finds a bilingual copy of *Télémaque* (Telemachus), furnishes each of his students with a copy, and with the aid of a translator requests that each of his students learn French through the Flemish translation. When the students had made it through the first half of the book Jacotot asked them to write in French about what they had read. The results were astonishing to the master. He had expected error and confusion and received learned scholarship and an advanced degree of literary fluency instead.

From his experiment in what he subsequently called intellectual emancipation, Jacotot discovered a blindness at the centre of teaching: “the necessity of explication”. Predicting what the Russian educational philosopher Lev Vygotsky would call the ZPD (zone of

proximal development) nearly a century later, Jacotot argued that if a father gave his child a book to read and an explicator gave the child a book to read the only difference would be that the explicator would be adept at judging the “distance” between understanding and non-understanding. This judgement though would be based primarily on the master’s conditional hierarchy – the knowledge that the gap between understanding and learning has been closed. Paradoxically, though, it is the explicator’s explication itself that perpetuates this gap, a practice that adds a reason to a reason and complicates the issue of learning rather than simplifying and compressing it. “Unfortunately”, recounts Rancière, “it is just this little word, this slogan of the enlightenment – understand – that causes all the trouble. It is this word that brings a halt to the movement of reason, that destroys its confidence in itself, that distracts it by breaking the world of intelligence into two, by installing the division between the groping animal and the learned little man, between common sense and science” (Rancière, 1991, p. 8).

Jacotot’s universal teaching strategy is premised on the assumption that learning is universally equivalent; that anyone can learn if they have the will to do so. It sees the division between the learned and the ignorant as a division of subjection and stultification, a suppression to the will of another, a master or teacher, in the name of understanding. Learning for oneself, by contrast, is equated with freedom of the will, the will to power over one’s own understanding in the world. Only those who have emancipated themselves, accordingly, can teach others to learn how to be emancipated in their own learning: “And this is at the heart of the method. To emancipate someone else, one must be emancipated oneself. One must know oneself to be a voyager of the mind, similar to all other voyagers: an intellectual subject participating in the power common to intellectual beings” (Rancière, 1991, p. 33).

Perhaps the most striking disagreement in Rancière’s short book is the disagreement and confrontation with Socrates. One would suspect that the Socratic model would lend quite a bit of support to Rancière’s argument; or, ironically, that a disagreement with Socrates on the task of teaching would counteract Rancière’s argument by exemplifying a master/student struggle that the book is trying to displace. Socrates is the philosopher of ignorance after all. “What Socrates seeks... is to teach the student *that he does not know*. To teach ignorance is,

for Socrates, to teach to *un-know*, to become conscious of the fact that what one thinks is knowledge is really an array of received ideas, prejudices, and opinions – a way of *not* knowing that one does not know” [original emphasis] (Johnson, 1988, p. 84).

Rancière/Jacotot view the Socratic model with scepticism because it simply inverts the ignorance/wisdom teacher/student model. Instead of the teacher teaching the student, the teacher asks the student to teach him; thus the student learns by learning to teach. The master in the guise of Socrates is secretly the smart one, allowing the student to form the knowledge that he is feigning to show. Therefore the power dynamic between the teacher and the student is not really shifted and the emancipating encounter is never fully realised:

The Socratic method is thus a perfected form of stultification. Like all learned masters, Socrates interrogates in order to instruct. But whoever wishes to emancipate someone must interrogate him in the manner of men and not in the manner of scholars, in order to be instructed, not to instruct. And that can only be performed by someone who effectively knows no more than the student, who has never made the voyage before him: the ignorant master.

(Rancière, 1991, p. 29-30)

A Socrates in Every Classroom

Let’s turn now from theory to practice, so to speak, with the following question: How then does the emancipatory ideal set out in Jacotot’s teaching in 1818 become re-inscribed in popular culture and in particular in the celluloid world of Hollywood? It is surely a commonplace to assume that most people’s idea of what a teacher is and ought to be is gleaned from popular filmic interpretations. There are so many: *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1939), *The Browning Version* (1951), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Educating Rita* (1983), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *School of Rock* (2005), *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Bad Teacher* (2011), and Damien Chazelle’s superb counterpoint *Whiplash* (2014) to mention only a handful. Public pedagogy fed through the lens of corporate Hollywood giants has not only left an indelible impression on today’s student bodies concerning expectations of teacherly

practice, it has formed that practice through and through via fixation, affective interpellation and refracted desire. Representations of college professors and schoolmasters from Chips to Schneebly have reinforced models of what effective professional performance should look like. Student expectations and teacher expectations are similarly formed in the matrix of a populist iconography that prizes entertainment value over and above everything else, including educational effectiveness.

One ought to acknowledge, alongside Henry Giroux, that the new forms of public pedagogy – the teletechnological and mediatic saturation of contemporary culture – has displaced the school and indeed the university as the focal centres of education.^{lxviii} The new electronic landscapes have given rise to a culture of hypermediated spaces, where the lecture hall and the schoolroom appear as archaic, outdated models of institutionalised learning. Students in lecture halls today, for example, are more likely to be using university wi-fi connections to tweet, check their emails, chat with friends via Instagram, line, Facebook, Snapchat or iPhone, than to listen to lectures.^{lxix} Lecture notes are generally posted on university websites anyway, which begs the question of whether or not students actually need to attend lectures in the first place. One can now also choose from a myriad of competing university websites where core lectures are recorded and posted for public viewing.

Paradoxically perhaps, much of the value of filmic representation of teachers in classrooms and lecture halls has reinforced the ideal of democratic and social engagement with one's peers in open, educationally stimulating environments. What such films tend to do is legitimize education by reinforcing notions of schooling as a hotbed for identity formation, competing worldviews, democracy, and so forth. For the most part, Hollywood films depict education as a vehicle for “finding oneself” and developing skills appropriate to pursuing one's professional ambitions. What tends to be left unchallenged though are broader social issues of privilege issuing from class, race, gender, and economic stability. These films, in short, tend to reinforce hegemonic and elitist attitudes by uncritically reflecting the status quo.

One example of this is Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989). One could rather reductively ask of this film: “is the whole story not a kind of buildup to the final pathetic crescendo when

the pupils defy the school authorities and express their solidarity with the fired teacher by standing on their benches?” (Žižek, 1992, p. 23). It is certainly an iconic moment in movie history. Just about everyone who has seen the film remembers its climactic moment. I’ve even seen students recreate the performance in class! Nevertheless this would be a fatuous account of what is otherwise a passionate plea for the Socratic model of education.

Set in the fictional Welton (“Hellton”) Academy, preparatory school for boys in 1959, *Dead Poets Society* chronicles an otherwise rather clichéd coming-of-age story of a group of teenagers from wealth and privilege pursuing their parents’ idealistic fantasies of cultural capitalism and materialism. The opening scene sees the school headmaster, Mr. Nolan, announce to a packed hall full of parents and students that in the previous year seventy-five percent of its graduates took up places at Ivy League schools, making Welton “the best preparatory school in the United States”. Nolan’s imperial patriarchal values are entrenched in the school motto garbled by the boys in the dorm a little later on: Tradition, Honour, Discipline, Excellence becomes Travesty, Horror, Decadence, Excrement. In a culture of competitive learning and academic one-upmanship, each of the boys displays their own unique prowess early on and though the relationships that form are strong, the feeling is that pressure to succeed makes permissible the most aggressively arriviste attitudes.

Mr Keating, played by Robin Williams, is the antidote to the repressively stagnant rigmarole of life at Welton. As the boys’ new English teacher, he represents a breath of fresh air for the bored and seemingly otherwise unimaginative cohorts at the school. Keating’s pedagogy is a reactionary pedagogy. He teaches self-reliance and free thinking, counselling his boys, via the Romantic poets, to “seize the day” [*carpe diem*]. Unlike the other teachers the boys encounter at the academy, Keating is by contrast warm and conversational and always ready to lend an ear or a hand to the boys in time of need. He speaks with them informally and is unafraid to broach topics of a sexual or a profane nature. His classes are thoroughly dramatic and he performs the voices in the texts he reads with the verve and flamboyance of a seasoned Shakespearean player; by turns John Wayne, Gielgud or Olivier, Marlon Brando or the ghost of Walt Whitman.

In this Keating is the perfect pervert teacher, in the etymological sense of that word as

someone who takes a different path. And he wants his students to follow suit, as can be seen when he asks them to walk differently, to counteract the lure of conformity, as he quotes Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken". Fundamentally, he's an apostate, rejecting the core values of Welton by openly defying its conventions and protocols of discipline and order. "Significantly, however, while Keating subsequently teaches his students how to stand on their desks, how to kick a soccer ball with gusto and how to free-associate lamely about Walt Whitman, he's never shown actually teaching them anything about the basics of form — basics they'd need in order to appreciate half the writers he's recommending" (Orr, 2001). Instead, we see him, in one of his more egregiously perverse moments as a Johnsonian antiteacher, counselling his students to tear out the introductory pages to their poetry anthologies: "Excrement, that's what I think of Mr J. Evans Pritchard... Tear out the entire introduction... Be gone J. Evans Pritchard, PhD!" By employing popular cultural references in his teaching, and flaunting school policy, Keating simultaneously entertains and cultivates willing acolytes, grooming them to become independent, free thinkers.

That *Dead Poets Society* is given to the saccharine and overblown may be a major drawback for some of its more discerning viewers, especially perhaps for the jaundiced eyes of an academic audience, but it is nonetheless a powerfully emotive treatise on radical pedagogical practice, an allegorical representation of the power of perversity to make us fall in love with the aberrant, the rebellious, the transgressive. "According to my students", recounts Giroux, "*Dead Poets Society* was valuable as an exemplary model of critical pedagogy because it staked out a terrain of hope, and offered subject positions from within which they could project an image of themselves as future teachers; an image that encouraged them to identify themselves as agents rather than as mere technicians. As some students pointed out, the film made them feel good about themselves as teachers in the making"(Giroux, 2001, p. 81).

Anacoluthonic Pedagogy (*Quo Vadis*)

Keating's teaching is an eclectic mix of discreet rebellion, canonical distortion, even supercilious neglect, a kind of teaching without teaching. By conventional standards at Welton, a school that values the bottom line of academic achievement, his students are deprived of the fundamental curricular parameters they need in order to progress through

terminal examinations. This is evidenced when Mr Nolan takes over Keating's class at the end of the film and asks where the class are in the textbook. "We skipped around a lot, sir" is Cameron's unconvincing answer. "Alright then", says Nolan, "we'll start over.... What *is* poetry?" Not one of the students in the class appears vaguely interested in the topic and Nolan's bungling ineptitude is framed against Keating's magisterially impassioned performances. When Keating enters the room to collect his belongings, there is a minor stir before the final act of rebellion. The scene hyperbolically alludes to the disparity we've been witness to all along, that chasm between traditional enlightenment models of education and scholarship on the one hand, and the popular, dynamics of the mimetic ideal on the other.

The unreflective Hollywood inflection would lead us to believe that it is better to be a Keating than a Nolan, without exception. But, in spite of itself, *Dead Poets Society* asks the following questions: In what ways is the scene of teaching predicated on the figure of the follower – the leader, the master, tutors, one's fellow scholars? What is the implicit social contract we enter into in every classroom situation, every seminar, every lecture hall? What does it mean to *follow* unseen protocols of learning and teaching? What does it mean to be faithful to learning? Moreover, in what ways can successful teaching be seen as a formulation of fidelity? To whom and to what?

In a stunning interview with Diane Davis, "Confessions of an Anacoluthon: On Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, and Politics", Avital Ronell goes some way to providing an answer to our queries.^{lxx} Ronell's work is unique in having followed the question of stupidity through philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political struggles inside and outside of the university. In answer to Davis's question concerning the implications of stupidity for academia and activism, for "foolosophy" (Ronell's coinage) and politics, Ronell makes the following statement: "I am interested in the humbling that occurs when one says, 'I am stupid before the other,' which is absolutely a taboo. You cannot imagine someone in a university saying, 'I am stupid' or 'I am stupid before my students.' This humbling and destabilizing of the *sujet supposé savoir* – of the subject who is supposed to know or who is posed as functionary of knowing – creates minor insurrections for me" (Ronell, 2004, p. 55).^{lxxi}

The argument here is deceptive, since it implies that you ought to know what stupidity is in

order for you to be able to say, “I am stupid before the other”. But stupidity is unknowable, *unrecognizable*, un-understandable (*Unverständlich*), as such. Paradoxically, “as long as I don’t know what stupidity is, what I know about knowing, remains uncertain, even forbidding” (Ronell, 2002, p. 14). This is an outrageous paradox, the crux, between knowing and not knowing, between the infinite promise of intellectual emancipation and the limitations of learning. To be faithful to learning, one could assume from Ronell’s thinking means to be faithful to stupidity’s call, to the call to rethink your position as teacher every minute of every day, to be humble before the other, and not in a sense that masks an underlying esoteric wisdom (the *sujet supposé savoir*), humble because one simply does *not* know.

Though Ronell doesn’t mention this in her interview, Heidegger (in *What is Called Thinking?*) is very close to the spirit of her argument for an ethical pedagogical praxis:

Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by ‘learning’ we now suddenly understand merely the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he has still far more to learn than they – he has to learn to let them learn. The teacher must be capable of being more teachable than the apprentices... If the relation between the teacher and the taught is genuine, therefore, there is never a place in it for the authority of the know-it-all or the authoritative sway of the official. It is still an exalted matter, then, to become a teacher – which is something else entirely than becoming a famous professor.

(Heidegger, 1968, p. 15)

In a practical, everyday sense, learning to allow your students to respond to the questions you put to them is one of the hardest things to get right. How long do you wait? How do you learn to know when it is time to interject? How much freedom, how much drift, do you grant your students? It’s a perennial question with a humbling answer: “I don’t know”. If one

follows the protocols of the anacoluthon, the peripatetic pervert, of roving and wandering, as that word implies, then one must face up to the reality that stupidity counts for a lot of what we do.^{lxxiii} This makes teaching a profession of faith, a leap in the dark, so to speak. Teaching, it may be, places an unfathomable responsibility on our shoulders, a responsibility to know ahead of time how our students are going to react to our teaching. That's impossible demand, but a demand nonetheless. Much can be said in *Dead Poets Society* about the responsibility of Keating for the suicide of his student. Is he responsible or not? The answer is that you can never know because you never know what the other thinks: "I am stupid before the other". "Responsibility is monstrous", which is why we can only, in truth, tell parables about it. It's a riddle that begets riddles. As John Caputo puts it in a reading of an interview with Jacques Derrida:

Non-knowing puts faith and passion to the test, stretching them beyond the too limited expectations that knowledge tolerates. Derrida does not propose a learned unknowing, which is but a more oblique and negative way to know something still higher. The 'come!' does not arise from a knower's unknowing, a *'docta' ignorantia*, but a lover's unknowing, an *ignorantia amans*, not a learned but a loving, expectant unknowing, which keeps the future open by the passion of its love, its messianic yearning for what is 'to come'.

(Caputo, 1997 p. 103)

What can we say about a non-philosophy of love for learning and teaching? A stance that says I am stupid before the other. A pedagogy of the future, of the to-come is impossible. It cannot be prescribed. Such a pedagogy would be the most hospitable, yearning, loving pedagogy imaginable – a philopedagogics. A love foolosophy.

Pygmalion in the Classroom

Miller's Law: The greatest critics are those whose readings exceed their theoretical presuppositions.

(J. Hillis Miller)

Introduction

This chapter develops the idea that seeing is always motivated; that seeing the world as it is never totally and objectively disinterested. We might think an analysis of a story, character, theme, or person is in some way objectifiable but when we think like this we forget our own reading desires. We forget about our projections and expectations. Seeing, the claim is here, is also a form of creation, an act of reading. The chapter proceeds through a reading of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and its implication in educational theories (the "Pygmalion effect") as well as through the work of J. Hillis Miller on prosopopoeia before offering a concluding example of motivated seeing through Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Through reading stories – narrative examples of teaching and unlearning – the claim is that unlearning is an ethical response to others by seeing them consistently as others. It is also dynamically ethical in the scene of teaching because it exposes us to an ethics of the other before the law (Readings, 1996, p. 162).^{lxxiii} Keeping this idea open, this chapter will also claim, is a difficult thing to do in teaching.

Prosopopoeia

"Prosopopoeia" means giving a face or a voice to something absent or dead – literally "making" a face. J. Hillis Miller understands this as "the fundamental generative linguistic act making a given story possible" (Miller, 1990, p. 13). The ur-text for prosopopoeia is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which develops the Greek myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who, mistrusting and disdainful of women, fell in love with his own representation of the ideal woman. Pygmalion, Ovid tells us, is lonely and prays to Aphrodite to find him a wife in the statue's likeness. Instead, there is a twist in the tale, as there is in many of the great Greek and Roman myths. Aphrodite brings the ivory statue itself to life and Pygmalion falls in love

with his own creation, whom he names Galatea. Allegorically, the tale works on a parallel desire for a fantasy and for its realisation. It makes the virtual a reality.

So pervasive has this myth become in popular culture, so inspiring to novelists, artists, playwrights, and film makers over the years, that it's become part of our popular consciousness. Some examples are: Jean-Léon Gérôme's famous oil painting "Pygmalion and Galetée" (1890); George Bernard Shaw's influential play *Pygmalion* (1912); Lerner and Loewe's musical adaptation *My Fair Lady* (1956); Willy Russell's update *Educating Rita* (1980); films such as Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940); John Hughes' fantasy *Weird Science* (1985); Michael Gottlieb's *Mannequin* (1987); Gary Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990); Robert Iscove's *She's All That* (1999); Wayne Wang's romcom *Maid in Manhattan* (2002); Craig Gillespie's *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007); and poetry by Carol Ann Duffy, Patrick Kavanagh, Hilda Doolittle, and Friedrich Schiller. Even Oscar Wilde's reversal *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) share something of this mythic heritage, as does Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

The real point here is that there is an archetypal libidinal force between these texts and an extremely common apprehensive desire for a lover at once attainable and unattainable. Though the myth plays on the concept of possession, the underlying beauty of the story is always about creation, the forging of an ideal beauty too impossible to be true.

The Pygmalion Effect

In pedagogical theory, specifically the so-called "Pygmalion effect", illustrates the way a teacher's expectations of his or her students' abilities (how they are seen) has a radical effect on the students' performances. In *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968), a sociologist (Robert Rosenthal) and a school principal (Lenore Jacobson) popularly argued that increasing teachers' expectations of their students' performances can have radical positive effects on how students achieve their learning goals. As an experiment, Rosenthal and Jacobson chose a handful of random student names out of a hat and informed their teacher that these students would be "late bloomers". Rosenthal argued that four key factors resulted in positive results for these randomly chosen students:

1. The teachers were kinder to the children they thought were on the way to academic success, resulting in a climate change in the classroom for these “gifted” students specifically.
2. The teachers were more inclined to teach a more mature content, which meant that those children were being stretched more fully by the material.
3. Those chosen students were called on more often to answer questions, keeping them engaged in the activities in the classroom.
4. The randomly chosen children were given more concerted praise and more differentiated feedback from the teacher.

(Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992)

According to Rosenthal and Jacobson’s findings, the teachers engaged in what they called “a self-fulfilling prophecy” – those students were believed to be bright, intelligent scholars and they became bright, intelligent scholars. The moral of the story is one of faith in students’ abilities: if you think your students will do well, then they’ll do well. The counterpoint: if you think they’ll do poorly (“the golem effect”) then they will. Hence the “Pygmalion effect”. Though the data from Rosenthal and Jacobson’s study has suffered considerable scrutiny in the intervening years, it stands to reason that teachers’ expectations of their students’ performance has always been a factor in their achievements, particularly as it pertains to the structured environment of a traditional classroom.

Rosenthal and Jacobson draw their inspiration from G. B. Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* in their book, using the following extract to solidify their thinking:

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she’s treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will: but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.

(Shaw, 2005, p. 120)

Eliza Doolittle – the “flower girl” – is complaining at this moment to Mr Pickering, Professor Higgins’ friend and colleague, about her abominable treatment by Higgins. When Higgins first meets Eliza on the squalid streets of London he calls her a “squashed cabbage leaf” and an “incarnate insult to the English language” before claiming that he can, with a little training, “pass [her] off as the Queen of Sheba” (Shaw, 2005, p. 23). The play evolves with Eliza’s self-actualization as a lady in the elite upper-class echelons of London’s highest society. Shaw’s genius as a critic of social hierarchy is to have Doolittle realise that she is not for sale once Higgins tries to marry her off to the foolish (but wealthy) Freddy. “We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road”, says Eliza reproachfully. “I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now youve [sic] made a lady of me I’m not fit to sell anything else” (Shaw, 2005, p. 100). The irony is that, for all her disadvantage, and despite the way she is treated by Higgins, Doolittle is the shining moral light of the play.

Seeing Eliza as a flower girl *makes* her a flower girl. This kind of seeing is prosopopoeia *avant la letter*. It’s a way of “making” the face of another by type – a flower girl face or a lady face, for Higgins and Pickering respectively. Each one *makes* the face. There is an ethics in this *making* that harks back to Emmanuel Levinas’ claim in *Totality and Infinity* that the face is “infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign” and not in the order of knowledge (Levinas, 1979, p. 194). The face, Levinas claims, is what forbids me to kill, not because I understand it in its totality but because its infinity and nakedness put me in a primary non-negotiable obligation to it before I can even claim to know it (see Levinas, 1985, p. 85-92). It’s a question of justice. How do I do justice to this call from the other?

What Levinas means by all this foreignness and non-knowledge is that there is an ethical relation to others in the moment of seeing face-to-face that is not simply about seeing the other as a physical object. The face is foreign to me because it is epiphanic and overflowing; at the very least it obliges me to speak, to break the silence and say something. “The other”, says Levinas, “is not for reason a scandal that puts it into a dialectical movement, but the first rational teaching, the condition for all teaching” (Levinas, 1979, p. 204). Ethics is a first philosophy, a philosophy before thought, a philosophy of the other where love of wisdom is

not a wisdom that one can ever say one attains. The ethical relation to the other is the primary moment of teaching – teaching’s first philosophy – the foolosophy of pedagogy. This is precisely the unattainable thought of the infinite otherness of the other, which keeps knowledge suspended between us (*entre nous*) as a secret, the depths of which can never be plumbed. The other instructs and we choose to listen. We are taught by it (Katz, 2019, p. 499).

In *Pygmalion* Higgins chooses to see Eliza as a property to be manipulated and trained. He sees an object, not a person. There is no other for him. In this, he is like a Svengali to Eliza’s Trilby. He’s a stock character: the aggressive self-serving master surreptitiously promoting his own goals and failing to understand anything at all about the student. The real beauty of the play is precisely Higgins’ ignorance to the plight of the heroine, which is the most powerful dramatic irony. The entire audience knows how she feels; he doesn’t because he has no concept of the other. He’s an ethical idiot.

In light of all of this, an argument against Rosenthal and Jacobson’s hypothesis would be that their initial understanding of the pedagogical situation is hierarchical through and through in a way that, say, Jacques Rancière’s is not. For Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster the equality of wills is the most democratic and inspiring moment in the scene of teaching because it stems from similar notions of the call of the other. The equality of intelligence is the sine qua non of effective pedagogy. Looking at students and teachers the way Rosenthal and Jacobson do, in terms of an us and them dynamic, inspires nothing less than an unbridgeable chasm. And this chasm is a hierarchical order that will never subside into a democracy of intellect, an equality of intelligence.

What about the remainder of the students in Rosenthal and Jacobson’s classes? What do they gain from the experiment? All of the students in these classes will remain only students (however effective) and the teachers will remain only the teachers. The power dynamic will not change because the teacher’s view is always in a daze and on a dais. Though Eliza is trained, we might say, she is not educated. At least not by Higgins. Neither is Higgins educated by Eliza because he starts and ends in a position of power, only ever speaking to his student *ex cathedra*. The subject/object chasm is never considered by Higgins enough to

make the experience reciprocal. He has no ear for the call of the other and remains, as Biesta would claim, in an egocentric position.

Willy Russell's take on the *Pygmalion* myth is even more subtle again and a good antidote to the Rosenthal/Jacobson hypothesis. For Russell's Rita, the purpose of education is initially a socio-economic way out of the dismal drudgery of an impoverished existence; much as it was for Eliza. Russell updates the morality of the relationship between his Pygmalion and Galatea hilariously in the opening act. The first thing Rita says after giving her name to Frank is a comment on the erotic elements of a classical nude painting on Frank's office wall: "look at those tits..." This is followed by Rita's admission that she is expected but reluctant to have children. She wants to discover herself first and believes her introduction to literature will accomplish this. "What can I teach you?" says Frank. To which Rita replies, "Everything" (Russell, 2000, p. 27).

The power of Russell's play is its sensitivity to the question of education, which is effectively underexplored in Shaw's. Though Shaw leaves his play's ending ambiguous, Russell lets a powerfully suggestive question mark hang over the relationship between Rita and Frank throughout the play. The point is that Frank doesn't want to teach Rita because she will become shallow and conceited. She'll be like everyone else in the university. What he admires about her is her difference and he realises that this is infinitely more precious than her ability to identify assonance or rhyme off T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Arthur Prufrock" [sic] (Russell, 2000, p. 9).

Where Shaw's *Pygmalion* is ostensibly a critique of nineteenth century upper class morality, Russell's companion play is a critique of the purpose of education itself. It quarrels metadiscursively with the point of it all. We begin with a smart, witty, ironic young woman before filtering into a sardonically bookish carelessness: "I'm educated, I've got what you have an' ya' don't like it because you'd rather see me as the peasant I once was; you're like the rest of them – you like to keep your natives thick, because that way they still look charming and delightful. I don't need you. I've got a room full of books" (Russell, 2000, p. 98).

Rita's comments are unkind and impulsive. They're unreflective of the reason why Frank

initially balked at the idea of teaching her: “What can I teach you?” What she ultimately realises in the latter moments of the play is that effectively her education with Frank *was* useless. That is, it was useless for finding herself. What finally mattered was the relationship between the student and the teacher as a meeting of wills. “You think you gave me nothing”, says Rita, “ did nothing for me. You think I just ended up with a load of quotes an’ empty phrases; an’ I did. But that wasn’t your doin’. I was so hungry. I wanted it all so much that I didn’t want it to be questioned. I told y’ I was stupid” (Russell, 2000, p. 103).

How ironic it is to see how students who want to be educated the most, can also be the most unreflective. Such is the case, famously, with Edward Causabon in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* whose research project, *The Key to All Mythologies*, is a ludicrous exercise in infinite regress. The spectre of Causabon must hang over every academic. Frank knows this instinctively. His prescient understanding of the institution’s complicity in creating a statue out of a girl (essentially reversing the Pygmalion myth) is intelligent and instructive. Like a Medusa effect, Russell ridicules the very notion of an uncomplicated effigy of educational success. What the Pygmalion effect is really telling us is that you should beware what you dream of. Our desires are often misplaced. So strong are our beliefs and so deep-seated our desires that we so often miss the point of it all. And there really is no outside of this ideological dilemma. As teachers we should be mindful of the desire to forge our students in our own likeness. We should begin with the understanding that the university is a construction, an institution of learning and design. Education is manifestly not the same thing as training.^{lxxiv} Eliza can be trained to speak eloquently. Rita can become bookish and well read. But that’s not education. Education does not work in a machine-like way (Biesta, 2013, p. x). The most powerful motivation for teaching ought to spring from a respect for the other beyond what the institution claims it can teach us. It must spring into life beyond “the undoubted reality of the intensification of bureaucratic surveillance infusing and permeating the delivery of university education today” (Bowman, 2013, p. 98).

Why Hillis Miller?

Anyone who’s read J. Hillis Miller, especially his *The Ethics of Reading* (1986), *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990), *Hawthorne and History* (1991), *Topographies* (1995), *Others* (2001), and

On Literature (2002) will know how important this Pygmalion trope becomes to him and how central it is in all of his work. Reading Miller closely means confronting, at some point or other, the central importance of this idea in his writings, which means reading prosopopoeia as an act and function of literature and beyond. Ultimately, reading prosopopoeia means asking yourself what it really means to *see* a character as a real person and thinking about what affects readers in the act and event of reading narratives, of bringing stories to life in the mind's eye. It simply means thinking about what stories do to us, why we need them, and what responsibilities we have to them. And, by extension, it means questioning the ethics of all of this.

Facing up to a responsibility in reading – facing what confronts us as we read, seeing through it – means understanding that what happens to us in the stories we read is simultaneously free and not free. We are directed by a text to a point, but how we read is entirely unique to us. What happens in reading, when we read, happens, with all the inaugural violence, Miller will tell us, of an event. *It is sheer unexpectedness*. No matter how many times you read the same book, no matter how many times those characters appear to us on the page, something different happens, something new. Miller's way of putting this is as follows:

One way to define this quality of true acts of reading is to say that they never correspond exactly to what other readers tell me I am going to find when I read that book, however learned, expert, and authoritative those previous readers have been. Another way to describe what is unpredictable in a genuine act of reading is to say that reading is always the disconfirmation or modification of presupposed literary theory rather than its confirmation. What happens when I read a book never quite fits my theory (or anyone else's) of what is going to happen.

(Miller, 1990, p. 20).

However unpredictable or new the reading experience, however free it feels, however limitless, nonetheless there is a responsibility for seeing what happens, to follow a path; and the responsibility is the reader's own. How Miller sees this is infinitely fascinating to him and, I daresay, to his readers. This is Miller's absolute uniqueness. To see eye to eye with

Miller is (however counterintuitively) not a process of clarity, therefore, rather it is a process of absolute submersion into a question of what it means to read well with both eyes open. Not to be given over to what others think a novel or poem ought to mean (even him) but to begin to see it for what it is, an invitation to think beyond what others have said about it. The inaugural violence of reading – what Miller calls “good reading” – its eventness, its quality of infinite surprise and regress, is the absolute challenge to the theories we bring with us.^{lxxv} This of course even works through the concept of the Pygmalion effect and the ethics of hospitality to the other. It might be (for how could we know for sure) the best guide we have for understanding our relationship with the other as an event of unlearning.

If there *is* an ethics of reading then it is an ethics based on the quality of honest and open disclosure of the event of reading itself, of seeing and saying what happens every time we encounter otherness in the texts we read, especially when that is a failure to comprehend what we are seeing or hearing therein. No theory absolves us from the risk of reading. No theorist comes before the event. No rubrics exist to quantify the event of this opening.

This is why we ought to begin here by saying that calling J. Hillis Miller a “literary theorist” is actually a gross misnomer. Miller is *not* a literary theorist, even though he appears in a recent *Oxford Bibliographies* project as a literary theorist (Dunne, 2018). He is not a theorist, that is, if by that you mean someone who sees through texts (the word “theory”, by the way, etymologically comes from the Greek word *theoria* meaning “seeing”). He is not a literary theorist if you mean by that denomination someone who can tell you by way of didactic instruction and conclusion how to read literature, so that you might be able to say one fine day, “now I am a good reader”. Just as one can never say “I *am* just”, so can one never say “I *am* a good reader”.

Miller’s eyes/I(s) are deeper than that, full of blindness and insight, full of what happens in the incoming, inventive, event, with no end in sight (no sight in end). Miller cannot show us the way because the way does not exist. What Miller does is incite us to read better by showing us time and again that the fundamental vein of literature is that it remains always already open to reinterpretation. Thus his incite to insight. The versions of Pygmalion he speaks of are opportunities for unlearning because they presuppose the idea that all theories

are provisional, transitory, plastic.

On First Looking into Miller's Prosopopoeias

Permit me to carry my seeing eye analogy one step further before I perform a brief reading of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as an example of prosopopoeia. Prosopopoeias often are anthropomorphic ascriptions to inanimate objects for which we have no other terms: for example, the hands of a clock, the legs of a chair, or the eye of a storm. We often think of hills, for example, as having a brow or a face. The abusive transfer of a metaphor from one realm to another is more properly known as a "catachresis". To say that a chair has arms is to make an analogy between the human world and the inhuman world. In order for us to engage with this idea, there has to be a kind of unlearning or critical naivety, a childlike innocence. Like looking at cloud patterns or stars and reading shapes, we need to suspend our disbelief in order to read. It is this kind of unlearning that I take to be fundamental to Miller's spectacularly^{lxxvi} peculiar idiom, and I will try to follow this up in what I say.

Prosopopoeia, for Miller, as we've seen, is the inaugural trope, our first step into the virtual dimension, and therefore essential to all acts of reading. Reading narratives are ways of breathing life into something inanimate or absent, of conjuring spirits, giving a name, a voice, and a face to some absent and otherwise unreachable other. It is for this reason that reading literature is one of the greatest responsibilities we have to the dead, our way of mourning them, of not fully forgetting them or letting go of their memories and deeds.^{lxxvii} All reading is therefore bound to an Ariadnean umbilical cord, fastening us forever to our most distant ancestral lines. Hence Joyce's fantastically metafictional tele-techno-prosopopoeic joke:

Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on dear old greatgrandfather kraahraak! Hellohellohello amawfullyglad kraak awfullygladaseeragain hellohello amarawf kophthst. Remind you of the voice like the photograph reminds you of the face. Otherwise you couldn't remember the face after fifteen years, say.

(Joyce, 1992, p. 144)

The odd thing here is of course that Joyce's joke is hyperbolic; in the sense that it exaggerates

the everyday, the way in which reading and writing are avenues for switching on that gramophone, encountering otherness, letting it (or better them) come. How often do we really think about this? How often do we think about raising the spirit of George Eliot or Anthony Trollope? How often do we wonder about the sheer peculiar necromancy of it all? Of Jack Lemon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like it Hot*, of Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*, of Robin Williams in *The Dead Poets Society*? How often do we look at photographs of ourselves and wonder about the ineluctable mortality of it all? About the ghost stories we live in? Not often enough it would seem.

Perhaps the best place to see why all reading is a species of necromancy is in Dickens' celebrated opening lines in *Great Expectations*, where the young Pip's burgeoning literacy manifests the letters on his family's tombstones as pure prosopopoeias:

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister — Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "Also Georgiana Wife of the Above", I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly.

(Dickens, 2002, p. 3)

Pip's reading of his parents' tombstones is an allegory of reading as prosopopoeial interjection, of seeing beyond the letter. It is one of the great moments in literature for seeing reading as symbolic action: that it sees through the word, relates it, and brings it back to itself. The joke is of course that Pip isn't really reading the names AND that he is doing precisely that, simultaneously, in a whirligig of wonderful little ironies. Pip is doing what all

readers must do; he is seeing through the letters on the headstone in order to imagine his parents. But they are letters, not his parents. The boy reads by substituting the letters for images, thus falling in love with the inanimate, as does Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with Galatea's statue. What Pip wants to do is to restore life into an inanimate text.

Without what Miller calls in *On Literature* those little "Open Sesames" delivering us over to the wonder of a virtual reality, there is no reading and no responsibility (Miller, 2002, p. 24-45). There is no narrative without it, no poetry, no literature. This condition is also, therefore, what essentially makes the foundation of storytelling invulnerable to deconstruction. Any accounting for prosopopoeia as a critical exercise is bound to fail since by an ineluctable necessity the initial criticism must set this trope in motion before the analysis can even begin. In Paul de Man's odd formulation of this (and Miller is never far from de Man on these issues): "to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat – that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophise them in our turn" (de Man, 1979, p. 68).

That's a wonderful list of contradictions. But you really need to think about it and how you actually read a text. How can a reading be at the same time understanding *and* forgetting, knowing *and* erasure, prosopopoeia *and* defacement? Each term cancels out the other until we arrive at the last: *repetition*, meaning that this process begins again anew each time, however knowledgeable we think we have become. Thus we are destined to repeat the crimes we condemn – we are destined to read as children. Like Pip – like him or not – we read. We repeat. We envisage. We deface. We start again.

This is the paradox of reading: to be critical of the trope you have to learn to become a slow reader, but – and this is a very large *but* indeed – in order to become a critical reader you must first pass naively through this prejudice. You have to, in other words, learn to read at two speeds (*allegro* and *lento*) at once. Impossibly. A naïve reading is not necessarily replaced by a critical reading when the critical reading comes to pass, since the naivety is the possibility of reading itself. You have to be naïve but you don't have to be critical. That's

theory for you.

In becoming a good reader, a virtuous or responsible reader, one must unlearn how to be critical over again each time in an endless process of reading again. If each act of reading is a singular response, situated at a single moment in time, *an event*, then it follows that that reading must necessarily have taken that figure for granted. Learning how to read Hillis Miller's way, is not only to become aware that the hills have eyes but that it is necessary for us to believe it. It is a question of faith in the best reading with the simultaneous (impossible) understanding that both ways are contiguous.

“Doomed to Be Seen”

As promised, I want to put these ideas to the test by offering a reading of prosopopoeia at work. I want to examine an act of reading taking place as it envisages the drama unfolding. I take Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in this instance as an example of reading as prosopopoeia (a reading-prosopopoeia), but my choice is somewhat arbitrary in the sense that I could literally take any piece of literature as my example. I choose Hardy here, simply because I have been teaching him lately and still find this work, after so many years of reading and rereading, to be one of the most extraordinary novels I have ever read. The experience of reading this work is consistently eventful, in the full resonance of that word. I find also, fortuitously or not, and on closer inspection, how oddly apt this text is to the topic at hand.

For present purposes, *Tess* is chock-full of references to seeing and sight, which makes it a convenient starting place. The more you look, the more you see: from Angel's first encounter with Tess (“As he fell out of the dance his eyes lighted on Tess Durbeyfield, whose own large orbs wore, to tell the truth, the faintest aspect of reproach that he had not chosen her”) to Tess's doomed encounter with Alec Stoke-d'Urberville's “bold rolling eye” (“She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her”), to Mrs. d'Urberville's literal and figurative blindness to her own son's character (“compelled to love her offspring resentfully”), to the tragically ironic unseen rape of Tess, to Tess's broken view of the world as a maiden no more, as she (“gazed over the familiar green world beyond, now half-veiled

in mist”). Indeed Hardy describes Tess early in the novel as a woman “doomed to be seen” by the wrong man – a prophetic imagining that will control every aspect of her life until, as Hardy famously puts it, “the President of the immortals had ended his sport with Tess” (Hardy, 1992, p. 390).

Perhaps, as Hardy himself, after seeing, at 16, Martha Brown being hanged outside Dorchester prison for murdering her husband, understood this visual trauma as also a trauma of reading. His question must have been how to apostrophise the memory in order to retell the story of a desperate woman driven to a desperate act, responsibly – at least responsibly to the memory of having seen it. In order to tell the story, Hardy has had to recreate a fictional representation of a significant real-world happening. He’s had to raise a ghost. This event in August 1856, the catalyst for the book, is not only a profound visual stimulus for the story, it is also a crisis in representation, which Hardy famously reflected on in his letters much later in his life, claiming he was ashamed at having ever witnessed it. Seen in this light, *Tess* operates as a work of voyeuristic penance. As in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Hardy responds to the tragic by immortalising it in text, by writing through it and committing it to history. Only when *Tess* is read, does she appear to us as a living soul. Only when we pick it up and see her again does the tragedy unfold again in a haunted parallel universe. Only when we raise her ghost and Hardy’s with it does she begin to live for us. Thus *Tess* is undoubtedly an extraordinary literary example of the collision of carnality and conceptuality, of vision and insight, the real and the surreal, in an ever increasing series of extraordinarily scopophilic renderings.

No one who reads *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* can fail to be struck by Hardy’s peculiar oral fixation either.^{lxxviii} That *Tess* is primarily drawn in the reader’s mind erotically isn’t exactly understated in the text. Her “mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes”, her “bouncing handsome womanliness” and her “luxuriance of aspect” and “fullness of growth” are powerfully suggestive, as are all those references to her mouth.^{lxxix} Examples of this are superabundant and far too many to recount here. Suffice it to mention the moment Alec feeds *Tess* those fateful strawberries through parted lips at Trantridge; that oddly tantalizing moment when Alec tutors *Tess* in the art of whistling – only to surreptitiously watch her mouthing sounds from behind closed curtains; all those stolen cursory kisses from Alec on

the road back and forth from Marlott; Angel's remembrance of Tess's kisses as the taste of "butter and eggs and milk and honey"; even Angel's very own "kiss of charity", which is really a kiss of death to Marion at Talbothays, and so on and so forth.

Perhaps the most obvious example, however, is Angel's aberrant orgasmic lunge at Tess in Chapter 24.

How very lovable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it; all was real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before, and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening. He had never before seen a woman's lips and teeth which forced upon his mind with such persistent iteration the old Elizabethan simile of roses filled with snow. Perfect, he, as a lover, might have called them off-hand. But no—they were not perfect. And it was the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which gave the humanity.

Clare had studied the curves of those lips so many times that he could reproduce them mentally with ease: and now, as they again confronted him, clothed with colour and life, they sent an *aura* over his flesh, a breeze through his nerves, which wellnigh produced a qualm; and actually produced, by some mysterious physiological process, a prosaic sneeze.

(Hardy, 1992, p. 147-148)

One of the marvels of Hardy's narrative art is his ability to manipulate point of view and this citation is an excellent example. Point of view shifts through the third person vicariously from Clare to Hardy and back to Clare in this section, so that the reader is hitchhiking in the consciousness of the narrator, then Angel, then the narrator. The piece, ironically, shifts point of view again, a little further on, culminating in Old Pretty, a "puzzled" cow kicking her hind leg anxiously while the lovers embrace beneath her.

Here Tess is sexualised and doomed yet again by the gaze of others. She is helpless, in this moment, just as she is helpless in the eyes of her readers throughout the novel. Perhaps that's her real tragedy. We see her almost entirely through the gaze of Alec and Angel, and, of course, Hardy's disembodied voice, and a host of other characters. She is a protagonist controlled and manipulated by the gaze of her peers and her readers, a protagonist as Peter Widdowson convincingly argues, that we simply don't get to know: "we know almost nothing substantive about Tess's 'character,' for the novel never attempts to penetrate her secret being" (Widdowson, 1993, p. 19). Tess herself is therefore a ghost haunting Hardy's imagination and the imaginations of Angel and Alec, not a substantive being. Again, like Pygmalion, the "pure woman, faithfully presented" (as Hardy ironically called her in his controversial subtitle) is anything but in the eyes of Victorian moralists. She is not pure and she is not faithful to anything but the germ of Hardy's story.

What we get with *Tess* therefore is a novel that prioritises the act of seeing so much so that the titular character is a focal point that fails to dislodge its secret. We see so much and yet know so little of her. Just as the three major moments in the novel are not narrated, so we come to realise that Hardy's strategy is to leave us guessing and not to present at all. Hardy's "faithful representation" is doubly ironic at such moments because it simply does not depict. We are not privy to the rape of Tess; we only get a question: "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive". Neither do we see Tess's act of murder. What we get is Mrs Brooks (the prying landlady) peering through the keyhole at Tess's tragedy followed by an oblong blood stain on the ceiling. Lastly, we see only 'Liza-Lu and Angel gazing at a black flag symbolizing Tess's doom.

As a moral, *Tess* narrates the "cruelty of lust and the fragility of love" (p. 276). Among its lessons is that seeing and believing are enmeshed in impressionistic desires; that, however else we may look at it, our gaze is motivated by a need: to understand, to obtain, to touch, to own, to embrace, to bring to life. Looks can be destructive both ways, from the beholder to the beheld. In this sense, *Tess* narrates an innate failure to see through seeing, to understand it for what it is. We may think we understand our desires. We may think we know why we see things the way we do. But we are perpetually undone by our blindness to understand why

we see the way we do. Moments of exposure to ideological or sensuous bias do not preclude us from making the same mistakes. We may read to see clearly but we are apt to stumble again because the initial act of reading, the first prosopopoeia, sets us off in a direction we have no way of understanding from a vantage point or from some prospect above that act itself.

I See Dead People

My claim here has been that *Tess* is a novel that in many ways foregrounds the trope of prosopopoeia. I have used it as an example to qualify Miller's assertion that the primary trope of literature (indeed, I would say, of all reading) is prosopopoeia and therefore it is as such undeconstructible. My example, I can now say after my brief analysis is strangely befitting, since Hardy is consistently drawing the reader's attention to ways of seeing in that novel. If you were inclined to follow this topic analytically and count them all up, you would find that there are 158 references to eyes in *Tess*, 176 in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 190 in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and 246 in *Jude the Obscure* (Marshall, 1966, p. 264). But this really tells us nothing more than Hardy uses the word quite a bit. What we ought to see is that beyond the simple data there is a propensity to disguise what is fundamentally apparent. In other words, there is a propensity in these novels to claim, however paradoxically, that the more we see the less we are aware of what we are seeing and how we are seeing it.

Take for instance the following description of Tess harvesting in the fields by the local townsfolk – Tess is considered a pitiful creature at this stage by her peers for being left alone to raise Alec's child:

It was a thousand pities, indeed; it was impossible for even an enemy to feel otherwise on looking at Tess as she sat there, with her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes, neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises—shade behind shade—tint beyond tint—around pupils that had no bottom; an almost standard woman, but for the slight incautiousness of character inherited from her race.

(Hardy 1992, p. 89)

Notice how Tess's eyes are described here. They are neither one colour nor another, shaded and tinted beyond definition, bottomless, and unreadable. The more we look the less we see. Hardy's description of them later in the novel is likewise unsettled:

At first she would not look straight up at him, but her eyes soon lifted, and his plumbed the deepness of the ever-varying pupils, with their radiating fibrils of blue, and black, and gray, and violet, while she regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam.

(Hardy 1992, p. 166-167)

Tess's ever-varying pupils are indicative of a difficulty not only of chromatic equivalence but with a deeper existential awareness. The more intently Angel traces the lineaments of Tess's features the more Hardy muddies the waters, as it were.

Reading passages like this cannot but make the reader infer that Hardy himself has fallen in love with his own creation. So finely wrought are those details that one can almost believe that this is the case, though of course we can never know for sure. Hardy has created a ghost of angelic proportions. By this I do not mean to suggest that Tess overshadows a phantom essence, an essence that conspicuously controls our reading of the text. My claim is merely that Hardy's art is to show us that our desires and projections create and control our readings in ways that we can never fully understand. We are directed by what we see but have no sure means of knowing that we are reading rightly.

This, finally, is the possibility and impossibility of good reading. If Miller's law is correct, and our theories are complicated and exceeded by our closest readings, then we ought to return to *Tess* each time with an open mind in order to read it well. We ought to expect its excesses. Literature, as Miller says of it, "speaks the unspeakable and finds resemblances for what resembles nothing else"; it affords us a privileged access to an otherness that is in no other way approachable (Miller, 2017, p. 251). When we read a character like Tess, we fill in the blanks and are guided along by a sense that we are correct in seeing things the way we see them. Perhaps, ultimately, nobody can make us see it differently once we have committed

to our own readings. We are directed by the text and our personalities. Knowing that we project our desires and wishes into these resemblances is no safeguard against reading awry. Seeing things this way is seeing that reading is part of what Miller (after Henry James and Ralph Waldo Emerson) calls the conduct of life. It is our responsibility to the living and to the dead. It is also a way of doing things with words, a speech act for which we are ultimately responsible, though to what exactly, only our own eyes can tell us.

What Can I Teach You?

We come again to the question posed by Frank in *Educating Rita*: What can I teach you? In each version of the Pygmalion story explored here we see a desire to comprehend a vision we create for ourselves through reading. Each story recreates a wish-fulfilment narrative. Each story tells us, allegorically, about the desires we have to understand the other. This desire is also a desire, as Galatea was for Pygmalion, for possession – comprehension as apprehension. We ought to see that these stories are also (each in their own way) a critique of the idea that we can control, as teachers or individuals, the desires of others. These stories, I believe, are connected in a fundamental way in this. They are speaking about the dangers of reducing the other to the same. They speak, each one, vicariously, about the dangers of seeing ourselves, our students, and the people in our lives as types.

Each allegory of prosopopoeial desire for the pure possession of the other is an allegory of the desire each one of us has to reproduce the other as a version of ourselves. The Pygmalion effect in education might then be understood, as I see it here, as a warning *not* a paradigm. The warning announces, above all else, not to deny others' voices. We ought to see others (every other other) as self-creating, self-aware, self-empowered, as individuals, however impossibly – for in truth this is not always possible. The opportunity to engage in an ethically open and hospitable dialogue is the hope against hope of becoming otherwise than students and teachers. We ought to begin by therefore reading otherwise.

Learnercentrism

In my more radical moments I sometimes think that learning is the last thing that educators should be concerned about...

(Gert Biesta)

If we follow Levinas in his suggestion that uniqueness is not a matter of essence but of existence, that it is not a matter of being but of “otherwise than being,” then it follows that subjectivity or subject-ness ceases to be an attribute of something (literally of *some thing*) and instead becomes an event: something that can occur from time to time, something that can emerge, rather than something that is constantly there, that we can have, possess and secure.

(Gert Biesta)

Introduction

In a very real sense nobody could feasibly write a thesis on the question of learning (or unlearning) without encountering at some point and in quite some depth the work of Gert Biesta. Biesta’s understanding of learning and his unrelenting challenge to this very sticky concept is unparalleled in contemporary philosophy of education; and arguably in philosophy in general. He has written no less than four books on the subject to date and is still publishing a substantial amount in various journal articles and commentaries. His critical quartet – *Beyond Learning* (2006), *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2010), *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), and *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (2017) – this chapter will argue is an important line of argument against the notion of what I will call in another strange (but I think justifiable) neologism *learnercentrism*, bringing the Biestian concept of “learnification” (Biesta, 2010, 2013, 2017) closer to a Derridean heritage for the purposes of this investigation.

Biesta refers to his coinage, “learnification”, as “a deliberately ugly word” (Biesta, 2010, p. 18) and justifies its use by claiming that it refers to the transformation of the vocabulary used to talk about education into one of “learning” and “learners”. (Biesta, 2010, p. 18). Biesta finds this linguistic transfer highly problematic and spells out his position in the

following manner:

The quickest way to express what is at stake here is to say that the point of education is never that children or students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular *purposes*, and that they learn this from *someone*. The problem with the language of learning and with the wider “learnification” of educational discourse is that it makes it far more difficult, if not impossible, to ask the crucial educational questions about *content, purpose, and relationships*. Yet it is in relation to these dimensions, so I wish to suggest, that teaching matters and that teachers should teach and should be allowed to teach.

(Biesta, 2012, p. 36)^{lxxx}

Of course these neologisms are much more than mere semantic issues. They strike deep into our understanding of what is actually central in and understood by teaching and learning in our everyday practical working lives. They point to fundamental questions about what it is we do when we think we’re teaching, what exactly we think we gain from going to schools and universities, and what we think the overriding purpose of education is. One of the most interesting areas for consideration in Biesta’s work is the subtle underpinning of words so often taken for granted, such as “education”, “learning”, “teaching”, “measurement”, “interruption”, “outcome”, and “standard”. In Biesta’s books these words are interrogated for broader resonances habitually overlooked or actively avoided by parents, students, educators, and administrators. If you think you know what these registers mean, says Biesta, then you need to think again.

In a way much of what I’ve been saying throughout my discussions of literary texts is indebted to Biesta’s vision for contemporary education. Though I refer to these concepts in different contexts and use them to tease out my own thesis that understanding literature as unlearning is primarily a narrative act, an event, and an epiphany, my terminology is consistently close to Biesta’s. Several of his intellectual influences, notably Derrida, Rancière, Levinas, and Caputo, have also influenced this thesis. His readings of these figures have also led him to a certain hermeneutical view of teaching and learning through

philosophical concepts that are also of interest here, namely weak thinking, ignorance, alterity, event, and outcome.

The Purpose of Dialogue

Here I will reintroduce Biesta's interests in order to 1.) highlight the similarities between my own way of thinking and his; 2.) to show how his contemporary philosophies of education are consistent with an obvious need for change; and 3.) to reflect these ideas in order to suggest ways of employing Biesta's commentaries in the classroom. Theories, I believe, are only worthwhile if they have practical purchase on what we do, feel, and think. Therefore I want to enter into a dialogue with Biesta with a view to putting what he says to work. I say "dialogue" here to employ one of his key words immediately. What follows consequently is not a simple critique of that work, as that would not be a *dialogue* as Biesta envisages it, nor would it be germane to the way his thinking manifests itself in his writings. Rather, in the weakest way imaginable, what follows here is simply a recounting for and a development of Biesta's ideas, because it is believed here that these ideas are one of the best possible springboards for change in contemporary education. I believe in the necessity of these ideas for productive and revolutionary modifications in the way we think and the way we practice teaching today. What I will add is merely how they can help us think further about unlearning – a word Biesta doesn't use, nor, I would suggest, is ever likely to use – to demonstrate why.

Beauty and Gert Biesta

Biesta's epigraph to *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (2017), and its guiding principle, comes by way of Philippe Meirieu: "*Un élève-sujet est capable de vivre dans le monde sans occuper le centre du monde*", which translates as "a student-subject is capable of living in the world without occupying the centre of the world" (Biesta, 2017, p. 9). What Biesta understands by this is that contemporary educational practices invariably place the student at the centre of learning without reflecting on the inherent difficulties of such polarisation. So student-centred has the world of education become, according to Biesta, that the teacher has been transformed from the "sage on the stage" to "a guide on the side" or a "peer at the rear" (Biesta, 2017, p. 2).

Much of Biesta's argument stems from a serious mistrust of the word "learning" and its use in our language today (Biesta, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017).^{lxxxix} Stakeholders in education have become accustomed to leaning on "learning" to humanize educational discourse. Students are "learners"; adult education is "lifelong learning". Instead of education we now talk about "learning objectives" and "learning outcomes"; we've even begun to understand our schools as "places of learning" and universities as "seats of learning". According to Biesta, we talk, absurdly often, in our everyday transactions with students, teachers, and administrators of teaching and learning as if the two were the same thing: "*teachingandlearning*" (Biesta, 2002, p. 38) . We talk about active learning, associative learning, assessment for learning, observational learning, rote learning, formal learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, distance learning, tangential learning, e-learning, machine learning, and so and so forth. This is what is known in Biesta's terms as the "learnification" of education (Biesta, 2010, p. 18).^{lxxxii}

For Biesta what we miss when we talk about "learning" is its significance first as a *process* word – meaning that it doesn't signify content and purpose – and second as an *individualistic* word – meaning that learning is something you do on your own (Biesta, 2013, p. 126). The problems then are that whereas educational language asks us to think about content and purpose, relations and responsibilities, the language of learning steers us away from these notions and asks students and teachers to think about ourselves and our results. When we think about learning, for Biesta, we tend to forget about others (Biesta, 2017, p. 16). We become "egological" – the centre of the world or rather the centre of our own world [*Un élève-sujet est capable de vivre dans le monde sans occuper le centre du monde*] (Biesta, 2017, p. 9).^{lxxxiii}

We might consider the term "learning outcome". What is it that teachers actually do when they talk about learning outcomes in their classrooms? The purpose and content of the class can be negated if the drive towards an endpoint understanding is focused on the pursuit of a grade. Though teachers and students understand this aspect, and value it since jobs and careers depend on it, a further directive is needed if we are to label the activity *educational* as opposed to simply mechanical, according to Biesta (Biesta, 2013, p. 3). On this latter point both Biesta and Readings concur. Biesta's claim is that "we need judgement rather than

recipes in order to be able to engage with this openness and do so in an educational way (Biesta, 2013, p. 137). For Readings, the question of judgement is also the quintessential element in determining what it means to do justice in the classroom: “[v]alue is a question of judgement, a question whose answers must continually be discussed” (Readings, 1991, p. 134).

The issues are contemporaneous with an understated burgeoning global neoliberalism (see Biesta, 2017a; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Giroux, 2004, 2014). Increasingly, under the aegis of national and international curricular guidelines, institutional protocols, performance indicators, course design templates, quantitative and qualitative models, subject rubrics, etc., teachers are required to justify their approaches to teaching content through learning outcomes parameters.^{lxxxiv} Such parameters are often framed in the following way: “In this lesson students will be able to do a, b, and c.”; “By the end of the lesson students will understand...”; “Students will be able to articulate, apply, evaluate, use, collect, organize... etc.” Most teachers are adept at writing these objectives. Bloom’s Taxonomy offers the vocabulary to help them describe what they want their outcomes to be: *Cognitive learning skills*: “arrange, define, examine, reproduce, identify, recognize”; *Appreciative learning skills*: “challenge”, “dispute”, “argue”, “support”; *Psychomotor learning skills*: “express”, “perform”, “handle” (Booker, 2007; Doughty, 2006; Ormell, 1974). Expectations are increasingly categorised (Hussey and Smith, 2010). Teacher observation examination rubrics utilise the same models for grading teacher performances in classes, so the language reciprocates and the student understands the commerce of the vocabulary. How was the learning assessed, measured, planned? Was the teacher cognizant of SMART goals throughout the lesson? Did the learning planning match the learning goal? This is how we assess students and teachers.^{lxxxv} The learning outcome, Biesta argues, has become the purpose itself as “the language of learning tends to obscure those dimensions that make education educational” (Biesta, 2013, p. 76).

While desiring the best possible schooling in terms of grades and qualifications is not in itself lamentable, the avenues being chosen by policy makers and learning institutions across the globe can be if *all* learning outcomes are mediated through a desire for better scores, which in turn makes the institutions more marketable and the students more publicly

presentable.^{lxxxvi}

An example of this business model approach is Mike Mattos' YouTube clip "How to get insanely clear about learning outcomes and learning objectives", which argues that the best intervention is prescription when it comes to standardised education.^{lxxxvii} Mattos claims that being "insanely clear" about learning outcomes is what schools need to practise. They need to translate state standards into "simple, understandable words, so that everyone is laser-like clear on what it means". Mattos' mantra is that when it comes to learning, "if it's predictable, it's preventable", meaning teachers need to hold team meetings with the purpose of "agreeing on the essentials". They need to boil down the curriculum in order to know what standards they need to work on to achieve their learning targets. Once they can all agree on the fundamentals of what it is they're teaching their students then they'll be able to dispense with the chaos of what he pejoratively calls "unintended outcomes", what Biesta would term the weak aspects that make education educational (Biesta, 2013, p. x).^{lxxxviii}

Ostensibly, what Mattos is saying is empowering for teachers. They have a task to do and that task is deliberate and quantifiable. If they follow Mattos' example, they will see the results of their labours through the enhanced abilities of their students. While the presence of precise and justifiable criteria is essential to the educative work of teachers and the peace of mind of their students, for this to be the exclusive pursuit is somewhat problematic. The position of the teacher shifts from educator to facilitator of learning alone. The shift is important because it harks back to Biesta's concerns about the language of learning itself (Biesta, 2010, p. 18). What learning gives us is a concept of measurable change, as a process term (Biesta, 2013, p. 63).

For Biesta, arguments for clarity and standards, targets and trajectories, PISA reports and OECD standards, TIMSS and PIRLS, are laudable goals. Indeed, teaching standards are desirable for the integrity of the profession, as are curricular protocols. At some level teachers need to be held accountable for the delivery and planning of their lessons, since what they teach is socio-politically and socio-economically decisive. They also essentially need to be able to justify their habits to their employers, their students and their students' guardians. However, since the market economy has become the single most important factor in

regulating the profession (Apple, 2000, 2006; Connell, 2013) it is important to reflect on the purpose of competition, data, and trajectories. The question comes back: to whom or to what are universities and schools accountable? (Readings, 1991; Lynch, 2012; Slater, 2015).

This need for predictability and surety in everything that goes on in the classroom and in the event of education can also be limiting. To limit learning to its utility rather than its capacity for surprise, can also devalue the experience of education as an experience, rather than an accumulation of the new (Biesta, 2013, p. 139-140). This surprise is precisely what's beautiful about education for people like Gert Biesta and why students and teachers today can miss the point that the learning outcome is useful rather than educative. The "beauty" of education is not necessarily found in the security of predictability and clarity. To people who believe that the purpose of education should be outcomes based this line of thinking will sound unabashedly idealistic, even absurd, but for those educators who see the profession as a vocation beyond certainty, Biesta's beautiful risk offers a dynamic alternative (Dijkman, 2019).^{lxxxix}

Unintended Outcomes

The phrase "unintended outcomes" is used by Mike Mattos as something educators need to be wary of. For Mattos outcomes need to be so clear that there can be no unintended remainders (Mattos, 2018). This line of thinking makes the power dynamic and the consumer/producer dyad most explicit. Biesta would claim that Mattos is looking at learning in the strong metaphysical sense as a presence to itself, a hermeneutics of control (Biesta, 2013, p. 15). What Mattos is missing is what is always missing in the scene of teaching, for Biesta, namely the absolute certainty of the remainder – what happens outside and around my intention, which I have referred to already (via Caputo and Biesta) as the weakness of education (Biesta, 2013, p. 1-9).

In his most recent book *The Rediscovery of Teaching* Biesta argues that when we begin to think about education in mechanistic ways such as this we objectify the world. We do this in such a way that our students become objects to us rather than subjects in their own right, as we do teachers to them. This is essentially the crux of the problem with the language of learning and the mechanics of "learnification". Learning objectifies our world because it

recounts to us a process of change that we can deem either sufficient or insufficient. We can look at the student in a way that removes them from their subjectivity and concentrate on a performance of production. The real dilemma for teaching, Biesta argues, is the ability for students to be open to a desire for “grown-up-ness”, by which he means an understanding that they *are not the centre of the world*, that things change and that being in the world is a difficult freedom, an existential dilemma, a being at war with oneself and one’s thoughts as much as it is being with others, with responsibility for oneself and others: every other. This is an awareness of one’s own “subject-ness” in a world of others (Biesta, 2017, p. 5).

“One could say”, argues Biesta, “that acts of understanding and interpretation always start from where we are – they are issued by the self, so to speak – go out to the world, and in some way then return to the self. Learning as comprehension thus puts the self at the centre and makes the world into an object of the self’s comprehension” (Biesta, 2017, p. 31). What Biesta is intimating here is that learning puts us at the centre of things because we think that when we learn we take something *into* ourselves. In the process we centre ourselves at the crucible of thought. This is how we have been taught to learn. This is echoed in Levinas, from where Biesta himself seems to have gleaned the impression:

Knowledge has always been interpreted as assimilation. Even the most surprising discoveries end by being absorbed, comprehended, with all that there is of ‘prehending’ in ‘comprehending’. The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude.

(Levinas, 1985, p. 60)

For Biesta, as for Levinas, such assimilation is an “egological” affair because it assumes that knowledge is one’s own possession, like a child with a new toy. The promise of learning is a gift to oneself that worries our relationship with sociality and the other. How then to think of knowledge without possession? If we are “grown-ups” in our education – an unfortunate but necessary phrase for Biesta – then it follows that our existential relationship with the world is premised on a primary responsibility to others and not ourselves (Biesta, 2017). We need to think of ourselves in a world of others and knowledge as a shared phenomenon. We

acknowledge our own subjectivity and desires. We understand that we are subject to the desires of others and not only ourselves. Education in this scenario is not an absolute denigration of knowledge as much as a challenge to its imperialism in our thinking system. “We move”, says Biesta, when we are non-egological, “from being subjected to our desires to becoming a subject of our desires” (Biesta, 2017, p. 18).

Knowledge can never replace the existential question in education: what happens when thinking happens? What is my responsibility to others in the process of understanding the world? How is my subjectivity subject to my desires for understanding and possession? How do these desires help me understand myself in my responsibility to the other? These are the remainders of learning, the unintended outcomes. The ones worth fighting for in our lesson plans and beyond. They are the questions, in Biesta’s vocabulary, that “interrupt” us in our thinking (Biesta, 2013a, p. 5). The one’s that frustrate us enough to *make* us think. It is the task of the teacher to discover, or rather rediscover, the absolutely crucial place for such challenges in the scene of teaching.

In Defence of Unlearning

As has been noted in the introduction to this thesis, Derrida says of the educational institution, that it should be a place where anything can be asked and anything questioned, even if it is its own purpose, its very *raison d’etre* (Derrida, 2002a). This speaks to Biesta’s major idea, that “the language of learning is insufficient as an educational language” because “a language of education always needs to pay attention to content, purpose, and relationships” (Biesta, 2017, p. 28).

I agree with Biesta on the importance of these terms in what we do as teachers but I don’t equate the language of learning with the language of training, nor do I oppose it to education in quite the same way he does. I think it harbours within itself the very promise of education precisely because it shimmers with a promise for something to come. Though I do agree that learning’s ubiquitous deployment in process models of strategies and end oriented goals is a lamentable turn in its history, it need not be. Learning need not put us at the centre of the world if we are to see it as a weak force directed towards all sorts of educational possibilities – if we see it this way we might be able to glimpse that it is really about something to-come,

a *Sehnsucht*, an existential growth.

For Biesta, this rationale is quintessential since this kind of thinking instils learning as a process at odds with education. It also, of course, places the student at the centre of things in a manner that is often incongruous with the very notion of interruption and reality. Hence Biesta's radical commitment to the freedom from learning:

Freeing teaching from learning, keeping learning out of the classroom, is also important for opening up other existential possibilities for students, particularly possibilities that do not put them and their sense-making at the centre of the educational process, but rather allow them to encounter what comes to them from 'beyond' their sense-making, that is, as I have put it, without reason.

(Biesta, 2017, p. 39)

The Case for Teaching Without Learning

This all sounds compelling theoretically, but the question suggested at the beginning of this chapter is how Biesta's "freeing teaching from learning" can come about in a *practical* sense in the classroom? On this point Biesta himself tells a story. He speaks of a two-week graduate seminar that he convened for doctoral students in education in which he tried "to take learning out" (Biesta, 2017, p. 34-37). The students were to investigate the seven key themes in his book *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), namely Creativity, Communication, Teaching, Learning, Emancipation, Democracy, and Virtuosity. Biesta spends a day discussing each of the seven concepts in class and advises the students that the relevance of each term may not strike them immediately in the context of their own work and thinking (Biesta, 2017). In fact, the ideas may strike them as radically different since, Biesta explains, ideas come to you rather than you moving towards them and sometimes as a result feel burdensome (Biesta, 2017, p. 36). While trying to grasp or comprehend them you may wish to reject them. His purpose was to ask his students "to adopt" one of these seven ideas from the outset, not to comprehend and analyse in the traditional sense but to "let it live with you" for two weeks (Biesta, 2017, p. 35). The point was manifestly not one of comprehension in

the traditional sense of learning about something, but existential in the sense of opening up experiential possibilities vis-à-vis *living with* a concept. Each one of the students picked one of the concepts out of a hat, so to speak, without any knowledge of what they were getting, encouraging an acceptance, a hospitality, and responsibility, that is in some way excessive in doing this exercise.

In the last session of the seminar Biesta invited his students to comment on their experience, how they “lived with the concept”, “encountered the concept”, “carried the concept” (Biesta, 2017, p. 37). Several of his students gave more “traditional” accounts of what it meant to comprehend their concepts in a learner-oriented manner. Biesta claims nonjudgmentally (“I pass no judgement on this”) that this is indicative of how entrenched the “learner-identity” is in his students and by implication all students (Biesta, 2017, p. 36). His point was to ask his students to resist the tendency to “*learn*”, to “*interpret*”, to “*comprehend*”, but rather to place emphasis on the experience of being with the concept, adopting it into one’s life – letting it in – without the baggage of sense-making and reason. The result, according to Biesta, was that this exercise showed students that education need not be meaningful in the default sense that one has to have learned something and that teaching can operate in a non-traditional or extra-strategical manner. Biesta’s art of teaching-without-learning, he claims, weakens the connection between teaching as agenda and education as goal, that teaching and education can still take place without the baggage of comprehension (Biesta, 2017, p. 37). It both is and is not a *laissez faire* exercise in that the teacher is simultaneously provocateur and voyeur.

In theory Biesta’s idea is not new, but in reality teachers are unlikely to tell their students not to learn. Apart from its obvious existential overtones in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it echoes what John Keats famously referred to as “negative capability” in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas on 21 December 1817 (Keats, 1970). Keats was recalling in that letter a discussion he was having with Charles Dilke on the subject of literature:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and

which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

(Keats 1970, p. 57)

To be able to remain in doubt and uncertainty was for Keats the pinnacle achievement of the literary mind. This kind of thinking envisions a radical openness to others – the abstract otherness of thought and the existential alterity of other people. It encompasses not only a Romantic acknowledgement of the limits of reason and the possibilities of extra-rational-awareness but also strikes out after a programmatic and limitable understanding of the world as such. For the young doctor the literary landscapes of the mind were simply sublime, immune to mapping and understanding, vertiginous, mountainous. The literary mind is prized for its ability to understand that the world be experienced before understood, if it can be said to be understood at all. The real beauty of such statements is that there is no room for the centralising ego in such experience. Rather what you get here is an emptying out of the ego to allow for the call of something other (see Todd, 2015).

Though Biesta recognises also that the notion of non-comprehending is not an attempt to simply denigrate the place of learning, he is still, I imagine, limited in his concept of what learning can provide by way of wandering. For a teacher of literature, the latter point is particularly attractive since the reason for reading – if it can fully be called a reason as opposed to an impulse – is so often qualified by moments of sheer non-knowing, uncertainty, and doubt. In short, moments of unlearning. What Biesta is saying and what I am saying here are not all that dissimilar. Though I would add the caveat that although we seem to be seeking to preserve a similar kind of experience in our teaching, I don't think that it's all that easy to manufacture. In fact, I would claim that it is precisely its unpredictability – the feeling that

it is overtaking us in the moment of reading – that is essentially rewarding. What happens happens. The reiteration is important because in reproducing the same text, the same reading, it is what’s going on *within* that’s important. Students don’t need to be told, to my mind, not to learn, not to comprehend, not to assimilate knowledge, but rather to be open to what may or may not happen in the moment of reading. That is the weakness of it, that provocation can come unexpectedly.

What Biesta is claiming is that learning can be “bracketed”, a term he gathers from phenomenology (Biesta, 2017, p. 5), but this is really impossible. You just cannot bracket experience in that way. This is why the focus of the event of unlearning resides in the happening – the sheer unpredictability of response – not in the plan to avoid learning but in the understanding that it may not be possible or even desirable. Unlearning decentres the task of learning by operating *within it*. You do not need to be rid of learning so much as to look at it closer and see what it is doing.^{xc}

Practical Considerations

Theories, as I’ve tried to point out throughout this thesis, are only helpful when they have a real purchase on the world. So I will proceed with Biesta through example and reading. What I want to do here, and by way of conclusion, is to see how Biesta’s understanding of education works in the practical world of work, of teaching a class. I take as my own example Michael Hoffman’s film *The Emperor’s Club* (2002). The film is somewhat like *Dead Poets Society* discussed in the previous chapter, in that it follows the course of a single teacher’s career at a prestigious US prep school. Like *Dead Poets Society*, it explores the practicalities of classroom dynamics, morality, leadership, learning, and issues of success and failure.

Kevin Klein plays the role of Mr. Hundert, a Western Civilisation professor at St. Benedict’s school for boys. Throughout the film Klein constantly lectures his classes on the qualities of “good character” and why they should all be conscientious citizens. “Great ambition and conquest without contribution”, he says, “is without significance”. And echoing Socrates, “It is not living that is important but living rightly”. All seems well until a new student is introduced into his classroom. Sedgwick Bell is a product of extreme privilege and class and is the son of a senior senator from West Virginia. He immediately announces himself as a

quick-witted and disruptive student who cares nothing for Hundert's refined moral rectitude, quizzing his teacher on the ridiculousness of seeing the moral martyrs of Western civilisation as anything other than practical idiots. The more Hundert tries to instil virtue in the boy, the more the boy's egocentrism lashes out.

At one point in the film there's a wonderful moment where Hundert finally has had enough and travels to meet the boy's father in Virginia. Klein arrives at the father's house in order to inform him of Sedgwick's behaviour and to ask for support. The episode encapsulates a glaring disparity between a neo-liberal understanding of education as a financial and competitive game and the idealism of education as a process of moral becoming. Klein's character is presented as amiably intelligent, but radically naïve; the boy's father, Senator Sedgwick Hiram Bell, is a caricature of the American self-made man: the big business executive replete with cigar, whiskey collection and gun cabinet. Though both characters are representative two-dimensional models of opposing ideologies, the scene plays itself out wonderfully.

Here's the dialogue between Hundert and Hiram Bell:

Hundert: Sedgwick, it seems, is not paying attention in class, sir, nor is he doing the assigned reading.

Senator: [*abruptly*] Let me ask you something: what's the good in what you're teaching those boys?

Hundert: The good?

Senator: Yes, the good?

Hundert: [pause] Senator... the Greeks and the Romans provided a model of democracy, which I don't need to tell you, the framers of our own constitution used as their inspiration. And more to the point I think when the boys read Plato, and Aristotle, Cicero, Julius Caesar, they're put in direct contact with the men that in their own age exemplified the highest standards of statesmanship, of civic virtue, character, conviction.

Senator: [laughing] That is a horse that can talk! So you're saying that my son Sedgwick has his head up his ass.

Hundert: Sir, it's my job to mold your son's character. I think if...

Senator: [interrupting]: Mold him?.. Jesus God in heaven son, you're not gonna mold my boy. Your job is to teach my son: teach him his times tables, teach him why the world is round, teach him who killed who and when and where. That is your job. You, sir, will not mold my son. I will mold him.

Hundert: Yes, sir.

Senator: Yes.

Now, here's a consideration based on this interesting dialogue that might be put to Biesta's understanding of taking learning out of the classroom (Biesta, 2013, p. 59). Senator Bell's understanding of education is that his son will learn practical ideas that will help him pass exams and get him on in the world. The purpose of the institution is to get you where you need to go. This is not a distant claim. People go to school and university to get on in the world. They understand that examinations are competitions that have real world consequences, so they do the best they can to get on. The senator sees that Hundert's role as a teacher is as an academic instructor not a moral guru, and as such sees Hundert as taking liberties by claiming that he can teach the senator's son how to be a good citizen; which one imagines in the senator's own world is actually a fatal flaw. The boy is categorically not to be taught morality. That the boy behaves throughout the film in a morally reprehensible manner is of little consequence to the father who is paying for the boy's education, a point the father makes to the boy immediately after his meeting with the teacher. The tragedy is that the boy will remain egocentric; but the reality is that boy the wants to. Nothing a teacher can do will change that. Hundert's response to this realisation later in the film is to tell Sedgwick "I have failed you as a teacher", to which Sedgwick responds, "Who gives a shit? I live in the real world".

What does this viewpoint really mean then? It means that according to Senator Bell's view if you take learning out of the equation you are looking at moral instruction and that is the

parent's job not the teacher's. If you ask a student like Sedgwick Bell to adopt a concept like democracy or emancipation and to live with it, what will happen? Of course, there is no real knowing, but it will not end up on the side of Derrida's democracy-to-come or Rancière's emancipation of intelligence. What you will get is a learnercentric understanding of the promise of education as a goal and endpoint, a place you need to get to. Democracy for people like the Bells is a phenomenon to be manipulated, emancipation is a means to excel, and virtue is a weakness to be exploited.

Though Biesta's promissory note is laudable, its practicality is suspect. Learnercentrism, it seems, has to be approached and dismantled from within. This is why I argue against Biesta that you cannot bracket learning in this manner, either theoretically or practically. In the world of work, in the scene of teaching, teachers cannot afford to make decisions about learning that are unjustifiable, even though they may be aware that they are ultimately justifying the unjustifiable in their lesson plans. Neither will it work for them to suggest that they are molding character or promoting existential fulfilment. These are practically impossible endeavours for all of the reasons I've just given. If the point is to change things, as Marx and Engels argued, then the revolution in education may come about only if teachers become circumspect about outcomes culture and refuse, to echo Readings yet again, to equate accountability with accounting.

Conclusion

Biesta's work is crucial to an understanding of unlearning as it is the best starting point for coming to terms with the problems the language of learning is creating today against what he calls the "promise" of education, its "beautiful risk". This is why his work is essential to the possibility of a better future understanding of education and how it might be promoted in educational institutions. On consideration of the language of learning and the strong hermeneutical understanding of what it is in the neoliberal world, there is a need for reflection and change. Biesta's work is a strong directive to start thinking about what education is doing for us and not what it is doing to promote the neoliberal system. Paulo Freire warned against this banking system of education in the 1960's in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and little has been done, it seems, to change the situation. The only practical avenue left is the promotion

of educational discourses that challenge such trajectories from the inside out.

Triggering and Trauma

One of the lessons of Auschwitz is that it is infinitely harder to grasp the mind of an ordinary person than to understand the mind of a Spinoza or Dante (Giorgio Agamben)

Introduction

Humanities teachers have traditionally claimed that reading literature can help ethical understanding and can lead to the cultivation of virtue (Stock, 2005).^{xci} This was the idea fostered by Professor Hundert in a previous chapter when he spoke after Aristotle and Socrates of molding young boys' characters. Indeed, the humanities has as its founding role the cultivation of virtue and the inculcation in society of autonomous liberal subjects bent on civic improvement and social progress. Just as it had for John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1852) and Wilhelm von Humboldt in *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* (1793), education traditionally espouses reason, virtue, and truth, what Humboldt memorably calls “the rich and worthy substance” of humanity, as its *raison d'être* (Humbolt, 1993, p. 59). Ethical issues surrounding trauma have more recently been imagined by critics in terms of trigger warnings in classrooms (Halberstam, 2018; Knox, 2020). This chapter seeks to investigate how these trigger warnings are being employed. It seeks, primarily, to understand these warnings in terms of trauma. In doing this, the argument is critical of what might be seen as a fashionable way of reducing trauma to the claim of feeling offended by something.

Much of what Bill Readings argues in *The University of Ruins* (1991) surrounds notions of value and justice, as opposed to Truth. In the latter chapters of that work particularly, Readings argues for a shift in thinking, as we have seen, concerning issues of accountability and accounting. What Readings highlights continually is the notion of an obligation to teaching and to Thought, which he refers to as an “unaccountable obligation” (Readings, 1991, p. 133). Readings' appeal in matters of justice is to openness and discussion, to questioning what it is that we value in education. “To whom and to what the University remains accountable”, as we have seen in earlier chapters of this thesis, “are questions we must continue to pose and worry over. Appeals to accounting – whether in the form of numerically scored teaching evaluations, efficiency ratings, or other bureaucratic statistics – will only serve to prop up the logic of consumerism that rules the University of Excellence.

Value is a question of judgement, a question whose answers must continually be discussed” (Readings, 1991, p. 134). In terms of trigger warnings and trauma in the scene of teaching, the question of judgement becomes an important ethical issue, one that requires rigorous responsibility, just decision, and judgement. This chapter is an attempt to highlight some of these responsibilities.

Education After Auschwitz

Perhaps the single most famous argument for ethical responsibility in the pursuit of a liberal education is Theodor Adorno’s “Education After Auschwitz”.^{xcii} For Adorno the quintessential factor in education is that Auschwitz never be allowed to happen again (Adorno, 1998, p. 191).^{xciii} For Adorno, like Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, civilization is apt to destroy itself over and over again by a built in psychic death-drive mechanism, a kind of autoimmunity in Derridean parlance.^{xciv} What has happened after Auschwitz: the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (1968); Bangladesh (1971); the Phnom Penh killing fields and S21 prison (1974-79); East Timor (1975-); El Mozote (1981); Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), Rwanda (1994); Darfur (2003-); and Syria (2014-), just to mention a few. It is unwise, however, to conflate Auschwitz with other atrocities, since to do so would reduce the singularity of that event. “While the uniqueness of the Holocaust or otherwise remains a question for scholarly debate”, argue Sue Vice and Gwyneth Bodger, “the notion that the Holocaust provides an analytical lens through which the mechanisms of all genocides and acts of violent discrimination can be observed and studied is problematic. Indeed... far from providing a foundation for learning lessons for the future, teaching the Holocaust in this manner actually leads to the creation of a false hierarchy of suffering, in which the Holocaust becomes a ‘benchmark of oppression and atrocity,’ the effect of which is to ‘trivialise crimes of a lesser magnitude’” (Vice and Bodger, 2008, p. 16). These issues are important to emphasize from the outset, though Adorno’s essay is interesting because it also foregrounds these issues while maintaining that there is a lesson teachers and students can take away from reading about Auschwitz.

Adorno’s hope was that education might resist genocidal tendencies by understanding that “the authoritarian personality” fostered by a traditional disciplinarian culture had no place in

a liberal education. For Adorno the cult of masculinity and power ingrained in traditional master-student conceptions of educational encounters undermined the autonomy of the student as an individual thinker. This would seem to ring true in the case of the Nazi trials in Nuremberg and Israel (in Eichmann's case) where the default defence was "I was just following orders". Strikingly, according to the 1989 Yorkshire Television documentary *Four Hours in My Lai*, the US soldiers in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968 mimicked the Nazi defence almost exactly (Sim, 1989). They were just following orders too. It would seem, after the testimony of the soldiers who engaged in this massacre openly admitting to inhuman offenses that "inhumanity has a great future" (Adorno, 1998, p. 199).

One reason for this dark vision of humanity is what Adorno calls "reified consciousness", which interestingly recalls Biesta's claim that emancipated subjectivity is our only defense against reification and *the* key component in his theory of "grown-up-ness" (Biesta, 2017).^{xcv} Reified consciousness "above all... is a consciousness blinded to all historical past, all insight into one's own conditionedness, and posits as absolute what exists contingently" (Adorno, 1998, p. 198-199). For Adorno, such consciousness sees the world objectively and is interested in the world as a thing to be acquired and/or manipulated, hence the propensity in such individuals to attach themselves to technology in a fetishistic manner. Adorno's great concern in "Education After Auschwitz" is that this techno-fetishism is not only a way of assimilating the world to things but also a way of assimilating people to things. Not that Adorno could ever have suspected in 1966, but similar fetishism is now perhaps becoming apparent in so-called "gaming disorder", which has recently been fully recognized by the World Health Organization and included in the International Classification of Diseases (2018).^{xcvi}

Adorno's central concern is that we don't know how affecting technological fetishization really is or what are the real consequences of total unreflective immersion in a technological world. A veil of technology is not easily lifted. If we live with it, Adorno argues, then we need to be critical of it. When Adorno envisions what he calls "desktop murderers" he envisions people like Eichmann adroitly organizing Jewish transports across Europe. He

imagines what he calls the coldness of these abstractions, the murderers removed from the realities of the killings.

What “Education After Auschwitz” essentially teaches is that the glimmer of hope for a progressive education at odds with inhumanity – in whatever form – is to be found in the adaptation of a critical consciousness. Adorno’s claim that education should become sociological is an alternative way of claiming that among the most important things that can happen in a classroom is that the students learn to question power formations. They can do this from within the system to see how the system works to oppress and control thinking. This means questioning how, for instance, “gaming culture”, the current “impulse society”, the market economy, and the political structures that represent them are claiming their lives, their individuality, and their understanding (Roberts, 2014).^{xcvii} If students don’t criticize the reason of the state to control its members, in Adorno’s expression, then “the horror is potentially already posited”(Adorno, 1998, p. 203). The number one factor in this scenario is that the student become capable of understanding that there are control mechanisms – both physical and ideological – that require reflection if there is to be any chance of agency and autonomy.

Adorno is also particularly interesting in his argument concerning anxiety and repression. “Education”, claims Adorno, “must take seriously an idea in no wise unfamiliar to philosophy: that anxiety must not be repressed. When anxiety is not repressed, when one permits oneself to have, in fact, all the anxiety that this reality warrants, then precisely by doing that, much of the destructive effect of unconscious and displaced anxiety will probably disappear” (Adorno, 1998). Facing up to this anxiety places critical consciousness at the pinnacle of its educative powers. However, this also raises the question: how much anxiety is helpful and how much of it becomes counterproductive or even dangerous? Expressing anxiety also requires some measure of judgement as critics of trigger warnings and microaggressions have been arguing in recent years (Lukianoff, 2012; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015; Campbell and Manning, 2018; Knox, 2020).

My Own Anxiety

Permit me to give an example from my own experience before moving on to this problem of

trigger warnings in more depth. In the summer of 2013 I was invited by my friend Dragan Kujundzic to attend a conference upon the release of his film *Frozen Time, Liquid Memories: 1942-2012*. The film commemorates the roundups of the Jews by the Nazis in Novi Sad (Serbia) and Paris in January and July 1942. The latter was known as the Vel d'Hiv roundup because the Nazis chose a velodrome to house the Jews before transports were arranged to bring them to their deaths in various outpost camps around Europe. After watching Dragan Kujundzic's *Frozen Time, Liquid Memories* I made my way to my college library in Dublin to source a hardcopy of Serge Klarsfeld's *French Children of the Holocaust*, a book mentioned in the film. Klarsfeld speaks eloquently at a commemoration in Paris in part two of Kujundzic's film, "They Were Children", about the Vel d'Hiv roundup in July 1942. Described in subtitle as "the foremost French historian of the Holocaust", he recounts how Reinhard Heydrich visited Paris in May 1942, two months previous to the roundup, in order to instate General Carl Oberg as the new SS Chief of France and the supervisor of the final solution with the corroboration of the French police. After introducing Klarsfeld the film cuts to a shot of the cover of Klarsfeld's book. The cover shows a copy of an identity card of a young child. The information is clear and concise and there is a monochrome image of a young girl with a striking, wide-eyed gaze holding up the number 413 elegantly rendered in chalk on a small blackboard. The identity card tells us the name of the girl, Anny-Yolande Horowitz. She was born in Strasbourg on June 2, 1933. Her address was 21, rue Rode, Bordeaux. The word JUIVE is also stamped in bright red bold ink over the words *Carte d'identite*. Apart from this, we are told she has blonde hair, blue eyes, and a rosy complexion and that she is of average height. Finally, in the top right of the image is Anny's childish handwritten signature.

French Children of the Holocaust contains similar images and information on over 2,500 children (all under 18) as well as the names and addresses of the 11,400 children deported on convoys under the orders of the Vichy government in France to Nazi death camps. There are in all 2,503 photos in the English edition comprising a grand total of 1,881 pages. It is still incomplete. The book follows on from the earlier *Le Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France* ("The Memorial to Jews Deported from France") containing the names, addresses, convoy numbers, and nationalities of the 76,000 French Auschwitz-bound Jews. *French Children of the Holocaust* is described by Klarsfeld in the preface to the English

edition as a “collective gravestone... a book born of my obsession to be sure that these children will not be forgotten”. For Klarsfeld, as Thomas Laqueur put it in the *London Review Books*, “God resides in the details” and the details are overwhelming. After 20 years of immense research, the images and details are far less than the 11,400 that Klarsfeld admits he wished he had been able to obtain.

Anny, we learn from the book, was interned in the Lalande camp near Tours, then transferred to Drancy. She was deported from there on September 11, 1942 on convoy number 31 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with her mother, Frieda, and 7-year-old sister, Paulette. From every photo we glean the tragedy that awaits the innocent faces of the children of the Shoah and it is difficult to take on board how exactly affecting these are or to know exactly how to react. In my own case twenty minutes was more than enough time. How difficult it is to look at fresh faces and imaginatively pursue the realities that was their lot.

Perhaps the facts themselves are more than enough to tell the story of these children, which bears down heavily on a question of representation and reminds us of Adorno’s infamous statement that to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric. Indeed, the question of testimony is always one of representation as Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Imre Kertész, Primo Levi, Elie Weisel, and a host of others have taught us.

As always there is an ethical dilemma in our interpretations. The danger is that letting the facts speak for themselves affords us some distance from those all too human moments and from what Marcel Aron-Weltman – a 10-year-old who escaped from Vel d’Hiv – refers to as the “unheard-of hope” that was unknowable to him or to his sister at the time their mother decides to let them be taken from her before she was transported. The madness of that decision will never be known to Marcel or Jacqueline. The facts can allow us to say, on the one hand how horrible these are, how unsayable, how unthinkable, unimaginable. But on the other hand the facts may also give us a breathing space, a moment to remove ourselves from the gravitas of decisions and the realities they purport to reveal. They may leave us distant, circumspect, or worse, indifferent; “men are accomplices”, as George Steiner memorably put it, “to that which leaves them indifferent” (Steiner, 1997, p. 175).

Something of the same can be said for Klarsfeld’s book. Looking at all those faces on page

after page is an extraordinary experience. The tendency is to drift, to flick through the thousands of images without fully taking in the gravity, without acknowledging the singularity of each and every other child. Our tendency is to treat it like a book, any other book, which it is not. It becomes an emotionally shattering experience, distantly disturbing, not because we see how horrible things are, but how quickly our emotions move from horror, through despair, and then blank acceptance.

Readers of Klarsfeld's book and of Kujundzic's film are likewise drawn into spectacles of crises, trauma, despair, making the viewer the third aspect in the testimonial triangle of perpetrator, victim, witness. Readers of these representations are obliged to respond to what is left unsaid, to what cannot be said anymore as much as what is there to be resaid. They are obliged to speak of the unheard of. "Memory", says Derrida, "is the name of what is no longer only a mental 'capacity' oriented toward one of the three modes in the present, the past present, which could be dissociated from the present present and the future present. Memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present" (Derrida, 1989, p. 57). Memory is re-lived experience, we might say, but how it is relived and how it changes things is the real issue. Hence Toni Morrison's coinage "rememory" in her novel *Beloved*, which denotes the traumatic encounter with the return of the repressed that haunts her characters.

The problem, as Norman Spaulding points out in a perceptive journal article in *Critical Inquiry*, is that "in seeking to do justice to the past we long for the very closure of judgement, along with its too-tidy hierarchical ordering of authoritative evidence, that memories of irreparable injury can never be expected to provide" (Spaulding, 2014, p. 136). A responsible response calls upon us to vocalise not just the evidentiary data, the epistemological criteria, the sullen fact, the accountability of the perpetrator, or the culpability of all those somnolent spectators. A responsible response calls upon us to concern ourselves with, in Spaulding's words, "exposing the respects in which resistance is triggered by the enormity of what the memory work reveals". Doing this is not easy. It is a kind of difficult knowledge, a knowledge that one finds in and through the difficulty experienced in the act of memory, the activation of memories. It is, indeed, a liquid art, an art of fluidity, of flowing back and forth, or becoming and unbecoming, finding and letting go, of drowning and drifting. Indeed, I

would call it the anxiety of unlearning, since to know it is to understand that it happened. But to understand it emotionally, as a sympathetic reader, is to understand that the trauma is affective, that it carries over and is difficult but ought to be kept difficult.

Klarsfeld's book is peculiar because it asks us not to look at it as a book but as a living testimony of the children who died in Auschwitz and beyond. It is disturbing and produces a complex anxiety. The anxiety that we might look at it like a book. If we do that then we objectify the children in those pages. And that's really the horror of what happens when we look at it. The flip side is the actual ignorance of memory that refuses the difficult knowledge and avoids the respect due to the victims.

Recently Israeli/German artist Shahak Shapira posted a website called "Yolocaust" in which he reposted a number of selfies he downloaded from Instagram, Facebook, Tinder, and Grindr.^{xcviii} What these photos were doing on sites like Tinder and Grindr raises a series of questions concerning propriety and respect. The selfies are a series of images showing young people at the Holocaust memorial site in Berlin. The artist then superimposed these images onto images of scenes from the Holocaust in order to highlight the discrepancy between what the memorial represents and what the memorial represents for the selfie-takers. Similar scenes are almost certainly played out on a daily basis at Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen. "Yolo" is an acronym for "you only live once", which seems appropriate since the lives of the selfie-takers are being lived in an almost total rejection of the memory of other lives, hence "yolocaust". What is most interesting in this, however, is the bizarre paradox apparent in the very possibility of approaching these issues in a classroom setting. That the memorial has no effective purchase on the realities of the jugglers, skateboarders, young lovers, or gymnasts in these images is another kind of testimony that seems remarkably at odds with a more recent phenomenon known as triggering.





Trigger Culture

In 2014 an internet blog by Judith Halberstam resulted in a surge of polarising responses across the blogosphere from queer communities, sociologists, psychoanalysts, and philosophers.^{xciix} Hundreds of comments concerning issues of trauma, some more sensitive than others, quickly poured in, as did Facebook messages and Tweets. Comments on how trauma is investigated, studied, spoken of, contemporaneously rendered in fractious discourses within gender studies and queer politics, reflected a gross disparity between commentators and a wide spectrum of responses. In his essay “You are Triggering Me! The Neo-liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma” Halberstam examines Monty Python’s comedy films *The Life of Brian* and *The Holy Grail*. His argument that those films, while banned in some countries upon their original releases in 1975 and 1979 respectively, could not possibly be released in cinemas now suggests that their irreligious satire, stereotype debunking, crass sexual silliness, and often pointless repetition is a litmus test for the manner in which communities have now become stultified in their thinking about trauma. So-called “snowflake generation” conservatism is having an impact across college campuses and free speech and critical thinking are suffering as a result, as Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning aver in their recent book *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* (2018).^c

A less divisive way to say this is to say that a cult of hurt has permeated academic discursivity in the past several decades. The argument goes that this has happened so pervasively that scholars are now unsubtly attuned to predicting and avoiding “triggering” terms or phrases that might result in adverse emotional responses from their audiences. Gone are slang derivatives, caricatures, ironic understatements, humorous deflations, and, “God forbid”, anything as satirically controversial as Monty Python. Students need to be informed before class if their teachers will be dealing with subject matters like the Holocaust, underage sex, drugs, nudity, religion, or queer studies. Scholars working within queer studies particularly – and further afield – are now mired in a rhetoric of responsiveness without response, to play on an old Kantian expression, a rhetoric which, while circumnavigating the perilous seas of triggering expression, precludes them from engaging in meaningful critical discourse in the first place, from saying anything worth saying. According to the American Association of University Professors:

Some discomfort in classrooms is inevitable if the goal is to expose students to new ideas, have them question beliefs they have taken for granted, grapple with ethical problems they have never considered, and, more generally, expand their horizons so as to become informed and responsible democratic citizens. Trigger warnings suggest that classrooms should offer protection and comfort rather than an intellectually challenging education.

(quoted in Tsesis, 2018, p. 143)

Halberstam sees a cataclysmic change in the impetus of queer movements. The revolution has come full circle. What was once the freedom of so-called queer theory, its queer inventiveness (its queryness) and its refusal to settle into the dogmatic slumber of a school has now become in certain quarters, reified, empty, pointlessly self-perpetuating jargonese; or, worse, simply obscene puerile hypersensitivity. Likewise, radical discursive practices mobilised to undermine and subvert ideological superstructures have themselves become over-arching hegemonic ideological modalities. queer theory has become Queer Theory. Anyone remotely sensitive to such changes will also know the same can be said of postcolonialism, new historicism, poststructuralism, deconstruction(ism), ecocriticism, and so on. It is easy to forget, Halberstam's arguments remind us, that the genesis of each of these disciplines stems from a revolutionary hope for change, even, and most importantly, when that means change from within. Halberstam observes: when it comes to factions, Monty Python can teach us quite a lot. Brian discovers this when he tries to join the PFJ (People's Front of Judea) in *The Life of Brian*:

“Are you the Judean People's Front?”

“Fuck off!

Judean People's Front!?? We're the People's Front of Judea! Judean People's Front.
Cawk!”

Notwithstanding the malaise Halberstam sees consuming such scholarship of late, her point concerning knee-jerk reactions to modes of representation deemed inappropriate for adult

audiences, the hierarchies of woundedness that compel students and scholars to erupt at conferences and in classrooms in a macabre one-upmanship, she hits on a crucial point that is important to a scholarly rethinking of trauma studies today, for what it means to be a responsible reader, teacher, and student. First, here is how Halberstam explains “triggering”:

Claims about being triggered work off literalist notions of emotional pain and cast traumatic events as barely buried hurt that can easily resurface in relation to any kind of representation or association that resembles or even merely represents the theme of the original painful experience. And so, while in the past, we turned to Freud’s mystic writing pad to think of memory as a palimpsest, burying material under layers of inscription, now we see a memory as a live wire sitting in the psyche waiting for a spark. Where once we saw traumatic recall as a set of enigmatic symptoms moving through the body, now people reduce the resurfacing of a painful memory to the catch all term of “trigger”, imagining that emotional pain is somehow similar to a pulled muscle –as something that hurts whenever it is deployed, and as an injury that requires protection.

(Halberstam, 2014)

Halberstam’s point is that a neo-liberal rhetoric of individual pain, instead of becoming a bolster against the forces of social inequality, indifference, and ignorance, counteractively undermines the possibility of affirmative social activism; it demolishes desire, diminishes difference, denigrates despair. Acolytes of the aggrieved politics of hurt are developing a notion of trauma that in classical Freudian circles is anything but. They are instead, in Halberstam’s argument, inculcating a hair-trigger sensitivity to injurious terminologies in such a manner that they are “censoring” the very discourses that led queer theorists to produce radical rhetorical challenges to the status quo and allowed them to reengage discourses of hatred, bigotry, and condemnation by queering such languages from the inside. That is, queer theory has always had the powerful periperformative function of outing language. Without that sharpness, what has it become if not simply a censoring body? It would seem that Derrida’s understanding of the autoimmunity inherent within any

community will present itself eventually and destroy the founding principles of that community.

Freudian Perspective

The *locus classicus* in Freud's writings on trauma is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), wherein Freud becomes fascinated and perplexed by a pathological condition brought on by traumatic neuroses, such as those manifested in survivors of WWI. Today we associate such pathologies with what the DSM (only since 1980) refers to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes as traumatic "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [*Reizschutz*]" and considers its manifestations in the repetition compulsion, a compulsion to relive the unpleasurable event over and over again, hence his revisions of dream theory as wish-fulfilment (Freud, 1976a, p. 301). The point, as Freud's spatial metaphors explicate throughout this essay and again in the later *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), is that there *is* a protective shield [*Reizschutz*] against stimuli inherent in the psyche, a protective barrier or psychological skin, admittedly different for each individual, but there nonetheless, that allows for preparedness against fright and anxiety. Anxiety on its own, he will say, will *not* produce traumatic neuroses. In his own words, "I do not believe anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis" [*Ich glaube nicht, daß die Angst eine traumatische Neurose erzeugen kann*]; something else is needed, such as the unmediated shock of an unforeseeable event, like a train accident we walk away from and that becomes symptomatic only after the event has occurred (Freud, 1976a, p. 7).^{ci}

What is most striking about *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as in *The Uncanny*, a text that Freud was working on in tandem at the wake of the Great War in 1919, is that uncertainty is the pervasive, unsettling, overwhelming driving force in both. Trembling on the limits of intelligibility both pieces confirm Schelling's hypothesis that traumatic events repeatedly reinstall themselves in consciousness because they are "something which ought to have remained hidden but [have] come to light" (Freud, 1976b, p. 364). Operating illogically, parasitically, paralogically, both pieces conflate the intelligible with the unintelligible, the conceivable with the unconceivable, the illuminating with the obscure, and the central with

the peripheral. This is in part because of Freud's inability to settle on a fundamental principle for the traumatic event. And that's the point. For Freud, this "dark and dismal topic" [*das dunkle und düstere Thema*] of trauma becomes not a concept as such, but a non-concept, a kind of black hole sucking enlightenment in. Everything that surrounds the ideas of deferral [*Nachträglichkeit*], the repetition compulsion [*fort-da*], and tendencies towards unpleasure [*Unlust*], are consonant with the conclusion that trauma is never something readily available to us in the here and now; rather it is always something that escapes the realm of knowledge, something *Nachtzeitlich*, night-timely, an afterthought that queers the concept of time itself.

Cathy Caruth argues that "trauma, in general, describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). It does not designate a state of anxiety by which one would be ready to denounce as traumatic the use of a designation that one has encountered time and again, despite the level of anxiety it may cause, or seem to cause. Anxiety embodies a kind of preparedness that the shell-shock impact of traumatic events never allow. Hence, the need to underline why trauma is not something we can apply readily as a term. Or, at the very least, it is important to see that Freud himself, is conscious that anxiety does not equate with trauma, that it is not something that readily falls into its own category either. Instead, it becomes a shifter term, a perverse signifier, revealing itself in the uncanny repetitions of the event, repetitions that cannot be healed or ignored, quantified or dissolved.

Teaching Trauma or Trauma Teaching?

Josh Gordon and Will Speck's movie *Blades of Glory* (2007) contains a parody that highlights the kind of woundedness indicative of scholars Halberstam's polemic rails against. *Blades of Glory* is a comedy film about two male figure skaters Chazz Michael Michaels (Will Ferrell) and Jimmy MacElroy (Jon Heder) who team up to become the world's first same-sex professional pair-skating duo in a bid to become world champions. At one point in the movie Jimmy McElroy is on a date with Katie van Waldenberg (Jenna Fischer) when the two become embroiled in an intimate moment of sensitive disclosure. Katie admits her dislike for ice because of its association with her family – a sister and brother, both

professional skaters, whom she loathes. Jimmy responds with an impassioned eulogy on the freedom he feels in his profession and concludes by asking Kate if she ever skated:

Katie: “When I was a kid a little, but my brother and sister don’t like anyone to steal their focus”.

Jimmy: “My life was nothing but focus. You know what I got for my tenth birthday? A six-pack of protein shakes and a subscription to *Men’s Health*”.

Katie: “I didn’t have a tenth birthday. My sister told all my friends that I was in jail for armed robbery”.

Jimmy: “When I was nine my father insisted on having me circumcised to minimise wind resistance”.

Katie: “While driving me to skating practice my parents were in a fatal accident. My brother and sister blamed me for their death and they forced me to work for them, like a slave”.

[They kiss]

Katie: “Wow, I never really thought of that as a romantic story before”.

The dialogue is darkly humorous but also illustrative. The audience is drawn in by the hyperboles as they surmount one another in their atrocity; even the chronology must be surpassed by the contestants – when I was ten, when I was nine, when I was a child, and so on. Both Katie’s and Jimmy’s lives have been Voltairean in their relentless series of tragedies and abuses. What is most instructive, however, is the kiss. It is peculiar that this kiss occurs at the culmination of the contest. Katie’s exclamation that she never expected her stories to preface a loving encounter is doubly ironic because it seems that this is the reason she is doing it. She uses her stories to garner sympathy and respect from Jimmy, who in turn develops his narrative of woes to the same ends. When they finally run out of stories they embrace, finding in one another a comparable crisis companion. Out of this trauma then comes affection and love, a love based on a mutual alienation and neglect. The audience laughs at the ludicrous embellishments because they are reminiscent of people who

invidiously play this game at the expense of those who are justifiably affected. The scene underscores a social issue concerning how often this macabre game is played out in reality and how truly unfortunate it is for those whose actual griefs are overshadowed by these scenarios.

Adorno in “Education after Auschwitz” argues that “being hard, the vaunted quality education should inculcate, means absolute indifference toward pain as such” (Adorno, 1998, p. 198). To agree with Adorno on this point means that educators must take seriously the idea that anxiety *must not be repressed*. However, there are differences between anxieties, crises and trauma, as Halberstam and Caruth have argued, distinctions that should be kept open to reflection and challenges. These differences can easily be forgotten in triggering controversies in schools and universities.

The crisis comparison, it can be argued, is important in order to think through pedagogical situations. In her landmark work on the subject (*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* 1992) Shoshanna Felman asks the following question in the opening sentence, “What is the relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education?” (Felman, 1992, p. 1). Her answer is a story that develops around a class entitled “Literature and Testimony”, which she taught at Yale in the fall of 1984. Her idea was through readings of Camus, Mallarme, Freud, Dostoevsky, Paul Celan, and the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, to 1.) ensure that her class understood that testimony is pervasive and implicated in almost all types of writing and 2.) that testimony has a powerful performative dimension that does not simply recount as much as defamiliarise and estrange us from what we think we know of testimony in the first place. As such, it can be noted that Felman’s own recollections of crises in her class contain within themselves a corollary performative force. In recounting what happens in her class, Felman is wholly implicated in the testimonials she is examining and her positions on these become importance in her arguments.

What is particularly striking in Felman’s account of her class’s disintegration into disarray and confusion is her reconsideration of her role as a teacher. After her class has viewed testimonial videos of survivors in an apartment (not a classroom) they are moved to tears.

What happens then, Felman calls an unforeseeable crisis. She begins receiving phone calls at odd hours of the night from her students wishing to talk about what happened. The students' peers begin asking to join Felman's classes and the ones that have attended her class begin forming groups outside of her classroom. There is a delayed affect from the class, an after-effect. Students begin feeling uneasy after twenty-four hours and beyond. They are "entirely at a loss, disoriented, and uprooted" (Felman, 1992, p. 48). Felman then confers with Dori Laub, her co-author, for counsel. "What was called for", she concludes, "was for me to resume authority as the teacher of the class and bring the students back into significance" (Felman, 1992, p. 48).

Felman's approach opens up a question regarding the presumption that these crises *are* manageable and that the role of the teacher is tantamount to controlling the event of encountering the traumas of others.^{cii} Felman's desire to take control of the situation, benignly undertaken, might even become counteractive, since she becomes a functionary of the desire to systematize the event of learning/unlearning. By taking control, she becomes the medium of understanding, the focal point of knowing. Her narrative therefore opens up a paradox at the heart of what Deborah Britzman refers to elsewhere as "difficult knowledge" in her readings of Freud in *After-Education* (Britzman, 2003, p. 31). Freud, Britzman recalls, referred to education, more than once, as one of the "impossible professions" (Britzman, 2003, p. 15). His term "*Nacherziehung*" (after-education) encapsulates the difficulties with moving on, as the term *Nachträglichkeit* also insists. After-education revolves around similar issues with trauma because it insists on movement and fluidity. It flows back to a concept of education as learning and forward to a conception of education as unlearning, reimagining, reliving, forgetting, moving on. However much our instincts lead us to take control, these distinctions suggest, we must resist the temptation to do so, since the event of learning is never understandable in that way.

What is impossible, according to Freud and Britzman, is "that however good and intentional our methods may feel, we cannot guarantee, for either ourselves or others, the force, the experience, or interpretation of our efforts..." (Britzman, 2003, p. 16). There are no guardrails, ethical or otherwise to stop us from making mistakes in this arena. Nor are their programs of response. What happens happens to the student and teacher, but the after effect,

the *Nachträglichkeit* of the event can never be known in the present. In saying this, an argument could be made that Felman's trauma inducing class is disturbing after the event and that the delayed effect is an interesting indication of Freud's concept.

Conclusion

Engaging in educational experience can mean being confronted with difficult knowledge, with ideas that may be profoundly affecting, that may radically change perspectives and become deeply unsettling to entrenched or traditional understandings of the world. Halberstam's argument is that unreflective approaches to triggering and trauma can have powerfully anti-pedagogical effects and can result in loss of freedom of speech and agency. The freedom to engage in experimental and at times contentious practices in our classrooms does not necessarily mean that this opens the gate to bigotry, prejudice, hatred, or pettiness. It does mean, however, that we open it up to ignorance, unlearning, and possible anxieties. "Education as a practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination", claims Paulo Freire, "denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people" (Freire, 2005, p. 81). The controversy over trigger warnings and trauma opens up, yet again, this chapter claims, the concept of accountability as an ethical response.

Conclusion: From Learning Outcomes to Learning Incomes

Introduction

In his essay “The Humanities and the University in Ruin” (2012), John Mowitt looks back on Bill Reading’s *The University in Ruins* and points out the changes that the humanities in post-second level institutions have experienced since Readings’ book was published in 1996. Mowitt’s objective in the essay is interestingly not just another defence of the humanities under “a contemporary neoliberal legitimation wherein the humanities is valued for producing ‘flexible’ and ‘multi skilled’ worker/citizens for the new global economy” (Mowitt, 2012). Neither is it a return to the Arnoldian concept of sweetness and light or a paean for the canon of modernist Western literature. “[T]he neoliberal paradigm”, Mowitt argues, “has demanded that – in a distinctly therapeutic discourse – we simply ‘get over’ our despair about such conflicts and cynically craft, using the available technologies, cultural micro-climates for private use. Taste and literacy converge in becoming utterly personal” (Mowitt, 2012).

In light of this, Mowitt understands that something else is called for now, a different argument that situates the humanities in a purposeful relation to the university and to thought. Mowitt’s purpose, after Readings, is to find a value in the humanities that “appeals neither to Arnoldian Eurocentrism, nor contemporary neoliberalism” (Mowitt, 2012). “The university”, he continues, “*is* a ‘knowledge-mongering institution’ and school teaching is largely productive labor, which is precisely why syndicalism has asserted itself with urgency, if not success, in so many corners of the educational field, but also, more ominously why the drumbeat of ‘deliverables’ or ‘outcomes,’ has become so tortuously loud” (original emphasis – Mowitt, 2012).

In Mowitt’s understanding, the neoliberal policies envisioned in Readings’ book have already come to pass. The conflict of the faculties has already run its course and we have long been dwelling in the ruins. What is needed now, Mowitt argues, is a renewed understanding of the value of the humanities:

Put simply, academic intellectuals are encamped in the ‘self-assertive’ university that now stands in the ruins for which it had been destined. Inside, strewn in some forensically legible blast pattern are to be found the ‘interdisciplinarity,’ ‘internationalism’ and ‘diversity’ that are fast becoming buzzing beacons of banality. To catch hold of the new beauty that flares up at this moment of danger, to redeem the idea of the plan silhouetted by the ruins of this university, it will take different concepts in the hands of differently organized ‘re-workers’”.

(Mowitt, 2012)

The question then becomes what is the work (re-work) of the humanities? What can academics do to defend the concept of the humanities or the vocation as a field of study? The counter-argument to this is Adam Sitze’s response article to Mowitt, where he suggests that there is a paradoxical irony involved in the way humanists attempt to defend their place in the university. The problems, as he concisely puts it are well known:

[T]here’s no lack of cause today for humanists to feel menaced. We read these days about the threat posed to the humanities by the invading forces of neoliberalism and market logic, on the one hand, and instrumental reason and the applied sciences, on the other hand. We read of the corporatisation and privatisation of the university, and the poisonous effects those processes have upon the humanities (whether it be the rising costs of books and tuition for students, or the inability of talented graduate students to find the permanent teaching positions they need in order to be able to do their work as researchers and teachers). We read of aggressive proposals to save the university (whether by “emancipating” it of its ostensibly outdated desire to unify knowledge under the rubric of the terminal B.A. degree, or by casting it into the sea of the Internet). And we read stories, seemingly increasing by the day, of administrators who arbitrarily and summarily close down humanities programs that allegedly cannot pay for their own operation costs, and that are said, with

shockingly little evidence, to be a drain on limited institutional resources.

(Sitze, 2012)

All of this, claims Sitze, is well known and well-worn territory, but the irony is that in defending the humanities, humanists tend to be sceptical of everyone but themselves (see also Bahti, 1991). By falling on the Socratic defense of the unexamined life, they nevertheless proleptically envision their own demise, just as Plato informs us Socrates did in *The Apology*.

This thesis argues, in light of arguments made here, and elsewhere, that new languages are needed to envision how to go about teaching literature in the humanities of the future. Teaching literature can have a social function. Speaking in defence of what Derrida calls the new humanities in “The Future of the Profession or the Unconditional University” (2005), Henry Giroux argues that “while it is crucial for educators and others to defend higher education as a public good, it is also important to recognize that the crisis of higher education cannot be understood outside of the overall restructuring of the social and civic life” (Giroux, 2005, p. 73). Bill Readings’ claims that we need to rethink our positions in terms of Thought and justice in *The University in Ruins* (1996), this thesis has argued, are still relevant and compelling. The belief here is that changing the terms we use to speak about education and what happens in it, can help us to reimagine what new acts of reading can bring about both inside and outside the university.

Risk

Risk is an interesting way to imagine education (see also “risk” in *Keywords* section of this thesis). To acknowledge its presence as central to what we do takes a certain kind of courage; a courage that can put one at odds with the institution. If the claim is, as has have been argued throughout this thesis, that risk is central to the event of learning and unlearning, then this thesis espouses an approach to education that recalls both what Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to when he spoke of the reader as an inventor of the book in “The American Scholar” and also of what Gert Biesta says in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*; namely, “that if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether”

(Biesta, 2013, p. 1).

In an industry – which essentially is what learning has become (perhaps it always was) – of increasingly obsessive micro-managerial tendencies, teaching, and learning have fallen heavily within the remit of an outcome-mechanism, a mechanism precluding the possibility of risk (Derrida, 1992; Lynch, 2012; Giroux, 2005; Mowitt, 2012; Sitze, 2012). That educational administrators are increasingly concerning themselves with structured learning schemes in secondary and tertiary institutions is no surprise for students and teachers alike. The process, it seems, has become naturalised. Learning outcomes are the quotidian lifecycle of the schooling agenda; outcomes and exam-focused learning tasks are the lifeblood of the institution. Within our institutions we have become used to committees and strategies, task forces and school boards, excellence frameworks and whole-school planning, agencies and panels, bottom-line results and league tables: so pervasive is this thinking that it may have been adopted as a natural attitude (Biesta, 2013, 2017; Giroux, 2013).

The focus here is on risk in economic terms. Thus I am aware that what I am saying will sound idealistic to those students and teachers whose livelihoods are bottom-line issues. The practical risks teachers (*and* students) take on a daily basis with their education and career prospects are very real risks indeed. It is worth noting that stepping out of the habitual, ordered understanding of “how we do things around here” can have lasting effects that may not be wholly desirable. Telling administrators that learning agendas don’t apply to you or your teaching is in the present age career suicide. I am not advocating this as a real possibility. What I am suggesting instead is the necessity for investigating the system from the viewpoint that agendas that minimise risk factors in education may be missing the essential point that education and skills training are often non-synonymous terms (see “training” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis). If education is to live up to its very idea then it has to, at some level, be understood as a “risky business” (Biesta, 2013, p. 139).

Learning Incomes

Unlearning, this thesis has argued, calls on us to shake things up and to take a leap of faith into nonknowledge and ignorance (Firestein, 2012; Gross and McGoey, 2015). It calls on us to let go, to fail, to fail again, for better or for worse (Firestein, 2015; Halberstam, 2011). It

calls on us to take the risk that encounters with learning ought also to be unacknowledged, unknowable, unassimilable (Biesta, 2013). It calls on us to understand that what we call learning (*Was Heisst Lernen?*) often does not have a why, a plan or an agenda, and essentially it calls on us to question why this is the case, or better, why this *takes* place.

I wish to argue, therefore, that unlearning is not concerned so much with learning outcomes as it is with learning incomes (see the *Keywords* sections of this thesis). This word is used to imply the *incoming* of the unforeseen, what Derrida calls “the monstrous”, the ad-vent of hospitality (Royle, 2003, p. 113). Unlearning is *into* the risk of intrusion and insemination, the insolent overcoming of the known knowns in favour of the *incoming* of the unknown knowns. The suggestion here is that thinking about incomes might provide another way of conceiving an important aspect of what Biesta, Mowitt, and others are talking about when they talk about “the drumbeat of deliverables” and the idea that education is consumer driven. To suggest that “incomes” are also an important element is at once to recall Readings’ argument concerning accountability and accounting (income as a financial term) and also to emphasise the notion that there might be another way of thinking about education as an event that interrupts learning.

Unlearning’s semantic force is not the antithesis of learning. Neither does its peculiar force reside in a simple linguistic slippage, as if semantic questions were somehow divorced from the referential real world of the here and now. The claim here, that is, is that “unlearning” is not another word for something that is already theorised. What “unlearning” gives us is, I claim, is a starting point to investigate what exactly we mean by “learning”, where we are going with this idea, where we have been going with it all along, and where we plan to go with it in the future.

The gambit here is that once “unlearning” becomes a question for “learning” we are in a very difficult place indeed. We are in a place we don’t necessarily want to be. This is precisely why we need to think about what we mean by this word. When we speak of unlearning we are not in the realm of the known. We are certainly not in the realm of simplistic binaries or structured hierarchies in the artifice of education. To think of unlearning is to begin to think about how we have become used to learning, so used to it in fact that we have failed to even

question it.

“There is a need for interrupting the politics of learning”, claims Gert Biesta, a need to “denaturalize the idea of learning” (Biesta, 2013, p. 76). Of course we need interruption. We need it because we have become immune to criticising something that has for so long been a simple unquestionable given. We learn *all* the time. We learn without knowing that we are learning. We even learn as we breathe, simply and progressively, passively and penitently. Learning in this thinking has become yet another word for osmosis. It’s just something we do. Biesta’s point is that learning can be rethought, or, in John Mowitt’s words “re-worked” (Mowitt, 2012).

When we refer to “learning”, according to Biesta (2013) we are not using a passive descriptor, however we may think about it. We are engaged in normative judgements. Learning discourses, that is to say, are not simply *descriptive* discourses; they are strongly *evaluative* conceptualizations. To reflect again, one last time, about the languages we are using for all of this: we talk about “teaching and learning”; we teach in “learning friendly environments”; our students are “learners” and we are “facilitators of learning”; our teaching is geared towards “learning outcomes”; we stress AFL (“assessment for learning”) strategies in our classrooms; and ultimately we progress through the status of “adult learners” until death do us part from all our learning(s).

“In my more radical moments”, says Biesta, “I sometimes even think that learning is the last thing educators should be concerned about” (Biesta, 2013, p. 59). This thesis, again, is premised on a plea to reconceive what we mean by learning and to approach the outcome with some more circumspection. The question posed here, after Readings, is how can we account for accountability without reducing accounting to accountability?

Etymology of Learning

To return to the question of learning one last time. The primary sense of the verb “to learn” stems from an old English word “*leornian*” and the old High German word “*lernen*”. It relates to the acquisition of knowledge or the attainment of a skill through study, experience, or teaching. In a practical sense, our experiences of education tell us time and time again that

learning surprises us; that it takes us over, undoes our perspectives and radically changes our worldviews. My hypothesis here is that being surprised by this *continually*, every moment of every day, every time you teach or think about teaching or learning. That's our Mount Moriah, our impossible moment of deciding what to do in a moment of crisis (Derrida, 2008, p. 69). If thinking about learning as an activity is undertaken carefully, conscientiously, rigorously, then thinking about thinking should be premised on the surprise and event of that activity; it can to be premised on questions like: what does it mean to understand understanding? How does thinking in taking place take the place(s) of preconditioned, installed ideologemes of thinking? How can we think, to play off Emmanuel Levinas, *otherwise* than being and beyond knowledge? How does thinking unlearn itself? How do we learn to unlearn?

If we are to think seriously about learning then thinking about the way that learning happens as a disruptive, unsettling, or better *interruptive* force seems appropriate. Perhaps this means hope for a future that will change our very idea of learning: "Learning is [in fact] conditioned by hope, something unforeseen that one, nevertheless, expects" (Joldersma, 2014, p. 39). In a sense learning is difficult because much of what happens in learning is unexpected, that is to say "learning starts with unlearning [*Entlernen*]" (Hamacher, 2004, p. 171).

There's a beautifully subtle reading from Hegel back to Plato and Aristotle, from Jean-Luc Nancy in *Being Singular Plural*, which provocatively maintains that philosophy is precisely this: "surprised thought" [*la pensée surprise*]. "We need to think", Nancy claims, "about how thought can and must be surprised – and how it may be exactly this that makes it think. Or then again we need to think about how there would be no thought without the event of thinking" (Nancy, 2000, p. 165). This means that the event of thinking is actually an impediment to teaching what thinking is. Or, to be more precise, if thinking is surprised thought then learning is suspended over an abyss of unlearning and that unlearning can happen only as the event of another kind of understanding. To love thinking, to speak *philosophically*, means to love the surprise of thought. It means being in love with the unsettling *insistence* of unlearning.^{ciii}

A subsidiary sense of the verb "to learn" refers specifically to an act of memory. This latter

sense is present when we say things in our classrooms like “do you recall how Gatsby acquired his fortune?” or “does everyone remember why Jude wanted to learn Latin?” or in direct past-tense constructions like “I got it” or “I learnt it by heart”. Learning by heart is a powerful phrase for acts of memory. Does it mean that I understand or that I feel something? Does it mean both simultaneously? Or does it mean one or the other intermittently? If I learn a poem by heart, for instance, does it mean I acquire its meaning, that I can summarize it, or does it mean that I don’t know what it essentially means for others, *only* for me? After all, it’s my heart, right? Though we speak of the “heart of the matter” it’s not necessarily the same thing as saying, “I’ve learnt something by heart;” that I *feel* (not necessarily think about) something in my deep heart’s core?

Learning By Heart

One of the best places to begin investigating the phrase “learning by heart” is Jacques Derrida’s strangely elliptical little piece called “Che cos’è la poesia?” Nicholas Royle calls this tiny essay “one of Derrida’s most lapidary performatives or *perverformatives*”; in other words, for Royle, it’s a little gem (Royle, 2003, p. 98). Like in “Learning to live finally”, Derrida’s last interview, “Che cos’è la poesia?” focuses on what that phrase “to learn by heart” might mean. The piece is the more unusual, though no less impassioned, for Derrida’s refusal to settle into any real logical argument. It abounds in all sorts of peculiar, playful repetitions, allusions, counterpaths, blind alleys, and obscure crevices. What “Che cos’è la poesia?” essentially does is teach us by withholding from us what we want to know. It is an exercise in the undoing of the known, of the teaching of poetry that is *otherwise*.

Throughout “Che cos’è la poesia?” Derrida pushes the phrase “to learn by heart” into obscure regions. In French to “learn by heart” is “*apprendre par coeur*”. The word “*apprendre*”, as Nick Royle has pointed out, carries the sense “to teach”, and “to hear”, as well as “to learn” (Royle, 2003, p. 136). Like the word “apprehend” in English it has the sense that something is grasped, held, arrested, understood or perceived in a fixed state. This is dangerous. It’s dangerous because learning by heart is also a correlative of “learning by rote”, the unthinking, vacuous rendering of information for information’s sake, a desire to fashion urns out of texts. But, as Derrida has it, the poem doesn’t hold still in words; it’s like a body in

movement, a lateral dance across the page. This allusiveness instils jealousy, a desire to want to have it and have done with it, to “know how to forget knowledge... to set fire to the library”. Hence Derrida’s neat paradox “You must celebrate; you have to commemorate amnesia, savagery, even the stupidity of the by-heart” (Derrida, 1995, p. 297).

In a peculiar turnabout Derrida claims that it is the poem that teaches the heart, that invents the heart. It is the poem that teaches us how to read, to learn, to feel, and to forget. The experience of learning *by* heart, of learning *the* heart, derails knowledge, upsets subjectivity, worries the selfhood of self, the *Da-sein* of *Sein*. The experience of the event of the poem (the poem as event) exposes us to chance, to risk and to uncertainty, and to wonder, ignorance, and stupidity. “Poems, therefore, befall us like benedictions; benedictions come from the other, the coming of the other” (Derrida, 1995, p. 297). You can’t teach that kind of learning. The heart has to learn that for itself. This is why, it is difficult to teach anyone how to read, not at least methodologically, since reading, like poetry, in Derrida’s work, often undoes its own definition. Reading is often a matter of learning how to read between the lines.

Stupidity

The word “unlearning” is a disjunctive register that catches something of the pace of this thinking, as opposed to perhaps, “understanding”, which is an apprehensive word. The word does not signify as a direct antonym of “learning”. This is its peculiarity and potentiality – the most important issue for think through. The argument throughout this thesis is that there is no learning on the one hand and unlearning on the other. Unlearning doesn’t sediment ignorance and stupidity as the obverse of teaching and learning. Learning does not contradict unlearning and vice versa; there is no either/or whereby we might contrast the two. At its weakest, unlearning is simply synonymous with learning. Unlearning’s perversity and irrationality, the fact that it doesn’t mean any-thing, any one-thing, causes minor insurrections for people like Avital Ronell, Jack Caputo, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, and Werner Hamacher – all of whose works intermittently obsess over this idea. Learning begins when knowledge gets suspended. Good, Biesta argues (2013), are teachers who suspend knowledge, who open up the abyss. They’re the ones that know that counselling

Enlightenment values of self-reliance and autonomy initiate an inescapable double bind. “Listen to me but don’t listen to me”. “Listen to me: Think for yourself!” *Sapere Aude*. Some instruction! Good teachers know that teaching and learning is not an endpoint, not a goal towards autonomy. There’s always more to be gained from dialogism and from the asymmetry of the face-to-face encounter. Effective teachers are the ones, as Ronell says, who can say “I am stupid before the other”, who are comfortable with a certain foolosophy and who know (without fully knowing why) stupidity and ignorance are not antithetical to concepts of intelligence and knowledge (Ronell, 2004, p. 55).^{civ} The ones who dismantle the *sujet suppose savoir* – the one who is supposed to know.

The “un” in unlearning is like the “un” in Freud’s *unheimlich*, at once both strange and familiar. Like the uncanny, unlearning resonates with questions of limits and borders – semantic, epistemological, philosophical, ontological, esoteric, and aesthetic. Like Freud’s term, it’s about what is familiar to us and unfamiliar simultaneously. You might think that you know what it is to learn, but if you ask yourself what is the opposite of learning you have to face up to the quasi-antonymic register, “unlearning”. Though we might think of the prefix in the negative sense, in reality the “un” in unlearning signals a more difficult knowledge. It might be called a kind of untology. Examples also exist, according to the OED, where “un” is used conversely as a positive.

Orthographical concerns aside, I’m not trying out a kind of archaeology as a theory of what unlearning is, a theory that might lead us to a methodology of unlearning. With this in mind, and within such space constraints, I can only only give three propositions along with three examples, which I think explain the case of unlearning. This thesis has presented various retellings of what unlearning is and is not, but for now permit me to conclude with three older ones. Here they are:

Proposition 1: Teaching someone how to read literature is impossible:

Example: Barbara Johnson:

Teaching reading is teaching how to read. How to notice things in a text that a speed-reading culture is trained to disregard, overcome edit out, or

explain away; how to read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking; how to take in evidence from the page, not seek a reality to substitute for it. This is the only teaching that can properly be called literary; anything else is history of ideas, biography, psychology, ethics or bad philosophy. Anything else does not measure up to the rigorous perversity of literary language.

(Johnson, 1988, p. 68)

Proposition 2: Teaching is *just* without reason:

Example: Bill Readings:

No authority can terminate the pedagogic relation, no knowledge can save us the task of thinking... We must seek to do justice to teaching rather than to know what it is. A belief that we know what teaching is or should be is actually a major impediment to just teaching. Teaching should cease to be about merely the transmission of information and the emancipation of the autonomous subject, and instead should become a site of obligation that exceeds an individual's consciousness of justice. My turn to the pedagogical scene of address, with all its ethical weight, is thus a way of developing an accountability at odds with accounting.

(Readings, 1996, p. 154)

Proposition 3: Ignorance does not mean failure:

Example: interview with Orson Welles, BBC 1960:

Interviewer: Where did you get the confidence to make *Citizen Kane*?

Welles: Ignorance, ignorance, sheer ignorance. You know there's no confidence to equal it. It's only when you know something about a profession, I think, that you're timid, or careful.

Interviewer: How does this ignorance show itself?

Welles: I thought you could do anything with a camera that the eye could do, that the imagination could do. And if you come up from the bottom in the film business you're taught all the things that the cameraman shouldn't attempt for fear you might be criticised for having failed. And in this case I had a cameraman who didn't care if he was criticised if he failed and I didn't know there were things you couldn't do, so anything I could think up in my dreams I attempted to photograph, not knowing that they were impossible or theoretically impossible. And again I had a real advantage not only in the real genius of my cameraman but in the fact that he, like all great men I think who are masters of their craft told me right from the start, there was nothing about camera work that I couldn't learn in half a day, that any intelligent person couldn't learn in half a day. And he was right. The great mystery that requires twenty years doesn't exist in any field, certainly not the camera.

(Welles, 1960)

Learning from these extracts means learning about the event. The eventness of the event, our failure to pin it down in the here and now, like a Zeno paradox, ensures that we are as ever alive to the trace of learning in the *living time* of learning, which is also a mode of unlearning. In this unlearning signifies the renewal of understanding in terms of what Schlegel called *Unverständlichkeit*, an un-understandability at the beating heart of each and every enunciation, its performativity – or more justly its performativity (Schlegel, 1964, p. 32). If quotidian scenes of teaching and learning instruct us experientially, they do so by constantly renewing and emphasising singularity and unexpectedness. This is what, I wager, constitutes the most intense form of unlearning.

If there is a law applicable to unlearning, this thesis wishes to argue, then it is simply this: That in teaching you can never be sure what you are teaching or precisely what effect you are having on your students, or when that effect will manifest itself, when it will return, how

it will return, from where it will return. This does not absolve us from our responsibilities to teach. In fact, it intensifies them, hyperbolises them. Knowing not what you do is no excuse for not knowing that what you do often has far-reaching consequences. The task is to know that this is the case and to try, as far as possible, to keep opening learning to debate, to make thinking about teaching an *event* and a new locus of learning. This thesis is a plea to teachers to learn to unlearn, however impossibly.

Keywords

A host of keywords circulate throughout this thesis; it is therefore important to define the way they are being used herein in order to ensure a high level of consistency and agreement. Each of the following terms, consequently, including the ones used in the title of this thesis, are employed in the following manner:

Education

“We all want to do the very best for our children”, argued Stuart Hall in 1997, “But what is education if it is not the process by which society inculcates its norms, standards and values – in short, its ‘culture’ – into the next generation in the hope and expectation that, in this way, it will broadly guide, channel, influence, and shape the actions and beliefs of future generations in line with the values and norms of its parents and the prevailing value-system of society? What is this if not regulation – moral governance by culture?” (Hall, 1997, p. 233).

Following from Hall’s understanding of education as a “process”, this work views education as a possibility rather than an attainable goal, an obligation to being open to something new (Readings, 1996) and an awareness that viewpoints on what constitutes a “good education” can and often do change from generation to generation, despite institutional appeals to norms, standards and values (Biesta, 2010). The emphasis on the word “education” throughout this thesis, moreover, and in contrast to the tenor of Hall’s argument above, who establishes its role here as ideological interpellation, is consistently highlighting the positive dimension of this term and is inspired by a belief that education is an experience that gradually makes us aware of our own ignorance. This is not a negative effect, as the argument concerning unlearning avers, since ignorance is also never viewed here as simply an adverse element in the classroom (Rancière, 1991; 2016).

Undoubtedly, the conception of education in this light can be critically evaluated as a naivety or, perhaps worse, a romanticism; however, the argument herein is that the experience of education (as it is conceived in literature classes) can be perpetually interruptive, in the sense that it challenges us to persistently update our views of what constitutes effective teaching

and learning (Biesta, 2006; 2010).^{cv} This understanding, and the argument that follows to explain it, stems from a pragmatic and experiential understanding of what happens in literature classrooms. The experiential dimension of this process is that the unforeseeable has a lot to do with the notion of education itself, hence the centrality of the next term “event” (see below).

To repeat what has been claimed earlier, in order to reinforce the importance of this point, this thesis does not view such literary experiences as being the *sine qua non* of *all* educational experiences. The claim here is merely that close-reading activities (acts of reading) in literature classes can and do afford us powerful avenues to challenge the norms, standards and values of prevailing societal codes – such avenues emerge from the stories we tell about ourselves and our readings and these can have powerful educational effects.

In order to be responsible to education, the argument claims, we are obligated to question its institutionalisation, its modes of address, its agendas, its power formations, and its moral regulations (Kamuf, 1997, p. 5-6). In short, this thesis wishes to distance an understanding of education from a pervasive neo-utilitarian culture of skills acquisition, training, and qualification by reframing education as something inherently excessive and interruptive; something that forces us to challenge our opinions on the world and our place within it (Biesta, 2013).

Event

To begin with a counterargument that might be laid out against this thesis: if events happen all the time, then why should we worry about them? Where’s the argument?

In this thesis, the event is considered a central element in the humanities, as an element that *interrupts* thinking. This interruption is considered here a major justification for doing work in the humanities, specifically when our deepest ideologies and assumptions are challenged by what happens in the event and activity of reading and teaching literature (Docherty 2011; Biesta 2013; Caputo 2016; Attridge, 2004). This concept, this thesis claims, can also be understood in relation to Bill Readings’ understanding of Thought (Readings, 1996), where Readings says that “thinking, if it is to remain open to the possibility of Thought, must not

seek to be economic” (Readings, 1996, p. 175). Indeed, alongside “unlearning”, “event” might be understood as the pivotal term here. Why is this?

The short answer is that if teaching and reading literature is conceived of as a way of promoting Thought outside of the commerce of an input/output mechanism, then it can possibly invent a language that challenges its domestication within the contemporary corporate university. This is not meant to imply that academics ought to be critical of the institution for the sake of being critical, or to be simply dismissive of institutional protocols; rather it suggests that reading and teaching literary works can have powerful institutional effects, effects which challenge preconceptions of what a good education consists of, what it does, and how it can benefit our lives. This does not mean to imply, either, that literature classes are the privileged arena for the event within the university. Since this thesis is concerned with literature and the teaching of literature, it will focus, therefore, on what the event means in that domain.

The major theorist under consideration here is Jacques Derrida, whose work has provided a longstanding philosophical dialogue with this concept.^{evi} Derrida is chosen in this thesis over other critics who theorise the event – Badiou, Deleuze, Heidegger, Levinas, Dastur, Romano, Žižek – because of his particular understanding of literature and the event of reading. For Derrida frequently links literature to democracy and to the future, to a democracy to come, to the theme of an unconditional university, and to truth, all of which are concerns here. As he explains:

What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political.... This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one’s thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That’s the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one

whose concept is linked to the to-come [*à-venir*, cf. *avenir*, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise.

(quoted in Miller, 2005, p. 32)^{cvii}

Derrida's understanding of responsibility here is peculiar, since to say that irresponsibility is "the highest form of responsibility" sounds like a mystical paradox. However, in defense of what Derrida is claiming here, and in what he says about the "endless promise of the future" (which again sounds like an unjustifiable mysticism), one can certainly understand that unpredictability plays a large role in reading, teaching, and writing about literary works. It can also be understood that teaching literature often challenges deeply held beliefs in a way that makes us aware that these beliefs can and do change. Again, the question comes up, posed in "Mochlos: or, The Conflict of the Faculties" (Derrida, 1992, p. 3), responsible to whom or to what? One answer to that is what Derrida calls his responsibility to the wholly other [*le tout autre*] (see Miller, 2009, p. 9-27).^{cviii}

Speaking in his capacity as professor in a university, Derrida argues that "[t]he university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth" (Derrida, 2005, p. 12). Undoubtedly, Derrida claims, the question of truth is difficult and can be questioned, as he puts it, "*ad infinitum*" (Derrida, 2005, p. 13). Though a commitment to the truth, Derrida suggests, in what he calls his "profession of faith", is of paramount importance in what he does and how he thinks about responsibility (Derrida, 2005, p.12). What this means is being faithful to what happens in acts of reading and writing; it means being faithful to the event. As Geoffrey Bennington describes it:

The University, and more especially, says Derrida, the 'Humanities', have a responsibility to foster *events* of thought that cannot fail to unsettle the University in its Idea of itself. For this to happen, the special institution that the University is must open itself up to the possibility of unpredictable events (events 'worthy of the name', as Derrida often says, being by definition absolutely unpredictable) in a way that always might seem to threaten the very institution that it is. On this account, the University is in principle the institution that 'lives' the precarious

chance and ruin of the institution as its very institutionality.

(original emphasis – Bennington, 2010, p. 28)

The responsibility the institution has to democracy, unconditionality, thinking, and education, Derrida claims, is that it keeps thinking open, that is open to the challenge of the new and to what might be said: “The coming of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented; it is another name for the future itself” (Derrida, 2002, p. 93). This openness to what comes, to the challenge events have to understanding, is reminiscent yet again of Readings’ claims that being accountable in the university means being open to Thought, not simply to a program or precondition. Events, when they happen, (in what Derrida refers to as “the strong sense”), are absolute surprises, unsettling in their unpredictability and power over us. If it is to be an event, this absolute unpredictability is what makes it an event, as opposed to a prediction or a calculation. Again, in Bennington’s words:

One predicate Derrida insists on is this: an event worthy of the name must be radically unpredictable or unforeseeable. An event that arrives on cue, as predicted or programmed, loses its edge as an event just because you saw it coming. A real event (worthy of the name, then) seems to derive its eventhood from some quality of out-of-the-blueness. Events in this sense befall us, surprise us, don’t politely announce their arrival and then arrive as announced: rather they land on us, hit us, appear out of nowhere, from above, below, from the side or from behind, rather than from up ahead. Derrida often stresses that events in this strong sense (and thereby the eventhood of events more generally, what makes events events) cannot adequately be thought of in terms of a horizon of expectation – what you see coming against the horizon is not an event (or at least, what in an event you could see coming was not its eventhood). This never-any-certainty-about-an-event means that I am never in control of it, and never sure of it, never sure it will happen. And this leads Derrida to what looks like a modulation in his thinking: from an earlier position where there was a kind of unconditional affirmation of the event in this sense, a kind of call on the event to come and happen in its unpredictability, there seems to be a shift of emphasis at least to a formulation of

a kind of transcendental ‘perhaps-ness’. No event would not be marked by this ‘perhaps-ness’ of its very happening.

(Bennington, 2010, p. 41)

To come back to the counterargument we began with: no, events (in the strong sense) don’t happen all the time. Neither is it possible to theorise them fully without in some way predicting their coming. Though this does not mean, this thesis wants to argue, that teachers and students can’t keep themselves open to the event by reading, talking, debating, and writing about what happens and how it happens.

Learning Incomes

In order to define what is meant by learning incomes in this thesis it will be important to look at what John D. Caputo says about the event first. Caputo’s interest in the event stems from his copious reading and writing on Derrida over several decades:

By ‘the event’, which is the motivating idea in everything I say, I mean the advent of what we cannot see coming. Events break out (*e-venire*), break in (*in-venire*), and interrupt the course of things. When something comes, something unexpected, that is the advent of the event and that is the Derridean side of the event. But events also have a Deleuzean side. Events, Deleuze says, are not what happens but what is going on *in* what happens.

(Caputo, 2013, p. 50)

What is interesting about Caputo’s understanding of Derrida and the event is that the focus is on boundaries and how they are disrupted or, better, ruptured by the advent (in-coming) of the event. The inside/outside dichotomy is threatened by what happens in the surprise and singularity of what comes. In a Deleuzean understanding of the event, it is not the event itself that is surprising but what is going on “in” what happens.

Learning *incomes* is an odd expression coined in this thesis in order to suggest a different mode of language and thinking about accountability. In some ways, it condenses further Bill Readings’ (1996) argument concerning accountability and accounting by having both an

economic overtone (financial income) and a sense that something might happen to challenge a transactional understanding of things (in-come as surprise or event). In other words, this word is employed in order to unsettle the notion that education is mostly about predetermined goals and strategies of prediction.

The ubiquitous expression in education circles “learning outcomes” can often be said to be used somewhat unreflectively, so much so that it might be considered a natural even unquestioned response to teaching and learning activities. By focusing on the “income” of learning, this thesis wants to forward the idea that learning or unlearning is not a one-way process, that it is not always predictable. Things happen that are not always foreseeable and responding to this is often a heightened responsibility of both teacher and student. Erikson and Erikson (2018) have claimed that intended learning outcomes models offer three main concerns for critical thinking. These are 1. that interpretation is often dependent on implicit interpretive frameworks; 2. there can be issues with educational goals that do not coincide with outcomes; and 3. there is a heightened risk that learning outcomes become a ceiling for ambition (Erikson and Erikson, 2008).^{cix}

The issue with incomes (as opposed to outcomes) then is that the word “incomes” highlights the notion that one is, in some way, accountable for what comes *in*; it is used, therefore, to insinuate surprise. Of course, one is also accountable for outcomes, but “incomes” is devised here in order to highlight unpredictability in a way that “outcomes” does not ordinarily reflect.

In trying to separate out “responsibility” and “accountability”, Nel Noddings (2007) also reflects on the responsibility teachers have for what happens. This happening is not always easily recognizable in a classroom setting:

Responsibility is a much deeper, wider ranging concept than accountability. Typically, a worker or teacher is accountable to some higher authority, and accountability can often be satisfied by conformity, compliance with the letter of the law. In contrast, responsibility points downward in the hierarchy. As teachers, we are responsible for those below us—those for whom we serve as authorities. Teachers may be accountable to administrators for certain

outcomes, but they are responsible to their students for a host of outcomes. Many of these outcomes are not easily measured.

(Noddings, 2007, p. 39)^{cx}

In this thesis, “accountability” is used in a different manner than Noddings argues here. It is used to suggest precisely a responsibility to the event. “Accounting”, by contrast, and in line with the way Bill Readings uses it in *The University in Ruins* (1996), is used to equate with the idea that one is accountable to a predetermined outcome. *Accountability* means, in this thesis, a responsibility to be truthful in the event that what happens in the classroom happens, whether or not one wants to admit it. Accountability in Readings’ sense is akin to this responsibility. For Readings “argues for the need for a philosophical separation of the notions of *accountability* and *accounting*. [He] argue[s] that it is imperative that the University respond to the demand for accountability, while at the same time refusing to conduct the debate over the nature of its responsibility solely in terms of the language of accounting (whose currency is excellence)” (original emphasis – Readings, 1996, p. 18).

Learning incomes, then, is designed to reflect on this question of the “currency” of excellence and one’s accountability to the students one teaches. It is designed to highlight the distinction between accounting and accountability by placing emphasis on the idea that what happens to teachers and students in the classroom is “not easily measurable”.

Literature

“The English”, according to Bill Readings, “invoke literature in order to make knowledge a cultural matter” (Readings, 1996, p. 79). In Readings’ terms, Dryden and Johnson, Arnold and Eliot, and John Henry Newman, invoke Shakespeare as the spiritual centre of the British national culture, just as the German idealists invoked Greek literature as a pure organic form of national community and heritage. In Readings’ view, in *The University in Ruins*, appeals to purity and canon in literary discourse are wholly suspect, perhaps even “ethically indefensible” (Readings, 1996, p. 85). What Readings is wary of is a form of literary culture that, as it appeals to democratic ideals and nostalgic purity, echoes more closely an inherent

elitism and politics of exclusion. This kind of argument understands literature's claims (and those who expound its possibilities) as harbouring a deeper and insidious role in setting up divisions and hierarchies in education and beyond.

There are many books demonstrating the rise of English literature and its role as a function of British imperialism around the world from its inculcation as a discipline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present. Notable works are: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), which effectively marks the author's transition from writing in English to his native African dialect of Gikuyu as a response to the imposition of a hegemonic colonial dialect; Franklin Court's *Institutionalising English Literature* (1992), a discourse on the politics and ethnocentric parochialisms determining the discipline of English literature in England and Scotland from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1996), which deploys Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon to illustrate and trace the postcolonial reactions and revolutions in Irish writing; and Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquests* (1989), which shows how British colonialism used English literature as a means of domination and subjugation in India. There are, of course, many more notable books in this area by writers such as Homi K. Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Gayatri Spivak, and Robert C. J. Young.^{cx1} Moreover, each one of these texts in their own ways acknowledge the political power and domineering heritage that surrounds the use of the term "literature". In doing so, they highlight the importance of understanding that teaching literature is a political act, whether we acknowledge it or not. Each of the aforementioned texts understands that culture – what Raymond Williams (1976) called "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" – is not something that can be easily identified, nor can it be easily elided; even the most benign humanistic desires, they inform us, belie a heritage of political subjugation and ideological interpellation.

The point here is that the term "literature" carries a weighty baggage and that the seemingly innocuous task of designing and teaching literature courses in university or second-level schools often carries with it a number of embedded hegemonic assumptions. For example, choosing major canonical works by British authors or organizing courses into historical periods from Renaissance literature, the eighteenth century, Romanticism, the Victorian period, modernism, and postmodernism. Such activities often reinforce notions about the

canon, the unity of works and periods, gender inequality, the linear progression of literary history, etc. (Miller, 1999, p. 29). They often reinforce the Arnoldian notion from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that literature somehow harbors the best that was thought and said, which consequently reinforces notions of cultural superiority and exclusion. In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's terms, "language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13). Where these values come from – which in Thiong'o's case was a brutal colonial regime – matters. And what they inculcate can take a lot of work and thought to challenge or undo. "Stories matter", as the influential Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has explained, "[s]tories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie, 2009).

This thesis, therefore, does not subscribe to a notion of "literature as such", a phrase Rey Chow has critiqued in the early work of Michel Foucault. According to Chow's reading of Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970) in *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (2006), when Foucault discusses literature's response to the demotion of language in the world, its loss of agency, he uncharacteristically devolves into an essentialist understanding of what literature is by employing the phrase "literature as such". Chow finds Foucault's views on modernist literature highly problematic:

The notion of literature as resistant and transgressive—qualities that are mapped onto the non-communicability, the hysteria as it were, of language in certain modern literary examples (examples that would include Raymond Roussel, Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot, and Georges Bataille at other moments in Foucault's writings), only then to be declared as the definition of literary writing itself—is, to say the very least, problematic. Whereas Foucault would go on, in his subsequent work, to criticize the "repressive hypothesis" in modern practices of sexuality such as psychoanalysis, at this point in his career he seemed invested in none other than a *repressive hypothesis of literature*, whereby literature, rather than being the vehicle and effect of power (as he would teach us about

sexuality), is conceived of, romantically, as power's victim and opposition.

(quoted in Bowman, 2013, p. 66)

As surprising as Chow's discursive turns are throughout this work, it is perhaps little surprise, given the work's title – a play on Martin Heidegger's essay "The Age of the World Picture" – that she criticizes the tendency in poststructuralist theorists to subscribe to an arcane hyper-academic language that claims to revolutionize thinking by ironically removing itself from both sense and world. The self-referentiality of the title speaks of modern literature's (and poststructuralist tendencies, after the so-called linguistic turn) to "take on a permanent oppositional stance against the world" (Chow, 2006, p. 7).^{cxii} This is most ironic, she will later claim, in those theorists who occupy privileged positions in elite universities but claim, through a language "folded in upon itself" (through the arcane excesses of poststructuralist hyperbole), to be representative of the disenfranchised, to be speaking for them. Indeed, if literature, conceived here in Foucault's terms as self-referential "as such" in order to separate it from other types of writing, the question becomes why is there a need to do it? And why has so much poststructuralist writing adhered to this general impetus to obscure and exteriorize meaning? "How", asks Chow, "have we come to write in the manner we do in the in the Anglo-American world of humanistic studies today?"

How did we arrive at this tortuous linguistic relation, in which the idea of transparent, comfortable communication between parties seems to have been forsaken to make way for ever more impenetrable writing, a writing that, to some of us at least (and I definitely include myself here), is oftentimes less a mere fashionable style than a necessary barrier – a line of self-defense – between ourselves and the world?

(Chow, 2006, p. 1-2)

In this thesis, teaching literature is regarded as a professional responsibility, a practice of reading and teaching, a daily activity.^{cxiii} The thesis does not claim to know what it "is" *as such* (as if there is a thing-in-itself called the "literary" that can be exposed or pointed to), nor does it aim to defend the "literary" against the crude instrumentalism of the world by "a

repressive hypothesis of literature”, by obscuring it, or objectifying it, or transcendentalising it, or covertly subscribing to what Chow calls elsewhere a “liberation theology” (Chow, 2002, p. 5).^{cxiv} What *is* highlighted throughout this thesis is the manner in which performative acts of reading in literature classes have powerful effects on subjectivity, thinking, learning, and unlearning. In short: the defence of the teaching of literature is not designed to idealise it, even to know what it is “as such”; it is merely to respond to what happens and to expand on the possibility that such activities require further investigation and acknowledgement by teachers and students in their classrooms all the time (Eagleton, 1996; Derrida, 1992).^{cxv} Reading literature, this thesis claims, is a way of connecting us to the world, *to what happens* in it.^{cxvi} Though literature can certainly be a form of escapism, like art, film, or music, the task of reading it connects it to the world.

New Managerialism

This term is inspired by the work of Kathleen Lynch, Bernie Gummell, and Dympna Devine, particularly in their work *New Managerialism in Education* (2012). For these authors, new managerialism refers to a political project borne of what they call a “radical change in the spirit of capitalism”. What they mean by that is that there has been an unprecedented shift in the function of capitalism in the last few decades. This shift ushers in a new moral order and a new phase of market-led models of control stemming from private-sector interests into the public sector, which are having a palpable effect on the way we view and account for our organizations, in particular education.

New managerialism is not, according to Lynch et al., simply a term indicating a change in management and government practices; it is a term used to refer to an entirely new set of values and practices influencing social, political, and economic organizational changes. According to this argument, new managerialism’s purpose as the organizational arm of neoliberal principles across Western countries, is to focus on output models over inputs, increase the use of performance indicators in all industries, and to fragment large organizations into smaller units. New managerialism emphasises choice and competition, it promotes decentralization and autonomy, and it does all of this by institutionalising market values and processes in all spheres and industries.

In education in particular – the realm in which this term is used throughout this thesis – the new managerial impetus can be seen directly through the pronounced contemporary attention to standardised models of learning and its concomitant outcomes (Hussey and Smith, 2010; Priestly, 2019). “Within education”, according to Michael Peters and Mark Olssen (2005), “new managerialism redefined what counts as knowledge, who are the bearers of such knowledge and who is empowered to act – all within a legitimate framework of public choice and market accountability” (quoted in Lynch et al., 2012). Peters and Olssen note four defining characteristics of the neoliberal trend. These are: 1. the self-interested individual: indicating what Lynch refers to elsewhere as “the actuarial self” or the economically self-interested individual who understands the market and one’s purpose within that framework; 2. free market economics: the espousal of free market economics as an efficient and morally superior mechanism; 3. a commitment to *laissez-faire*: an attachment to the concept that the market is a self-regulating mechanism which requires no government intervention and/or no outside influences; 4. a commitment to free trade: the resistance to any form of state control or protection when it comes to the open economy (Peters and Olssen, 2005, p. 315).

Following Ronald Barnett (2000), Peters and Olssen argue that new forms of managerialism and marketization have become universal themes and trends that commodify education and push it towards an emphasis on measurable outcomes (Peters and Olssen, 2005, p. 315). This trend results in a replacement of a culture of open intellectual enquiry by an institutionalised stress on performativity and tangible results represented by input-output systems with an economic production function. In Lynch’s terms:

The move to make education into a marketable economy has implications for learning in terms of what is taught (and not taught), who is taught and what types of subjectivities are developed in schools and colleges. In a market-led system, the student is defined as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest. There is a glorification of the ‘consumer citizen’ construed as willing, resourced and capable of making market-led choices. Education becomes just another consumption good (not a human right) paralleling other goods and the individual is held responsible for her or his own ‘choices’ within it. The state’s role is one of facilitator and enabler of

the consumer and market-led citizen. Neoliberalism embeds not only a unique concept of the learner in education, it also maps on a new set of goals to education's purpose as a key institution in protecting people's human rights".

(Lynch et al., 2012, p. 34)

Lynch's fears are prominent in her recent lecture at the UCD Humanities Institute, "Managerialism, Class, Gender and Care in the Neoliberal University" (2017), where she argued that we have been entering, for some time now, a culture of carelessness, where education as a public good has been disintegrated. New managerialism, with its emphasis on market accountability, replaces democratic responsibility with human capital theory; it divorces the common good from the competitive self.

Neoliberalism

Given the scope and resonance of neoliberalism, and its myriad uses in contemporary political, philosophical, economic, cultural, and social theories, it is best to approach the term with a view to how it is effecting, most specifically, the world of education. More will be said about the broader history of neoliberalism throughout this thesis, though to follow, yet again, Bill Readings' (1996) prescient understanding of the differences between accountability and accounting in *The University in Ruins*, and in education in particular, the argument here views neoliberal policies as synonymous with what Henry Giroux elsewhere refers to as a new global "economic Darwinism" (Giroux, 2014, p. 191). At the time of writing, such principles are most evident in the wave of second-level strikes in the US, the ubiquitous student strikes in Chile and across South America, and the university strikes across the UK.^{cxvii}

According to Heather Connolly, an associate professor of employment relations at the University of Leicester, in an article on recent university strikes in the UK, where faculty in 43 universities are organising strike action due to pension changes, students are increasingly positioned as consumers in a system that is becoming more evidently flawed in recent years (Connolly, 2019). The marketization of education has been detrimental to the relationship

between lecturer and student by positioning the student in the role of a customer and the lecturer in the role of the provider (see especially Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004; Allais, 2014; Aronowitz, 2001; Giroux, 2014). “Higher education”, Connolly claims, “is a post-experience good. This means that its impact is difficult for the customer to ascertain. So in a competitive education market, universities need to assure as much quality as possible to be ‘market leaders’. This leads to more control over the work effort and the commodification of education – think quality control, auditing, and ranking performance. Yet, rather than developing a competitive, well-functioning education market, the marketization of education has been paralleled by an increase in state intervention, through, for example, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework. This and other measures of ranking universities, such as the Research Excellence Framework, have led to an increased use of performance targets in research and teaching” (Connolly, 2019).

The increase in performance indicators and tangible targets, argues Connolly, is an indicator of how deeply entrenched neoliberal policies have become in the education sector and how deeply the language of managerialism and the market principles that underlie such language has gripped the entire system.

Neoliberalism, in this thesis, is therefore conceived of via Noam Chomsky (1999), Henry Giroux (2014), Wendy Brown (2015; 2019), Samuel Chambers (2016), and David Harvey (2005) as the elevation of capitalism and free-market principles into an ethic, a politics, and a cultural logic. Neoliberalism, according to Harvey, “values market exchange as an ethics in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs... it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2005, p. 1). According to each of the aforementioned theorists, who share similar views and catastrophic claims concerning current neoliberal policies, the privatization, commodification, and commercialization of public services for corporate interests, is a clear indicator for the necessity for educators to respond forcefully and intelligently to the wholesale corporatisation of their profession. According to Giroux (2014), via Readings (1996), “[a]t the heart of such a task is the challenge for teachers, academics, cultural workers, and labor organizers to join together in opposition to the transformation of public education into a commercial sector – to resist what Bill Readings has called a consumer-

oriented corporation more concerned about accounting than accountability” (Giroux, 2004, p. 45).

Risk

The word “risk” is used frequently throughout this thesis to coincide with commentaries on the event and in order to usher into the argument a notion of the unpredictability of the experience of education. Though this word might be readily associated with important work in sociology by, for example, Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) and Anthony Giddens, it is used here particularly with a view to how it occurs in educational settings and discourse (specifically in literature classes), not in broader socio-cultural conditions, as it is in Beck’s discussions of nuclear catastrophes, environmental disasters, or what he refers to as “manufactured risks”.^{cxviii} Gert Biesta in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), an important work about learning and the event of education, argues that “education always involves a risk”(Biesta, 2013, p. 1). This thesis is interested in exploring what this means, particularly through the stories we tell ourselves and are told about what constitutes an educational experience. Biesta’s understanding of risk therefore sees it as central to what is desirable in what we do when we engage in teaching and learning, not as machines but as human beings. His argument will almost certainly be seen as wilfully idealistic by detractors, but the argument is sustained throughout this thesis as it is viewed as a necessary rebuttal to claims that education is primarily a process of skills acquisition (see “Training” below):

The risk is not that teachers might fail because they are not sufficiently qualified. The risk is not that education might fail because it is not sufficiently based on scientific evidence. The risk is not that students might fail because they are not working hard enough or are lacking motivation. The risk is there because, as W. B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. Yes, we do educate because we want results and because

we want our students to learn and achieve. But that does not mean that an educational technology, that is, a situation in which there is a perfect match between “input” and “output”, is either possible or desirable. And the reason for this lies in the simple fact that if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether.

(Biesta, 2013, p. 1)

Biesta (2013) rails against the current education system by accusing policy makers, politicians, the popular press, and others (the IMF, the OECD, and the World Bank) of systematically (and “impatiently”) denying the riskiness of education in order to make it “strong, predictable, secure, and risk-free” so that its commodification is ensured. For Biesta, what has become the pervasive standardisation of education neglects what is essential about it: namely, its weakness and its risk. This thesis argues, likewise, after Biesta and John D. Caputo (whom Biesta employs throughout his own work), that the experience of education is interruptive, unsettling, and unpredictable, and that risk is central to what happens in the event of being educated.^{cxix}

To place this in the context of reading and teaching literature, such riskiness entails an openness to what comes unexpectedly, what Derrida would refer to as the hospitality to the other (Derrida, 2002a; Caputo, 1996).^{cxx} Reading and teaching literature, this thesis claims, often interrupts us, which can cause us to re-interrogate, renegotiate, and reconstruct preconceptions behind outcomes. Shoshana Felman (1993) wonders about this:

If reading has historically been a tool of revolutions and of liberation, is it not rather because, constitutively, reading is a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance? Does not reading involve one risk that, precisely, cannot be resisted: that of finding in the text something one does not expect? The danger with becoming a ‘resisting reader’ is that we end up, in effect, *resisting reading*. But resisting reading for the sake of holding on to our ideologies and preconceptions (be they chauvinist or feminist) is what we tend to do in any case.

(Felman, 1993, p. 5-6)

To think of finding something one does not expect in the text in such a way that it “cannot be resisted” is an odd claim, yet it makes sense if reading is understood as a temporal act, something that happens. As such, reading is risky because it cannot project ahead of time what will happen in the event of doing it. Felman does not imply here that the event always happens, rather that what happens happens whether or not we want it to. The resistance to reading in this sense is a resistance to what happens, so that our preconceptions and ideologies can remain intact, “which is what we tend to do anyway”.

Commenting on this particular citation, Julian Wolfreys (2000) argues that risk in reading means being open to the other, to what might challenge our preconceptions. This might not always be a benign thing either. What he refers to as “the good reader” is someone attuned to this prospect:

The good reader takes risks. Reading entails risk. It is an act which takes risks, which is itself risking everything in the event of reading, because reading opens itself to the other, and to the chance encounter with textuality. This is why reading of a certain kind, whether reading to escape, reading guiltily, reading *textually*, or reading while acknowledging that there are remains and that no mastery over one’s subject is possible, finally, is referred to as an act or an event. The act or event of reading is risky precisely because nothing is decided ahead of the event. Reading should not bring with it a programme or method, but should, instead, proceed step by step.

(Wolfreys, 2000, p. 56)

To be conscious of what Wolfreys is implying here regarding a methodology for the act of reading means to think about the practice and protocols of reading texts: what methodologies could we possibly put in place to avoid closing down preemptively the event of reading? To think of the act of reading as an event that cannot be programmable in advance is to reconsider what happens in literary seminars and classrooms when we are said to be teaching reading. Being a good reader for Wolfreys does not imply that one can achieve “mastery”

over it, nor that one is going to be good at it because one has been doing it for a long time. Indeed, there is something strikingly egalitarian about all of this, since ignorance does not disqualify one from being a good reader. It might even be the opposite. Risk is therefore considered throughout this thesis as something that should be embraced (one should be open to it), just as failure does not necessarily come with a purely negative connotation.

Training

Training is a highly contentious term. On the one hand, it might be argued that the difference between education as training and education as transformation seems to be increasingly blurred, since the language of education, over the past few decades, has become increasingly concerned with justification through guaranteed standards and outcomes at all levels (Erikson & Erikson, 2018; Kuh, 2010; Proitz, 2013). On the other hand, any attempt to separate training and education draws an arbitrary line between the two that polarises one as uncomplicatedly bad and the other as idealistically good. Neither effort seems efficacious. Speaking of education as event in 2003 – a concept that this thesis aims to defend and pursue – Thomas Docherty claimed that pervasive managerialist models of education as predictable and outcomes-oriented are divorcing teachers and students from what matters most in that experience. Docherty argues the following:

It is part of the triumph of the managerialist ideology damaging education at the present time that we must be able, whenever we propose a new course of instruction, to predict with total certainty its ‘outcomes’: what the student who follows the course will be able to do after she has followed it. This, as we know – and as the managerialists (who are, of course, anything but managers, for they depend on supposedly ‘neutral’ systems to make decisions, afraid of making decisions themselves) will never concede – is anathema to education as such. An education that is worthy of the name cannot predict outcomes: it is part of the point of education that we do not know what will eventuate in our processes of thinking and working and experimenting. In this sense, education should be of the nature of the event: the Docherty who is there after reading and

thinking about Joyce or Proust or Rilke or Woolf is different from the Docherty who was there before that activity; but the earlier Docherty could never have predicted what the later one might think – that was the point of the exercise of reading in the first place: to think things that were previously undreamt of in my philosophy.

(Bowman, 2003, p. 233-234)

Germane to the argument that follows in this thesis is Docherty's implicit understanding of the "interruptive" experience of the event, an experience of the impact of education as a transformative moment or crisis whereby one's previous thinking (philosophy) is challenged, undermined, or discarded (see "Event" above). A further consequence of such thinking is also the ignorance one takes away from the experience.

A counterargument to this understanding would be the claim that this hyperbolizing rhetoric creates a false dichotomy between the ways methodologies and learning strategies are employed to enhance skills and training opportunities in the classroom. According to Bowman (2013), who offers a critique of this argument 10 years after his initial interview with Docherty (Bowman, 2003), in which the extract above appears, the issue here is that "the dramatic all-or-nothing mode of his polemical formulation" conflates very different issues, which feed back into the long-raging debate of education as training (predictable, justifiable, accountable) and education as "revolutionary transformation, alteration, or interruption (education as event)" (Bowman, 2013). "Surely", says Bowman, "no administrator ever said that educators must 'predict with total certainty' *everything* that students might possibly learn during a course" (Bowman, 2013, p. 98).

The difficulty with these concepts, as can be seen here, is the polarising quality of the arguments that arise from each corner. "As anyone who has undertaken any kind of 'mere training' can testify – whether in martial arts or music or marketing, language learning, or management – there is no sense in which 'mere training', rationalized by predictable outcomes, precludes the possibility of a completely transformative event" (Bowman, 2013). Practically speaking, the idea that anyone would conclude that training (mere or otherwise) precludes the event of education or vice versa seems, of course, quite simply wrong. The

rhetoric of both arguments push the dichotomy to extremes in order to trace the absurdities of the opposite side. Nevertheless, there are certainly elements of truth in both cases. Training in literature seminars or high school classes, to give an example, does not automatically ensure that the reader will be changed by the experience. Reading Proust or Joyce does not guarantee a life-changing experience. There is no *guarantee*, and that is the crux of the problem, since one cannot say either way. Although, it would be equally wrong to suggest that this does not happen all the time (see especially Rosenblatt, 1978; Miller, 2002; Attridge, 2004). Experience teaches that students and teachers can be and often are radically unsettled by the experience of reading, whatever the outcomes predict beforehand. The problem with the last sentence is that the rejoinder is this: “There is absolutely no guarantee, for instance, that those involved in areas that neo(liberal)-utilitarianism deems ‘useless’ [literature, for instance] are not, in fact, terrible elitists; and there is absolutely no guarantee that their works, their subjects, their orientations, their knowledge, and all the rest of it are necessarily ‘good’” (Bowman, 2013).

With this in mind, “training” here is conceived of as the process by which educational institutions decide to ensure quality assurance in the acquisition of predetermined or transferable skills. This thesis does not argue against training per se, nor does it subscribe to a bias (often attributed to scholars like Harold Bloom) that literary studies are the “elite” faculty in the university at the expense of, say, science, social studies, or mathematics departments.^{cxxi} Rather, the argument is precisely against a preconceived managerial impetus towards justifying elements within teaching (in this case literary studies) that are not straightforwardly justifiable by outcomes mechanisms. Docherty’s argument that an education “worthy of the name... should be of the nature of the event” is compelling, not because all education should be about reading poetry or studying the Western canon at the exclusion of everyone else, but that within the field of literature studies, as it is conceived of here (not as an elitist element), teachers and educators ought to be aware that there is more to the process than narrowly conceived goals and outcomes. This thesis is an attempt to remind educators and students to acknowledge the importance of the unpredictable, the event, uncertainty and ignorance in what happens and to open up to it (to be “accountable” for it) in their own experiences in educational settings. The argument does not seek to polarize these positions; it seeks to engage with them. The overarching issue here is neatly

pointed out in Samuel Chambers' reading of Gary Becker's human capital theory in *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (2016):

Those of us who have taken up the roles of instructor in the university have been repeatedly told that precisely our job as teachers is to produce in the body of knowledge of our students something called 'transferable skills.' I have no doubt my story is commonplace: when I taught in Wales it was mandatory on all module guides to have a three to five bullet-pointed list of these skills. More important than any of the texts, themes, ideas, or history to be covered in any course was this apparently 'concrete' (perhaps even quantifiable) notion of the 'skills' that the class would somehow produce in the body of the student. In those very bullet-point lists, we can see a certain 'materialisation' of skills and an implementation of the neoliberal logic of human capitalist theory. In the requirement that such a list of skills be produced for each and every single module taught, we witness a clear (and materially powerful) expression of the core of human capital theory. The job of the teacher is to facilitate the individual student's rational choice to 'invest' in themselves, and the teacher can only do so if what the teacher provides are 'skills' that the student may later use to reap a return on investment. They pay us for skills, which they then leverage to produce a future income stream.

(Chambers, 2016, p. 94)

Chambers' anecdote (and frustration) is important here as an indicator of how education is conceived in the contemporary university; not as a process of intellectual stimulation or political possibility, but as a process towards individual advancement, competition, and solipsism at the expense of everyone else. The argument is against the automatization of the individual and an unreflective view of training as little more than a stepladder to economic advancement. Thinking of education as event, this thesis claims, is one of the ways of challenging the new managerialism in the current corporate system and in our communities.

Unlearning

In order to define how this term is being used in this thesis it is important to delineate between education-as-learning versus education-as-something-other (something wholly romantic). Firstly, to insinuate that unlearning, as it is being used in this thesis, is a romantic concept would be to neutralise the term. It would be to suggest that it harks after a nostalgic moment when literature held an esteemed position within the university. It would also imply that a literary education seeks a secular form of spiritual enlightenment. Neither of these is the case here.

Unlearning, this thesis argues, refers to adaptability and an openness to the event. It refers to the idea that what is learnt in the classroom is often extraneous or different from what the program offers and suggests it will teach. In this respect, unlearning refers to the process whereby one becomes conscious of one's own ignorance and the necessity for adapting to that realisation: this is not always a good thing. It also refers to the notion that learning can happen as an after-effect (as a form of "*Nachträglichkeit*" in Freudian terms), which can also be traumatic (Bennington, 2010, p. 41-42). Thomas Docherty argues, somewhat controversially, that "[i]f learning is anything, it is a process of *transformation* and most certainly not of *transmission* or transfer. It is a process in which I can become something, and in which I can become something other than I am at present" (original emphasis – Docherty, 2011, p. 42).

The argument in this thesis does not disqualify the notion of transmission in learning; it does not wish to suggest that learning does not (or cannot) take place through traditional didactic approaches to instruction or from rigorous empirical research. It does not wish to suggest that *all* learning should happen in one way or another or that the most important learning happens in literature classes. It wishes, merely, to suggest that learning is a complex process that cannot be narrowed down into a specific formula and that current teaching and learning strategies require more circumspection in this regard. In which case, in the current ruined institutions in which we are now dwelling (Readings, 1996, p. 166), the need is to recognize the limits of the transfer, outcomes, and predictions models of learning we have and are being given by market-influenced institutions: "We have to recognize that the University is a *ruined institution*, while thinking what it means to dwell in the ruins without recourse to romantic nostalgia" (original emphasis – Readings, 1996, p. 169).

It might therefore be beneficial to acknowledge that things are not as easy as they seem and the programs that assume uncomplicated knowledge acquisition or transmission – in literature courses, in this instance – would do well to rethink outcomes models and the language of learning. In short: this is a plea to teachers to be more circumspect, to think more roundly about education and its promises, not a design for how that process should end up.

Again, as Thomas Docherty claims:

... much of what passes for ‘learning’ in our times proceeds precisely as if this were how knowledge operates. Our talk of ‘outcomes’ and of ‘knowledge-transfer’ presupposes a certainty and a stability in the process of learning or of ‘taking’ certain modules; and in doing so, it stops learning from being a process, reducing it to the level instead of the commercial activity of the consumption of a product, and of a product that is assumed to be non-organic, non-changing. Is it any surprise that a teaching that goes on in this model is rightly experienced as ‘dead’, in every sense?

(Docherty, 2011, p. 41)

This thesis could also have taken other interesting directions with unlearning. It could have investigated unlearning as a concept beyond literature classes and acts of reading. For instance, examples such as bodily unlearning may have been used to tease out the contours of this terminology – “muscle memory” in particular seems like an obvious metaphor for what unlearning could productively investigate. The idea that learning a difficult skill like riding a bike or driving a car or becoming an athlete can become an automated skill (unthinking and unreflective) is interesting in terms of memory, training, and skills acquisition. What changes in the brain’s chemistry, neural pathways, or the physical make-up of the body need to occur in order to achieve this acquisition? Once things are learned in this way, how can one say that they become unlearned? What changes would need to occur again in order to reverse or modify precognitive skills?

In certain arenas, such as boxing perhaps, unlearning could have been used to investigate strategies that are employed to train the body to learn skills that are unnatural or

counterintuitive; training, for instance, that reverses impulsive inclinations for bodily movement in defensive and attacking positions. Unlearning could also have been employed to investigate issues with memory deterioration and retention, such as in Alzheimer's patients. It could also be employed to investigate a range of cognitive biases in psychology studies or have been developed through foreign language acquisition strategies or foundational intervention strategies in, say, dyslexia.

There are undoubtedly a range of alternatives for investigating unlearning as a concept, although this thesis has chosen to focus on unlearning in acts of reading and teaching in literature classes specifically. It has done so as a response to the experience of teaching in these environments and in the hope that exploration in this area might deepen to incorporate the importance of ignorance, non-knowledge, and the event.

Beyond this, thinking about unlearning in this thesis has been inspired most consistently by the work of Gert Biesta, who has suggested that the language we use to describe education matters beyond simple description. His major argument over the last two decades has been that “the language of education has been replaced with the language of *learning*” (original emphasis – Biesta, 2005, p. 54). His neologism for this is “learnification”, by which he means “the relatively recent tendency to express much if not all there is to say about education in terms of a language of learning” (Biesta, 2015, p. 235; see also Biesta, 2009; 2010; 2013).

Biesta's major critical impulse, to speak reductively, is to show that “[s]omething has been lost in the shift from a language of education to the language of learning... [so] there is a need to reclaim a language *of* education *for* education” (original emphasis – Biesta, 2005, p. 55). Accordingly, this means trying to “re-invent a language for education, a language that is responsive to the theoretical and practical challenges we are faced with today” (Biesta, 2005, p. 55). Given Biesta's argument, the claim in this project is that the languages we choose to speak about education are important. After Wittgenstein and Derrida, we know that language is always to some extent performative, and that what matters in it, its purposes and its aims, can and do change the way we think (see Miller, 2001).

The language used herein is an attempt, therefore, to take this latter point seriously. How we talk about something – the language or languages we choose (or are given) to speak about it

– delimits or expands our ability to conceive of it. Education in this thesis is approached through many odd or ambiguous terms (unlearning, foolosophy, learnercentrism, untology, event, the other, etc.). These terms result from acts of reading and are generated by a response to stories of education. They are not invented ex nihilo; they are elicited from readings of stories: from John Williams’ novel *Stoner*, from Hermann Hesse’s *The Prodigy*, from Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, from Charles Baxter’s short story “Gryphon”, and so on. Throughout this thesis, it is the stories that people tell about education that drives the theory and the readings that come from reading and teaching those stories. Each reading tells or retells a story. Each chapter explores a story of education. These stories, it is claimed here, are the evidence of unlearning in the teaching of literature classes.

Notes

ⁱ This is true, up to a point of course, and there are alternative models that can be used to question even this distinction. For instance, at second level international schools the core ethos of the International Baccalaureate curriculum is that TOK (Theory of Knowledge) classes link cross-curricular knowledge questions (KQs) to distinct disciplines across the departments and programs. In order to obtain an IB Diploma, students need to take at least two years of TOK classes. The idea is to see how real-life situations often crisscross disciplinary knowledge models, so that areas of knowledge (AOKs) can be seen to become interdependent and fluid. Students, that is, come to see that paradigm shifts in the history of knowledge acquisition often pitch what seem to be distinct knowledge areas into conflict. What happens in a math class or a science class can have connections to what happens in a history class or a literature class if the lens is readjusted to incorporate broader conceptual perspectives. See Eileen Dombrowski et al., *Theory of Knowledge: Course Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

ⁱⁱ See for instance Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for the concept of *phronesis*, which relates to the wisdom of practical action and good judgement, variously referred to by critics as prudence, practical wisdom or ethical intelligence. In the *Ethics* Aristotle argues that the capacity to live well (*Eudaimonia*) requires a command of ethical judgement. The difficulties arise in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when Aristotle attempts to define what that might be. Ethical judgement, he claims, arises from experience, so that various forms of theoretical knowledge such as *techne* (understanding how things work) and *theoria* (an understanding of general principles) are not always relevant to situated acts of virtue. In other words, experience of the world results in knowing when to diverge from the principles one has learned, when to break protocol or even the law. Plato in the *Meno* dialogue claimed that practical wisdom therefore cannot be taught but merely lived, just as Aristotle claims that only experience can teach us what is good in each uniquely singular situation. "*Phronesis*", according to John D. Caputo in his *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), "is the nimbleness and dexterity of a mind capable of coming to grips with the complexity of factual life itself, with the difficulty of the idiosyncratic and unexpected. *Phronesis* is the capacity to act on the spot, to think on one's feet, to invent what is needed at the time, to innovate, improvise, experiment, a capacity to move with the mobility of events, to let one's *logos* hang loose. The medieval schoolmen said that *phronesis* means having the *recta ratio*, the right touch, a sense of what is just right, *au juste*, for what the situation demands (*agendi*)", p. 101. My claim here is that *phronesis* operates on similar lines to the concept of unlearning as event, and could be explored further, since it acknowledges education as excessive, as something that often happens outside of the confines of curricular planning, evidence-based learning principles or outcomes trajectories. *Phronesis* envisages a kind of learning that is an undoing of the principles of the law in favour of the principles of justice. This echoes not only Caputo's understanding of *phronesis* in *Against Ethics* but also Derrida's understanding of justice in "The Force of Law" where he argues that "justice exceeds the law and calculation", p. 28. See Derrida's "The Force of Law: The Mythical Foundation of Authority" (particularly the 3 aporias, p. 22-29) in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 3-67. Neither Derrida nor Caputo mean to suggest that there is no need for the law, nor is this thesis claiming that there is no need for structured planning in classroom practice. The examples emphasise the necessity to think about practical issues of teaching, learning and justice in the real world scene of education. Aristotle's *phronesis* is helpful for explaining a major criticism of unlearning. The criticism is premised on the notion that we need people trained to know what they are doing, for instance a heart

surgeon. In the instance of an operation, for example, the surgeon needs to understand the laws and principles of his/her profession. This is true. However, in the event of the unforeseen, the surgeon also needs to know how to make a decision, which often exceeds that training in order to do justice to the situation, for no training can fully predict the future. They need to react. Aristotle's argument is that experience teaches us to adjust, while both Derrida and Caputo emphasise the need in education (prudence and jurisprudence) to understand the limits of knowledge and the necessity for critical judgement and improvisation. Unlearning argues against obsessive standardisation to suggest the pressing need for educators to understand that blind adherence to systems and standards curtail the students' abilities to act out for justice in the event of the new.

ⁱⁱⁱ Halberstam uses the term "low theory" throughout his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) in order to suggest alternative avenues for thinking topics like failure, emptiness, sterility, perversion, unbecoming, loss and so on. Halberstam borrows this term from Stuart Hall who in his essay "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" (first published in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 1986, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 5-27) argues that Gramsci was not a "general theorist" or "an academic or scholarly theorist of any kind", rather, his real value lies in the sophisticated direction of "complexifying [sic] existing theories and problems" in the guise of a politically engaged intellectual and social activist. Gramsci's revised counterhegemonic theorisations offer an insight, for both Hall and Halberstam, into a concept of theory as "a detour en route to something else" (an echo of Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that method is wandering). Theory for both writers can, if left unchecked, elevate itself into a rigid masculinist position of authority and guidance that staunchly precludes voices of the oppressed other. The power of theory to exalt rigour and abstraction over pragmatism and social activism (and high theory over low theory) undoes its power to envisage alternative ways of knowing, ways that matter politically and socially beyond the walls of institutions, research frameworks and strategic outcomes models. "Today in the university", argues Halberstam, "we spend far less time thinking about counter-hegemony than about hegemony. What Gramsci seemed to mean by counter-hegemony was the production and circulation of another, competing set of ideas that could join in an active struggle to change society" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 17). Low theory, understood in Halberstam's book as a radical openness to counterhegemonic alternatives to stultifying knowledge productions, the well-worn path of scholarly output, understands that contemporary teaching practices ought to reflect these open-ended principles: "An 'open' pedagogy, in the spirit of Rancière and Freire, also detaches itself from the prescriptive methods, fixed logics, and epistemes, and it orients us toward problem-solving knowledge or social visions of radical justice" (Ibid.). Halberstam's argument, echoing Hall, also understands that hegemony refers to a system of beliefs espoused by dominant groups to achieve and maintain power over subordinates, a system that controls the propagation of ideas and perspectives under the regimen of "common sense". Such control is particularly insidious in Halberstam's and Hall's reading of Gramsci because it refers to a "set of beliefs that are persuasive precisely because they do not present themselves as ideology or try to win consent" (Ibid.). The task of low theoretical models is therefore to challenge the hierarchical structures put in place by powerful voices in the academy, espousing and protecting the status quo, in such a way as to create alternative modes of understanding not only the politics and power of education but also its promise for a more democratic future. The task of low theory, that is, is to challenge the academy to fulfil its role as a social, democratic, political institution.

^{iv} See Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 131, on assessment and the difficult experience of learning.

^v In *Higher Education: A Critical Business* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997) Ronald Barnett argues the following: “We have to displace critical thinking as a core concept of higher education with a more comprehensive concept. The concept that I am proposing is that of critical being, which embraces critical thinking, critical action and critical self-reflection”, p. 1. Barnett’s initiative in theorising “critical being” is to displace the idea that specialised critical thinking in a single area of enquiry without the concomitant emphasis on critical agency, autonomy and the ability to act in the world is lacking and often dangerous. Elsewhere in “A Curriculum for Critical Being” (2005) Barnett suggests that “unless we are able to supply an account of how these critical tasks [of knowledge, of world, and of self] can be held together, the danger looms that we might produce students who are adept at critically evaluating, say, literary texts or other works of humanistic culture in one way, but who adopt quite different powers of critical evaluation in relation to the world. This is the nightmare that [George] Steiner presents us: a world in which the Nazis might appreciate Schubert or Picasso and then turn to their critique of the Jewish Community in the Final Solution”. See “A Curriculum for Critical Being” in *The Palgrave Handbook for Critical Thinking in Higher Education* eds. Martin Davies and Ronald Barnett (London: Palgrave, 2005), p. 63-76. For more on the concept of unlearning, reading literature, and ethical responsibility, see the chapter on trauma below.

^{vi} My chapter on “Untology”, below, is an attempt to come to terms with Rancière’s somewhat idiosyncratic understanding of the prefix “un”. My contention is that Rancière’s understanding of this prefix and its function in “unlearning” and “un-explication” sets him apart from other critics who often see unlearning as a simple form of forgetting.

^{vii} Caputo’s style is highly idiosyncratic and has garnered much attention from his critics and acolytes in equal measure. His first books were written in what he refers to as “a traditional academic propriety”, though since his *Radical Hermeneutics* (1998) he has been developing an unorthodox writing style that polarises his critics. For Caputo’s defence of his style, see B. Keith Putt’s “What do I love when I love my God? an interview with John D. Caputo” in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* ed. James Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 150-180. For more on Caputo’s critics and his style of writing, see Cleo McNelly Kearns “The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Esoteric Comedy and the Poetics of Obligation” in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* ed. Mark Dooley (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 283-294.

^{viii} For more on Halberstam and unlearning, see also “Unlearning” in *Profession*, a publication of the *Modern Language Association*, 2012, p. 9-16. Here Halberstam argues that it is not only the humanities that are in crisis, “crisis defines the era we inhabit”. What is needed now, she continues, is “new forms of protest politics, new modes of feminism and queerness, animation, and revolt”, p. 9.

^{ix} This thesis is concerned with how unlearning functions in educational settings, particularly literature classes and seminars, so has not tackled these areas. Some of these titles, however, are as follows: *Unlearn: 101 Simple Truths for a Better Life*; *Unlearn: Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results*; *Learning to Unlearn: Choosing Individuality over Conformity*; *Unlearn, Rewild: Earth Skills, Ideas and Inspiration for the Future Primitive*; *Unlearn Moderation: Mindfood for Heretics*.

^x Spivak speaks at more length on this “unlearning of one’s privilege” in a number of interviews. For example in an interview with John Hutnyk, Scott McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadas, Spivak has the following to say on unlearning: “One must be conscious of the struggle to win back the position of the questioning subject in specific context. But if I think in terms of the much larger female constituency in the world for whom I am an

infinitely privileged person, in this broader context, what I really want to learn about is what I have called the unlearning of one's privilege. So that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency. And furthermore, to recognize that the position of the speaking subject within theory can be an historically powerful position when it wants the other actually to be able to answer back. As a feminist concerned about women, that's the position that interests me more", p. 42. See "Strategy, Identity, Writing" in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 35-49.

^{xi} For a sustained consideration of the importance of the concept of unlearning in Spivak's work, see *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1-14.

^{xii} See The University of Sydney website for their unlearning mission statement: <https://sydney.edu.au> [accessed 10/2/2020].

^{xiii} For more on new managerialism, see the *Keywords* section of this thesis.

^{xiv} Ellen Hazelkorn, Magnus Gulbrandsen and Paul Benneworth offer a well-rounded case study of Ireland's history of education right up to the current crisis in their chapter "Ireland: Valuing the Arts and Humanities in a Time of Crisis and Beyond" in *The Impact and Future of Arts and Humanities Research* (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 89-115. See also my case study on Ireland, neoliberalism and education below.

^{xv} See Bowman (2016): "... the intimacy implied in the poststructuralist fantasy scenario of a seminar group of close reading and the close discussion of a difficult modernist literary text is sometimes put on a pedestal and raised to the status of being just about the only kind of authentic revelatory event – the only one that poststructuralists seem to know about, anyway. Might not this fetish or fantasy be something we should unlearn?", p. 142. In this thesis the study of literature, as it is envisioned in seminars and high schools, is understood as a practical working reality. The idea is to find ways to do this better, to find responsible (responsive) ways of thinking about literary study and pedagogy in educational institutions, to suggest that how we do it and what we do with it, matters.

^{xvi} For the very latest statistics and trends in English departments in the UK and some further afield, see "The State of the Discipline: English Studies" on the *Times Higher Education* website (May 2, 2019) with contributions by Lennard Davis, Trisha Pender, Robert Eaglestone, Elleke Boehmer, Alexander Dick, Patricia Badir and Michael O'Sullivan: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/state-discipline-english-studies>

^{xvii} See Prof. Marlys Witte on medical ignorance and the ignorance university on YouTube discussing her ideas at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8q5KXi8R3s>

^{xviii} The rise of neoliberalism in education and its prominence in this thesis will be discussed below in the rationale and further throughout the thesis.

^{xix} It should be noted that throughout *The Fall of the Faculty*, Benjamin Ginsberg takes the time to justify his

claims concerning “the all-administrative university” to ensure that his comments are not a general polemic against all administrators. His commentary is designed, rather, to point to what seems to him to be “a continuing erosion of educational quality and research productivity”, ushered in by dramatically top-heavy administrative institutions (Ginsberg, 2013, 199). For a more recent and more equitable understanding of the role of administrators in colleges, see Herb Childress’ *The Adjunct Underclass: How America’s Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 106-113. For a more dramatic representation, see especially chapter 7 of Charles J. Sykes’ *Fail U: The False Promise of Higher Education* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

^{xx} According to Ginsberg, over the past ten years or so, “the University of Virginia increased the size of its faculty by 15 percent while enlarging its administrative ranks by 28 percent; at Stanford the faculty grew by 15 percent while the number of administrators increased by 34 percent; at the University of Massachusetts, a school constantly facing budget problems, the faculty grew by only 5 percent, but despite budgetary shortfalls the number of administrators increased 25 percent; at Yale the number of professors actually declined by 4 percent but the number of administrators, nevertheless, increased by 25 percent” (Ginsberg, 2013, p. 198).

^{xxi} For example the research excellence frameworks (REFs) for UK universities: <https://www.ref.ac.uk>

^{xxii} Readings is not arguing that research frameworks are always bad and that there can ever be some idyllic research and teaching atmosphere outside of the confines of institutional responsibility – he does not, as he states quite clearly, argue for “some romantic ideal of eternal learning” (p. 128). Neither does this argument believe that there is a romantic ideal of eternal unlearning, a way of shirking responsibility to the institution or the curriculum. This is not the point. Neither romantic nostalgia for a blissful period of plenitude or a future of benign simplicity, but an ongoing pragmatism that sees the present situation as complex and in need of powerful critical intervention, and the future as open, unforeseeable, and dynamic. If one reads “romantic” as a synonym for naivety, wilful or otherwise, then this thesis argues against this notion in the name of new possibilities for finding a better future for education. If hope for a better future is considered a romantic ideal then this thesis argues for that possibility.

^{xxiii} See, for instance, Laura McInerney’s recent article “A Misguided Obsession with STEM Subjects is to Blame for the Decline in English A-Levels” in *The Guardian*, Tuesday, July 16th, 2019. According to McInerney, three types of A-Level English courses in the UK have seen their numbers decline by one-fifth in the past three years whereas the past three years have seen science courses rise by the same amount. The article argues that humanities is seeing a sharp decline because students are concerned about job prospects in the field. University students interviewed for the same article are also lamenting choosing humanities due to uncertainty in the future. The market value for education in the latter area is now in crisis.

^{xxiv} In “Why ‘What Works’ Still Won’t Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value Based Education”, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 29, 2010, p. 491-503, Gert Biesta focuses on the ontological, epistemological and praxeological dimensions of the turn to evidence-based educational practices in order to argue that policy makers and politicians are increasingly making unwarranted expectations of educators. These expectations are impacting on the possibilities of education to serve broader functions beyond complexity reduction and outcomes models. Biesta argues that the latter is a “political act”. Such educational practices and models don’t sit easily with core values of educational experiences: “Given that evidence can at most provide us with information about *possible* connections between actions and

consequences and therefore is entirely located at the level of the means of education, the idea of evidence-based practice is problematic, because if evidence were the only base for educational practice, educational practice would be entirely without direction. This is one reason why, in education, values come first”.

^{xxv} This is not to deny the reality of the working lives of students and the function of the university for training its attendees to be productive citizens. It merely echoes a sentiment put forward by Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) concerning the “widespread sense among students” that they are “parked at the university”: “taking courses, acquiring credits, waiting to graduate. In a sense, this is their reaction to the fact that nothing in their education encourages them to think of themselves as the heroes of the story of liberal education, embarking on the long voyage of self-discovery. What they are engaged in is *self-accreditation*, preparing for the job market... it is no use being nostalgic for the days when bourgeois society was sufficiently closed and prosperous, when the University was sufficiently elitist” (138). From the teacher’s perspective, Samuel Chambers asks “If we (teachers) aren’t producing and selling a product, then what are we doing?” “To sustain the university today”, he argues, “means to challenge and resist the neoliberal hegemony” that produces this kind of thinking. See Samuel Chambers’ “Learning How to Be a Capitalist: From Neoliberal Pedagogy to the Mystery of Learning” in *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* eds. Aidan Seery and Éamonn Dunne (New York: Punctum Books, p. 100).

^{xxvi} In “The Idea of a Chrestomathic University” Robert Young points to a number of complex issues when champions of literature are arguing for the value of their discipline within the humanities. Following funding cuts made to the humanities under the Thatcher government in the UK in the 1980s, Young argued that the English departments’ response was to issue conservative and outmoded humanistic claims for the cultural relevance of literature, claims that such departments had been at pains to attack and undo since the 1970’s: “The difficulty for literary theorists, when faced with a new ‘technologico-Thatcherite’ assault on the humanities, was that the terms by which their subject was established historically, and the only effective terms with which it could be defended, were those of the cultural conservatism and humanist belief in literature and philosophy that ‘literary theory’ has, broadly speaking, been attacking since the 1970s. When theorists found themselves wanting to defend their discipline against successive government cuts they discovered that the only view with which they could vindicate themselves was the very one which, in intellectual terms, they wanted to attack” (113). In Richard Rand ed. *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1992). Young’s claims, echoing Readings’ in *The University in Ruins*, hone in on the narrow understanding of literary history as an act of cultural realisation and the inevitable fragmentation of such a view with the rise of women’s studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, and cultural studies. Readings points out that literary culture conceived of and promoted in Western universities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – an era that sees a noticeable shift from philosophy to literary studies as the major discipline reflecting the nation-state’s cultural identity – can be understood as a “straight forward imperialism”, especially when literary culture is understood as the best place to achieve national consciousness, as in, for example, John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1852 & 1858) and Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1868). Questions of utility, at such moments, foreground the shaky foundations from which literary culture has sprung and highlight the inevitability that those foundations of cultural homogeneity and collective consciousness would in the long run fragment. “The emergence of critical practices that question the status of the literary and pay attention to popular culture is not the cause of the decline of literature but its effect. Such practices become possible once the link between the nation-state and its virtual subjects, the link that the University’s idea of culture (be it philosophical or literary) has historically served to forge, is no longer the primary ground of a generalized subjectivity. Cultural studies, that is, arise when culture ceases to be the immanent principle in terms of

which knowledge within the university is organised, and instead becomes one object among others” (Readings, 1996, p. 87). Accordingly, both Young and Readings see the “crisis of the canon” as a clear indicator of the demise of the concept of the nation-state and its *cause celeb*, culture; in lieu of which the concept of utility becomes paramount. Where they diverge, incidentally, is in the way literary studies might be reconceived in the future. Readings, though sympathetic to the general purpose of Young’s argument, that “the university, both inside and outside the market economy, should function as a surplus that the economy cannot comprehend” is also wary that Young is trying “to save the university by proposing a deconstructive idea – the idea of the supplement”. The fear for Readings is that the University of Excellence will be able to factor in the use/useless, value/market-value dynamic by “telling us to be excellently supplementary”. Readings views this angle as a flashback to Humboldt’s notion of “indirect utility, direct uselessness” and wonders why deconstructive arguments tend to inadvertently foster romantic ideals. The tendency is to either return to a Humboldtian nostalgia or to embrace a corporate model. At such moments Readings sounds particularly anarchic but the other alternative is to drop the idea of an overarching controlling idea that will reunify the university’s identity – be it culture or reason or nation – and try to find a new language for expressing where things are now and why we are “dwelling in the ruins” of a post-historical institution. By transvaluing our ideals and inventing languages to foster “Thought”, Readings argues, there will at least be a hope that some justice might be done: “Thought can only do justice to heterogeneity if it does not aim at consensus” (Readings, 1996, p. 187).

^{xxvii} In *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Stanley Fish argues, controversially, that teachers in higher level institutions should refrain from bringing personal opinions, judgements and political persuasions to bear on their teaching. They need to do their job by teaching students what they need to know and separate their personal prejudices, as far as possible, from the world of work.

^{xxviii} See note ix above.

^{xxix} See Rey Chow’s critique of Foucault in “Literature” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis.

^{xxx} To appeal to truth echoes again what might appear to be a romantic notion in the eyes of some critics. According to Rita Felski, “certain words—truth, reality, objectivity— have virtually vanished from scholarly writing, admissible only when garnished with an amplitude of scare quotes” (Felski, 2015, p. 36). This thesis is fully aware of the critical rejoinders, but emphasises the notion nonetheless as a plea to teachers to take seriously the pragmatics of pedagogy, the notion that the reality of what happens ought to trump what one wants or desires to happen.

^{xxxi} Declan Kiberd notably speaks of the impact of stories on the lives of his students in his *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce’s Masterpiece* (New York: Norton, 2010). Kiberd’s argument, not unlike Rita Felski’s in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), is that concentrated critical awareness and self-consciousness often pushes students away from the ability to see how stories have real purchase on daily their lives. In refusing to acknowledge the ignorance and mystery of stories, in favour of an institutionalised “technocratic explication”, students miss out on a core value of reading literature, namely that it can provide a “lived wisdom”: “Any teacher knows that many students today sprinkle their essays with quotations from the lyrics of rock music and from popular films. This suggests that they still yearn for instruction from artists on how to live. It may well be that rock artists provide the only common culture that most of those students know. The need now is for readers who will challenge the bloodless, technocratic explication of texts:

amateur readers who will come up with what may appear to be naive, even innocent, interpretations. Today's students have been prevented by a knowing, sophisticated criticism from seeking such wisdom in modern literature. In it they seek mainly tricks of style, rhetorical devices, formal experiment, historical insight, but seldom if ever lived wisdom. The contemporary gulf between technique and feeling cries out to be bridged in the classroom, through the work of teaching and learning", 2010, p. 15.

^{xxxii} For an interesting overview of arguments surrounding the question of subjectivity and rigour in narrative inquiry, see James Phelan's editor's column "Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism" in *Narrative*, vol. 13, no. 3, October 2005, p. 205-210.

^{xxxiii} See Peggy Kamuf's essay "Accountability" in which her neologism "account-er-ability" uses "er" at "the point of exact bisection" in order to find and factor into the notion of accountability a "hiatus" or "a little time to think" about what we mean when use the word accountability – "a counter-institution of resistance to the irresistible logic of accountability", p. 253. Kamuf's quarry in her essay are unquestioned assumptions about numerical efficiency in pedagogical practices and the "belief" that evidence and accountability are often thought to be generally synonymous. Kamuf's account is an indictment of "value added assessment" principles set up by educational market managers. The crux of the argument is that statistical reporting is widely set up to produce "evidence" but what type of evidence we receive from reports about students' learning is also a form of interpretation, a narrative set up on the premise that numbers don't lie and that the principle aim of the assessment of "thinking" (critical thinking) by "accountablists" in university settings is to set it up by way of contrast with "factual knowledge". There are good reasons, she claims, "to be sceptical when an advocate of accountability-for-the-university promises relief from 'faith-based' estimates of the quality or efficiency of these institutions", p. 258.

^{xxxiv} In an Irish context, Stephen O'Brien argues the following: "While technologies like learning outcomes are but one (banal) expression of neoliberal governance, they can certainly impact on learning attitudes and behaviours. If presented in a sufficiently inflexible (positivist) manner, learning outcomes can limit serious question or challenge. More subtly, learning outcomes represent a particular knowledge type – how we exploit it, measure it, claim ownership over it, test it for inadequacies (as if it were ever adequate); in short, in terms of means production, by conceiving it primarily as a product of exchange value. When teachers write learning outcomes into culture, they (unwittingly or otherwise) uphold the right to manage education in *that way*". See "Resisting Neoliberal Education: For Freedom's Sake" in *Negotiating Neoliberalism: Developing Educational Visions* eds. Tim Rudd and Ivor F. Goodson. Boston: Sense Publications, p. 149-166.

^{xxxv} On the use of the word "crisis" here, see also Frank Donoghue in *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham, 2008): Too many observers now describe the current state of higher education, particularly of the humanities, as a crisis. I wish instead to characterize it as an ongoing set of problems, a distinction that might at first appear only to be semantic. The terms of the so-called crisis, from the academic humanist perspective, are always the same: corporate interests and values are poised to overwhelm the ideals of the liberal arts and to transform the university into a thoroughly businesslike workplace. Humanists have perhaps always waxed histrionic on this topic. In an address at the Modern Language Association's annual convention in December 1952, Hayward Keniston proclaimed: "Ladies and gentlemen: it is time for an awakening . . . for a restoration of the relevance of our discipline to the life of our day. For our day is a day of crisis." I don't dispute this depiction of the opposing camps, but rather I begin my own account by observing that it has been like this for a very long time, p. 1.

^{xxxvi} J. Hillis Miller spends the entire ninth chapter of his *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), “Derrida’s Ethics of irresponsibilization; or, How to Get Irresponsible, in Two Easy Lessons,” on the use of this word in Derrida’s work – in particular, on four instances of it in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

^{xxxvii} See also Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferris, *A Taste for the Secret* trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (London: Polity, 2001): “Of course it will be said that deconstruction of the institution is not institutionalizable – but neither does it belong to a space untouched by institutionality. It is probably the logic that has guided me for all these years, always at war with institutions, but always attempting to found yet another one”, p. 50. For a sustained analysis of Derrida’s relationship with universities see Simon Morgan Wortham’s *Counter-Institutions: Jacques Derrida: And the Question of the University* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); for how institutions shape interpretive practices, see Samuel Weber’s *Institution and Interpretation*, expanded edition, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

^{xxxviii} See also Derrida’s commentary on literature and the university in “A Madness Must Watch over Thinking” in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994* e. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): “No more than philosophy or science, literature is not an institution among others; it is at once institution and counter-institution, placed at a *distance* from the institution, at the angle that the institution makes with itself in order to *take a distance from itself, by itself* [s’écarter d’elle-même]”. Jacques Derrida, “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking,” p. 346.

^{xxxix} See Derrida’s commentary on the dream of a counter-institution in *A Taste for the Secret* (London: Polity, 2001): “I am always torn between the critique of institutions and the dream of an *other* institution that, in an interminable process, will come to replace institutions that are oppressive, violent and inoperative. The idea of a counter-institution, neither spontaneous, wild nor immediate, is the most permanent motif that, in a way, has guided me in my work,” pp. 50-51.

^{xl} Miller dedicates the book *Black Holes* to the memory of Bill Readings.

^{xli} Young is quoting from J. Hillis Miller’s MLA Presidential Address 1986 “The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading and the Question of the Material Base” in *PMLA*, May 1987, 102(3), pp. 281-291.

^{xlii} One notable exception to the neoliberalist crisis, which understands global capitalist excesses as socially detrimental, and has garnered widespread criticism as we’ve seen, is Jeremy Rifkin’s work in *The Zero Cost Marginal Society* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2014), where he sees the beginnings of what he refers to as a “post-capitalist society”. Rifkin’s argument is that rather than a future of hopelessness, wage disparity, radical alienation, and hyper-capitalist consumer practices, we are now catching a glimpse of a “collaborative commons”. This refers to the ways in which people are now sharing goods and knowledge online for free and by-passing the traditional capitalist market. His argument is that this is the first new economic system since the advent of capitalism and socialism and we are now moving into an entirely new economic revolution. There is a paradox at the heart of capitalism, according to Rifkin, accelerated by the technological revolution, which has seen zero cost margins make information and goods nearly free. Consumers have become “prosumers”. This means that there has been a radical shift in the way goods and information move around, for instance in the music and publishing industries where e-books and digital music is transferable and downloadable for free as long as we are connected to the internet. One

counterargument against Rifkin would be that capitalism has been extraordinarily resilient in the past and it is difficult, given the arguments put forth by astute critics such as Noam Chomsky and David Harvey, to imagine that this paradox will be sustainable in the future, that capitalist tendencies won't find a way to surmount and/or infiltrate the sharing culture, a lot of which surrounds serious issues of copyright infringement already. In terms of education, free MOOCs (massive open online courses) are seen as part of this collaborative commons network, as is the IoC (internet of things), which is understood to be the next phase in our techno-evolution. Whether Rifkin's predictions come true or not and we do end up in a post-capitalist age remains to be seen. See also Rifkin's *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* (London: Palgrave, 2011) and Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

^{xliii} For the most recent contribution to the disastrous academic job placement statistics for literature graduates, see "Endgame: Can Literary Studies Survive?" special report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 2020: http://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/ChronicleReview_Endgame.pdf. Accordingly, "The academic study of literature is no longer on the verge of field collapse. It's in the midst of it". Entire fields of study (Victorian poetry, modernism) are evaporating from the biggest universities and have essentially ceased to exist. This comes on the heels of a recent debacle where Columbia University failed to place a single PhD graduate in literature into a tenure-track position in 2018. Disgruntled graduates wrote a letter to the administration claiming that the university had effectively misled them and failed them in preparing them for the current job market. The reality, of course, is that the statistics of job placement in this field are grim, with a fall of 55% in the last decade of jobs being advertised by the MLA.

^{xliiv} See *The Atlantic* May 26, 2015 for Laura McKenna's "The Cost of an Adjunct" alongside Caroline Fredrickson's fascinating article "There is no Excuse for How Universities Treat Adjuncts", Sep 15, 2015. Few publications are doing more to address these issues so cogently and continually at this point. McKenna's article can be found here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/the-cost-of-an-adjunct/394091/> [accessed 30/8/2018]

^{xliiv} Firestein's point is that discernment and selection are essential elements in scientific research. "According to the Berkeley Institute", Firestein says, "in the year 2002, 5 exabytes of information were added to the world's stores. That's a billion billion bits of data, enough to fill the Library of Congress 37,000 times over. This means 80 megabytes for every individual on the planet, equalling a stack of books 30 feet high for each of us to read. That was in 2002. It appears to have increased by a million times according to the latest update in this series for 2007", p. 12. To say, however, that scientists "don't care all that much for facts" is of course a sweeping generalisation and Firestein, to be fair, qualifies the statement by saying that they don't get bogged down in them. Nevertheless, as in this thesis, selections have to be made in order to move the research on. Here, my own sense of things, leads me to the authors I know and have discovered over a decade and more who have made significant inroads into questions of ignorance and unlearning. The literary texts I choose as examples of these theories is also a series of selections. These latter selections are made from texts I teach and read in classes all the time. Firestein's point is that there is always more research to look at and more arguments to follow. Perhaps the most appropriate literary figure for this is The Reverend Edward Casaubon from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* whose epic never-to-be-completed "Key to all Mythologies" is Eliot's example of a scholar who can't select or discern between what is valuable and what is not. Casaubon spends much of that novel obsessed with finding a key that doesn't exist. J. Hillis Miller informs us that "Neil Hertz has speculated on how George Eliot saw herself in Casaubon, as does Hertz himself. Don't we all, all we scribblers in whatever genre", in *Reading for Our Time: Adam Bede and*

Middlemarch Revisited (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. xvi).

^{xlv} Witte and a handful of colleagues inaugurated in 1984 the CMI in the Department of Surgery as part of the Medical Student Research Program at the University of Arizona. See “Lessons Learned from Ignorance: The Curriculum on Medical (and Other) Ignorance” in *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), p. 258.

^{xlvi} See the University of Arizona webpage for the Centre for Medical Ignorance for a full list of programs, curricula and aims: <https://ignorance.medicine.arizona.edu/about-us/home>

^{xlvii} See also Marlys Witte’s “A Curriculum on Medical Ignorance” online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3SGNvMcNdI>

^{xlviii} One might argue again, that this kind of thinking from Halberstam (and by association my argument concerning unlearning) amounts to a kind of “repressive hypothesis” as Rey Chow refers to it in her book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), where she argues that the early Foucault’s most interesting insights concerning Freudian repression and what he came to call biopower, is the question not of repression itself but how we came to think of ourselves as being repressed in the first place. “Foucault’s most remarkable point”, claims Chow, “is that the repressive hypothesis, along with its discursive productivity, is what amounts to a kind of preaching, premised as it is on the ultimately *religious* belief in a better, brighter future”, p. 4. Again, the concept of unlearning and the discussions concerning hope, truth, promise, risk, incomes, etc., are not meant to suggest an ultimate “liberation theology” against the brutal repression of a neoliberal hegemony – as if that could ultimately ever happen. The argument, rather, is that education as something other than it is can be imagined. Education is understood in this thesis as a *process* not as an end. As Bill Reading has it, we are dwelling in the ruins of the university, the task now is to envision ways of doing that as best we can. “Teaching”, says Readings, “should cease to be about merely the transmission of information and the emancipation of the autonomous subject, and instead should become a site of obligation that exceeds an individual’s consciousness of justice. My turn to the pedagogical scene of address, with all its ethical weight, is thus a way of developing an accountability that is at odds with accounting” (Readings, 1996, p. 154).

^{xlix} See *The Atlantic* May 26, 2015 for Laura McKenna’s “The Cost of an Adjunct” alongside Caroline Fredrickson’s fascinating article “There is no Excuse for How Universities Treat Adjuncts”, Sep 15, 2015. Few publications are doing more to address these issues so cogently and continually at this point. McKenna’s article can be found here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/the-cost-of-an-adjunct/394091/> [accessed 30/8/2018]

^l In terms of examples that fail, interrupt meaning, or divert meaning in unforeseen ways, see also “Miller’s Law”: “The greatest critics are those whose readings exceed their theoretical presuppositions” in Éamonn Dunne, *Reading Theory Now: An ABC of Good Reading with J. Hillis Miller* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. xvii and pp. xxiv-xxv. See also J. Hillis Miller’s “Theory-Example-Reading-History” in *ADE Bulletin* 88 (Winter 1987), pp. 42-48. What Miller claims throughout his work is that readings and examples are asymmetrical. Examples have always had a way of changing theoretical presuppositions in an unpredictable manner. See also Richard Stamp’s reading of examples in Slavoj Žižek in “‘Another Exemplary Case’: Žižek’s Logic of Examples” in *The Truth of Žižek* eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 161-176: “If thought, or at least the pedagogy of philosophical thinking, cannot proceed without examples,

neither can it allow itself to rest upon them; nor can the singularity of any example remain outside relations of substitutability. If every example is singular, more than or other than simply 'an instance of. . .', it is at the same time as 'this' or 'that' example that it becomes open to reading. *Every example necessarily fails to do its job*", p. 172.

^{li} Key texts here include, Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005); Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2015) and *The Instant of My Death/ Demure: Fiction and Testimony* with Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Giles Deleuze *The Logic of Sense* trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Bondas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Emmanuel Levinas *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998) and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Jean-Luc Nancy *Being Singular Plural* trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Henri Maldiney *Penser l'homme et la folie* (Grenoble: Editions Jerome Millon, 2007); Jacques Derrida *Limited Inc* ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mellman and Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) and *A Taste for the Secret* with Maurizio Ferraris (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); and of course Claude Romano's extraordinary event trilogy – *Event and World* trans. Shane MacKinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), *Event and Time* trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing* trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). Another text worth exploring here is Ilai Rowner's recent *The Event: Literature and Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015) for issues concerning "the un-happening in the happening".

^{lii} Ronell (2004) is particularly interesting on nonknowledge. See her interview with Diane Davis, "Confessions of an Anacoluthon": "You cannot imagine someone in a university saying, "I am stupid" or "I am stupid before my students". This humbling and destabilizing *of the sujet suppose savoir*— of the subject who is supposed to know or who is posed as functionary of knowing—creates minor insurrections that interest me. But, of course, one of the most stupid reflexes is to think that you know what stupidity is all about. This situation calls for another type of activism that begins with "I'm not sure I know". And you don't close the book; you don't *throw* the book at anyone. I fear I am simplifying the trajectory of the book right now. I hope you'll extend me some credit on this account. Suffice it to say that it would provide for a very different politics to say "I don't know" or "I am stupid before the other", but not in the oppositional sense that stupidity is the opposite of whatever opposes it—let's say, provisionally, intelligence", p. 63.

^{liii} What is *destinerrance*? J. Hillis Miller asks this question in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). "It is a motif, or, better still, spatio-temporal figure, that connects intimately with the other salient spatio-temporal figures in Derrida's work. I call *destinerrance* spatio-temporal because, like most of Derrida's key terms, it is a spatio-temporal figure for time. It names a fatal possibility of erring by not reaching a predefined temporal goal in terms of wandering away from a predefined spatial goal" p. 32.

^{liv} In one of the most concise definitions of the event in Derrida's work, from who Caputo consistently returns, appears in his interview in "The Deconstruction of Actuality" in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Of the event Derrida says "It is another name for that which, in what arrives, one can neither reduce nor deny (or only, if you prefer, what one cannot deny). It is another name for experience itself, which is always experience of

the other. The event does not let itself be subsumed under any other concept, not even that of being. The 'il y a' or the 'let there be something rather than nothing' arises perhaps from the experience of the event, rather than from a thinking of being. The coming of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented; it is another name for the future itself. This does not mean that it is good—good in itself—for everything or anything to arrive; it is not that one should give up trying to prevent certain things from coming to pass (without which there would be no decision, no responsibility, ethics, or politics). But one should only ever oppose events that one thinks will block the future or that bring death with them: events that would put an end to the possibility of the event, to the affirmative opening to the coming of the other”, p. 94. In Caputo, likewise, the experience of the event gives rise to the experience of the other (otherness), what cannot be fully known.

^{lv} See also “The Fall and Rise of William Stoner” by Steve Almond in *The Literary Hub* online magazine, August 29, 2019, for a history of the novel’s reception [<https://lithub.com/the-fall-and-rise-of-william-stoner/>]. The novel is, incidentally, currently being given the Hollywood film treatment, with Joe Wright (adapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Atonement*, and *Anna Karenina*) directing. Ethan Hawke is producing it and Casey Affleck will play the leading role. See also Charles Shields’ recent biography, *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel* (Austin: University of Texas, 2018). A documentary film was also released by Morris Hill Pictures in the US in 2015, directed by Jennifer Anderson and Vernon Lott. The documentary consists of thirteen short interviews with critics and reviewers of the novel and testifies to the novel’s originality and power.

^{lvi} See also *Keywords* section of this thesis for more on so-called “New Managerialism”.

^{lvii} *Phronesis* famously appears in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* as a form of practical wisdom which is distinct from other modes of understanding such as *episteme* or *techne*. In Aristotle, *phronesis* becomes an understanding that is practically unteachable, the kind of creative understanding necessary to make decisions without a limiting logical or determining grasp of fact. Hence Jack Caputo’s interpretation of the individual capable of simultaneously combining the schema and the creative leap of interpretation as a “*phronimos*”. “The difficulty of factual life, when it comes to putting courage (or any other schemata of *arete*) to work” claims Caputo, “is not that there are no rules – for courage is a kind of rule – but that the rules have no rules”, see his *Against Ethics* cited below, p. 100. I say Aristotle has not understood *phronesis* a little ironically because what Aristotle effectively does with this word is open up ethics to moments of decision which are evental and without calculation, the kind of ethical decision making envisioned more intensively in deconstruction.

^{lviii} Ford motors’ “Unlearn” campaign for 2016 employed the tagline “Let Go Of What You Know” in order to instruct its audience to drop preconceptions about its brand.

^{lix} For more on training and education, see also the *Keywords* section of this thesis on “training”. Ben Spatz, in *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London: Routledge, 2015) is particularly interesting on the interplay between training, research and technique in embodied pedagogies, such as acting and martial arts. In attempting to define training, Spatz argues that it is precisely the interaction between training and research that allows us to confront the unknown with the known. An absolute distinction is therefore problematic: “I propose that, like any other field of knowledge, acting technique is sustained by the ongoing and dynamic interaction of training and research. Technique therefore exceeds training in a very precise sense: It involves both the known and the unknown in relation to each other. Training may then refer to any practice in which existing knowledge is intentionally passed along, inculcated, or absorbed. This includes mandatory or imposed training, self-directed training, military

training, dance training, actor training, spiritual training, strength training, physio-therapeutic training or “re-training”, the training of animals, and more. In other words, training can refer to any practice that works through previously established pathways of practice. Training can be an ongoing, even lifelong process: a continual and iterative encounter with technique. What training cannot logically signify is the development or discovery of new technique: new pathways in materiality, newly recognized patterns and forms in which one might then proceed to train. One cannot “train” in a discipline that does not exist. When Matthews, Evans, and Murray suggest that training is “more than” technique, they are pointing to exactly this potential of discovery, on both individual and social levels. But rather than attribute this difference to the mystifying and hierarchical trope of excess, an epistemological model allows us to articulate the content of the “more than” as precisely research. Without research, there would be no forms or disciplines—no technique—in which to train. If training is the transmission of what is known, then research is the edge of any epistemic field”, p. 121. So, just as training has its limits in “the iterative encounter with technique”, research pushes training to the edge of what is known in and from training. The point here, and in what has been said above, is that though training and research (or training and education) are often thought of as distinct elements, making those distinctions can raise a whole host of difficult questions. That said, opening up those same distinctions can help us to think through notions of what is “more than” training. In what is being said above, the distinction between education and training is operating in the same manner as Spatz’s distinction between training and research. To reiterate then: “What training cannot logically signify is the development or discovery of new technique: new pathways in materiality, newly recognized patterns and forms in which one might then proceed to train”. Education, therefore, when we think of it as discovery and invention is not “logically” the same as training.

^{lx} For more on police logic, see Rancière’s “Ten Theses on Politics” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* ed. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 36-7.

^{lxi} See J. Hillis Miller’s “The Critic as Host” in *Deconstruction and Criticism* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 217-253 and *Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

^{lxii} This is not to insinuate that Rancière’s Jacotot is not doing anything at all, or that his teaching is not premised on effecting change in the classroom. As Samuel Chambers points out in *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): “The title to Rancière’s book on Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, is not meant as a critique of current teaching (that title would have been “The Stultifying Schoolmaster”) but as a possibility. Jacotot shows the promise of teachers who teach despite the fact that they do not know – or teachers who teach as if they do not know. Nevertheless, the teacher has to teach, and mastery has a place in Rancière’s radical pedagogy because the teacher is the one who imposes a mastery of *will* over his or her students, creating an environment, a context, and a structure in which they can learn... Therefore we must approach Rancière’s teachings not with the assumption that he knows something we do not. We must read Rancière not for a glimpse into his superior intelligence or for the provision of an explanation of texts and things that we cannot understand ourselves. We must operate instead under the principle of equality of intelligence. But this does not mean there is nothing for us to learn. The “lessons” of Rancière are the lessons of an ignorant school-master and therein lies their radical significance”, p. 31.

^{lxiii} This thesis has literature and acts of reading as its primary focus; however, when it comes to unlearning, there are obviously many more interesting places to go with this concept than can be tackled here. To say that riding a bike cannot be unlearned is not exactly true, according to recent insights on Steven Magness’ website *The Science of Running*. Magness is a lecturer in Exercise Science and Strength and Conditioning at St. Mary’s University (UK) and has coached some of the world’s top athletes in long-distance running. In an

article entitled “What Unlearning and Re-learning How to Ride a Bike Can Teach Us”, Magness is interesting in challenging the idea that conditioned learning and habituation are immune to rediscovery and unlearning. Taking his example from a video clip called “The Backwards Brain Bicycle”, Magness is able to gain some interesting insights into the mechanics of learning and unlearning. In the video, an engineer changes the steering on a conventional bicycle, so that when the handlebars are turned to make a left turn, the bike goes right. The engineer then asks his colleague to ride the bike. An interesting phenomenon occurs, the bike becomes unrideable for the subject. What’s odd about this for Magness is the following: 1.) the man learning to ride the bike takes months to master it, whereas his young son takes weeks; 2.) once the man switches back to a normal bike he has real difficulty and it take considerable time to relearn that skill; 3.) perhaps the most interesting thing is that when he is relearning how to ride a normal bike there isn’t a gradual process of learning, there’s a switch “almost in an instant, as if his brain is rewired instantly”. What all of this shows is a practical demonstration of how ingrained motor skills can be difficult to change or even alter slightly. The insight for coaches results in two questions: “How deeply ingrained is the movement pattern you are messing with and are their unintended consequences for altering it?” and “How do we know when we’re on the brink of ‘getting it’; and don’t stop before we reach that breakthrough?” There are many other examples that might be given here to demonstrate such thinking. See also, Paul Bowman on “unlearning disciplinarity” in martial arts, “The Ignorant Schoolmaster and the Ignorant *Sifu*” in *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* eds. Aidan Seery and Éamonn Dunne (New York: Punctum, 2016), pp. 131-155 and Ben Spatz on embodied pedagogies in *What a Body Can Do* (London: Routledge, 2015): “To renew and reinvent physical education, we must place critical theory and pedagogy alongside embodied technique, laying them side by side as *contiguous* rather than hierarchical fields”, p. 108. See also Steven Magness’ website scienceofrunning.com.

^{lxiv} Miller has written extensively on parables in literature elsewhere. For more on this see also *Hawthorne and History: Defacing It* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and “Teaching Middlemarch: Close Reading and Theory” in Kathleen Blake’s *Approaches to Teaching Middlemarch* (New York: MLA, 1990), pp. 51-63.

^{lxv} See also John Drury’s impressive analysis of the parables in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Mass: Harvard UP, 1987), pp. 427-434.

^{lxvi} De Man’s famous essay “The Resistance to Theory” first appeared in *Yale French Studies*, vol. 63, in 1982, after having been deemed (somewhat ironically) unsuitable for publication in the MLA’s volume on literary scholarship. De Man was asked to write the section on literary theory. “I found it difficult to live up, in minimal good faith”, says de Man, “to the requirements of this program and could only try to explain, as concisely as possible, why the main theoretical interest of literary theory consists in the impossibility of its definition”, p. 3. Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3-20.

^{lxvii} Avital Ronell, who will be discussed a little later, has this to say about understanding: “‘Have I been understood?’ It’s a big question, a big interrogatory challenge. The irony of understanding is that the only knowledge we could have is that we have *not* understood, not fully understood”. See her interview with Diane Davis in *Thinking Difference: Critics in Conversation* ed. Julian Wolfreys (New York: Fordham UP, 2004), pp. 33-67.

^{lxviii} See Henry Giroux, “Hollywood Film as Public Pedagogy: Education in the Crossfire” at: <http://transformativeteaching.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/hollywood-film-as-public-pedagogy-giroux-h-a.pdf>

^{lxi} Elaine Showalter argues in her insightful book *Teaching Literature* that this mode of teaching has inherent drawbacks concerning issues of attention that need to inform lecturers' preparations: "Lecturing is ubiquitous in higher education, although there is a remarkable consensus among teaching specialists on its extensive drawbacks. The lecture has to confront problems of attention span, memory, and distraction, and these are not simply problems of poor or unmotivated students, but basic human issues of perception and retention", (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 49. Without implying that contemporary youth culture is any more distracted than previous generations, it stands to reason that lecturers are remiss not to be incorporating current technological innovations in their classrooms to make effective use of their materials.

^{lxx} For more on foolosophy see Avital Ronell's *Stupidity* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002): "Anyone coming up against the pervasive power of stupidity risks being turned into a foolosopher", p. 14.

^{lxxi} See Avital Ronell (as interviewed by D. Diane Davis) in "Confessions of an Anacoluthon: On Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, and Politics" in *Thinking Difference: Critics in Conversation* ed. Julian Wolfreys (New York: Fordham UP, 2004) for an interesting interview revealing what can and cannot be known in pedagogical encounters.

^{lxxii} For an analysis of this figure see Jacques Derrida *Without Alibi* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 181-182.

^{lxxiii} "There is some other in the classroom", says Readings, "and it has many names: culture, thought, desire, energy, tradition, the event, the immemorial, the sublime. The educational institution seeks to process it, to dampen the shock it gives the system. *Qua* institution, education seeks to channel and circulate this otherness so that some profit can be made from it. Yet shock arises, since it is *the minimal condition of pedagogy*, and it opens a series of incalculable differences, the exploration of which is the business of pedagogy", in Bill Readings *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 162.

^{lxxiv} See also Paul Bowman (2013) on the issue of training and event: "All-or-nothing interpretations of events and orientations may themselves be rather more predictable than eventual— missing subtlety, complexity, multiplicity. For instance, despite the undoubted reality of the intensification of bureaucratic surveillance infusing and permeating the delivery of university education today, surely (and actually according to the tenets of poststructuralist ontologies) there must always be gaps, hiatuses, aporias, spaces, play, scope for the unpredictable, the event, the future, etc. These will exist no matter how all-encompassing the statement and enforcement of rationale, aim, method, outcome. Surely, even the most programmatic programme cannot ward off or entirely control the possibility of an event" in *Reading Rey Chow: Visuality, Postcoloniality, Ethnicity, Sexuality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 97-100. Again, the argument here is not that "training" precludes the event or that the event is an "all-or-nothing" phenomenon – absolutist claims like *no event in training or no training in event* do not square well with the argument herein. The point of tracing the event in acts of reading in education and following moments of non-knowledge, ignorance and unlearning is to see how, in light of "the intensification of bureaucratic surveillance", teachers and students can stay open to the event. Again, in Bill Readings' words, the question is how to keep accountability and accounting at odds with one another. Furthermore, to say that education and training are not the same is a statement made in the context of a reading of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* in which the central character, Eliza Doolittle, is trained to perform on her instructor's whim (like a poor parody of a circus animal). Shaw's point is that Eliza's training in "modern linguistics" is at odds with what she learns from the experience of doing her training (we might even say the same of Rita in

Educating Rita). Read from this angle, *Pygmalion* opens up interesting questions about how training and education are often at odds with each other. Shaw also became something of a celebrity in his own right for uttering damning indictments of educational institutions and their lack of social consciousness. Education, for Shaw, was a way of engaging with the world, becoming a critical agent in it, a way into socialization. In his own words, “I have often wondered whether our school system is really a system of education at all... Any dog trainer will testify that a spaniel can be spoiled for life by a single act of terrorization, and many human beings have been spoiled in this way”, in “George Bernard Shaw On Education” in *The Journal of Education* vol. 89, no. 11, March 13, 1919, p. 289. See also “Training” and “Event” in the *Keywords* section of this thesis for more on this argument.

^{lxxv} For the “inaugural violence” of the act of reading, see *The J. Hillis Miller Reader* ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005): “An act of reading takes place as an event. It is something that happens, with the same inaugural violence, breaking any predictable concatenation, as other events in the real world like birth, copulation, death, or declarations of independence. That such events, including reading, may be in one way or another a repetition by no means disables their disruptive force, as Kierkegaard recognised in his concept of repetition, described as follows by Sylviane Agacinski: repetition ‘is like a tear or rip that blows or blows up, pops, pierces, opens and shows up. There it was, and now here it is. It happens.’ The event of reading, like the writing of that text in the first place, ‘takes place,’ with all the enigmatic force in this notion of an event as something that comes out of nowhere, so to speak, occupies space, and makes that space into a place, with orienting coordinates. Reading occurs in a certain spot to a certain person in a certain historical, personal, institutional, and political situation, but it always exceeds what was predictable from those circumstances. It makes something happen that is a derivation from its context, and what happens demands a new definition each time. The record of those deviations includes the further language written or spoken in response to the act of reading, such as critical essays or acts of teaching, but of course reading may lead to many other kinds of acts. Another way to put this is to say that reading always has a performative as well as a cognitive dimension. It follows that the historical and practical, as well as theoretical, study of literature should include attention to the performative force in reading”, p. 44. Criticism of what Miller says here – originally in *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) – will undoubtedly make claims against the event of reading by saying that not all reading is evental, that the force Miller is claiming for readings is hyperbolic and fantastical. Picking up a book does not ensure that one is going to be changed by the act of reading or that anything unpredictable will happen at all. The claim that acts of reading can happen with inaugural violence (as in birth and death) can also easily be seen as wildly unjustifiable. How can a reading be like death? Throughout this thesis the word “interruption” is used to describe the force of the event in acts of reading. It is used in order to catch what Miller and others claim about the disturbance created by acts of reading, when they make something happen. Undoubtedly, this does not happen to the same degree all the time and Miller is not claiming that this is the case – the phrase “act of reading” is the clue here. What he *is* claiming is that acts of reading – when they happen – are disruptive and that repetition does not exclude the possibility of the event. This is what Derrida famously refers to as “iterability” in *Limited Inc* and elsewhere. Repetition does not exclude the possibility for something different, something interruptive, something unpredictable, or inaugural, from entering the world. To recall Jonathan Culler: “Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless” in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, p. 123). The argument here is that it is important to acknowledge the possibility that reading events can and do change things radically all the time.

^{lxxvi} The word “spectacular” is used in this context to suggest a “spectacle”, as in something that is seen.

Miller's "spectacular peculiar idiom" is designed to suggest how strangely Miller is seeing the works he reads. If prosopopoeia, in Miller's work, is trying to make us see how we see, then Miller's idiom is literally "spectacular".

^{lxxvii} To say that reading literature is one of the greatest responsibilities we have to the dead echoes an idea J. Hillis Miller has expressed in *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 75. Here Miller says "Reading is one major form of responsibility the living have for the dead". See also Éamonn Dunne, *J. Hillis Miller and the Possibilities of Reading: Literature After Deconstruction* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 83. The comment is employed to suggest that reading and interpreting the stories of our ancestors is one way of keeping their memories alive. This is not designed to alienate those who cannot read or who are misrepresented in literature: the subaltern, the other, the outcast, the foreigner, the illiterate, and so on. The point is that storytelling (oral or written literature) is a powerful means of breathing life into the past. This thesis aims to pursue the importance of stories in our lives, how we read them, interpret them, learn from them, unlearn from them, and teach them. An authoritative argument concerning the complications of such a statement can be found in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986). Here Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o tells the story of his own education and upbringing in Kenya under British colonial rule. The story is one of nostalgia for a first language, Gikuyu, that "was not a mere string of words" but a "carrier of culture", p. 10-22. Thiong'o relates how under the imposition of a foreign tongue the cultural heritage that was so important to his understanding of the world and his place within it was literally beaten out of him. "English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom"; to get on in the world meant full immersion within it and the active complicity in forgetting one's own cultural heritage. The loss meant giving up an identity and adopting another. That sense of loss resulted in Thiong'o's understanding that his own responsibility to his ancestors was taken from him by a language that was foreign to him. "Language as culture", he claims, "is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next", p. 15. For Thiong'o the language of imperialism was also the language of cultural capital and success. Learning the language of the colonialists afforded him an opportunity to get on in life. The point is that language and literature always have been related to the power dynamic of privilege and place. Who has the authority to say what, when and where are bound up in the narratives and struggles of the past. Thiong'o's struggles now are to unlearn a past that was foisted upon him in order to recapture a past he has never fully known.

^{lxxviii} Peter Widdowson makes this claim when he says, "Anyone who has read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (and certainly any modern criticism about it) will be in no doubt the novel is emphatically visual in many of its effects", p. 115. See "'Moments of Vision': Postmodernising *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; Or, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Faithfully Presented by Peter Widdowson" in *On Thomas Hardy: Late Essays and Earlier* (London: Palgrave, 1998), p. 115-133. Widdowson is also acutely aware of the odd oral descriptions in the novel in this essay: the "narrative's obsessive voyeuristic gazing at Tess herself (especially the famous 'mobile peony mouth') which has made so many readers *wonder* a little about Thomas Hardy", p. 115 (original emphasis).

^{lxxix} Not surprisingly, perhaps, Hardy's depiction of Tess in this manner has garnered a huge amount of critical attention. The issues are generally centred around how Hardy views women in his novels and the questions concerning chauvinism and/or feminist perspectives. For more on this, see especially Julie Grossman's "Hardy's *Tess* and 'The Photograph': Images to Die for" in *Criticism*, Fall 1993, vol. 35, no. 4, p.

609-630; Charles Lock's "Hardy and His Critics" in *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies* ed. Philip Mallett (London: Palgrave, 2004), p. 14-37; Mary Childers' "Thomas Hardy, The Man Who 'Liked' Women" in *Criticism*, Fall 1981, vol. 23, no. 4, p. 317-334; and Margaret Higonnet ed. *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

^{lxxx} Biesta will link this rise in the new language of learning to several key factors later on. These are important for discussions in this thesis, particularly as they relate to neoliberal policies, which have been discussed previously in the introduction to this work: "The rise of the 'new language of learning' is the result—and perhaps we should say the partly unintended outcome—of a number of developments. These include (1) the impact of new theories of learning, particularly constructivist theories, that put the focus more strongly on students and their activities than on teachers and their input; (2) the (postmodern) critique of authoritarian forms of teaching; (3) what John Field has called the "silent explosion" of learning, that is, the fact that more and more people are engaged in more and more different forms and modes of learning, particularly nonformal and informal ones; and (4) the individualizing impact of neoliberal policies and politics on education, including adult education (a point to which I will return). The rise of the language of learning has, in some cases, empowered those at the receiving end of the spectrum, particularly where teaching was conceived in narrow, controlling, and authoritarian ways. But the rise of a language of learning has also had some less desirable consequences. These consequences have to do with two aspects of the concept of 'learning', one being that 'learning' is a process term, and the other that 'learning', unlike 'education', is an individualistic and individualizing term" (Biesta, 2013, 63). Biesta's last point is important here, since it responds to a possible counterargument that might point to the all-or-nothing tenor of the argument. Biesta is not claiming that all learning is bad, merely that there has been too much emphasis placed on it by constructivist educators and policy makers. The question Biesta is raising is why such emphasis? Who benefits? and who loses out?

^{lxxxi} In his 2005 essay "Against Learning: Reclaiming a language of Education in an Age of Learning" in *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 25, 54-66, Biesta makes explicit the issues he has with the word learning. Biesta's argument is quite simple, though it is certainly not without controversy. He argues that "the language of education has largely been replaced with the language of learning", p. 54. The shift from the language of education to the language of learning can be related, as Biesta understands it, to "larger socio-economic and political developments, particularly the erosion of the welfare state and the rise of neo-liberalism", p. 57. The change means that this new language of learning describes education as an economic transaction, "that is, a transaction in which (i) the learner is the (potential) consumer, the one who has certain needs, in which (ii) the teacher, the educator, or the educational institution becomes the provider, that is, the one who is there to meet the needs of the learner, and where (iii) education itself becomes a commodity to be produced or delivered by the teacher or educational institution and to be consumed by the learner. This is the 'logic' which says that educational institutions and individual educators should be flexible, that they should respond to the needs of the learners, that they should give the learners value for money, and perhaps even that they should operate on the principle that the customer is always right", p. 58. An obvious critique to this kind of critique is that Biesta's understanding of education is idealistic, nostalgic, or romantic; or, that it rails against the cruel instrumentality of the world without offering us anything beyond an impossible mystical vision of the beautiful. When, this critique might argue, was education anything other than an economic transaction? Or, when have students not been consumers of learning? The distinction between education and learning might even appear to some as a worthless binary: education and learning are not exactly polarizing terms. The answers to these critiques would be that the language we use to describe the processes we are involved in when we teach or talk about teaching, or talk about our institutions or our goals or plans is not neutral. "Language is not simply a mirror of reality. At least since Dewey and Wittgenstein we know that language is a practice, that it something we do. And at least since Foucault we know that linguistic or discursive practices delineate – and perhaps we can even say" constitute – what can be seen, what can be said, what can be known, what can be thought and, ultimately, what can be done", p. 54. To seek a new vocabulary for teaching and learning, or unlearning, this thesis argues, means examining why it is we are so tied to the languages we use. Thinking about what we say and why we say it when we speak about education is, this thesis argues, a major issue. For Bill Readings, this means

questioning the distinction between accountability and accounting, for Biesta it means the distinction between learning and education, for what is happening here, it means questioning the distinction between learning and unlearning. In Biesta's words: "There are, therefore, two arguments against the new language of learning or, to be more precise, against a line of thinking that is made possible by the new language of learning. One problem is that the new language of learning facilitates an economic understanding of the process of education, one in which the learner is supposed to know what he or she wants, and where a provider (a teacher, an educational institution) is simply there to meet the needs of the learner or, in more crude terms: to satisfy the customer. I have shown why I think that such a depiction of the process of education is problematic. The other problem with the logic of the new language of learning is that it makes it difficult to raise questions about the content and purpose of education, other than in terms of what 'the consumer' or 'the market' wants. This, as I have argued, poses a threat both to educational professionalism and to democracy", p. 60

^{lxxxii} Biesta's (2010) argument concerning "learnification" is as follows: "Learnification" refers to the transformation of the vocabulary used to talk about education into one of "learning" and "learners". A focus on learning and learners is, of course, not just problematic. To see that learning is not determined by input but depends on the activities of students—although not a new insight—can help us to rethink what teachers can best do to support their students' learning. There are even emancipatory possibilities in the new language of learning to the extent to which it can empower individuals to take control of their own educational agendas. Yet there are also problems connected with the rise of the new language of learning, and in this regard we shouldn't underestimate the power of language", p. 18.

^{lxxxiii} It would of course be easy to criticise this aspect of Biesta by emphasising group learning activities. Though this is not what Biesta's argument is attempting to explore. What he is examining is the tendency to use competition in educational institutions to isolate and atomise the community. If the marketisation of education and neoliberal policies adopted by schools and universities are changing the way we understand education, then the point is that some circumspection about community and care is necessary.

^{lxxxiv} See, for instance, the recent NCAA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) policy document *Learning Outcomes: An International Perspective*, May 2019, ed. Mark Priestley et al, for a series of case studies on learning outcomes in the Irish context. Priestley et al. argue that Ireland is shifting away "from prescriptive specification of content towards a more generic, skill-based approach articulated as Learning Outcomes". The motivations for which are "curricular balance", "increase in pedagogical content knowledge and disciplinary knowledge", "direct engagement with the 'big ideas' and purposes of education", and a general strategic "coherence".

^{lxxxv} For a broad reflection on the principles of teacher evaluation and the important arguments that are at issue with such programmatic understanding, see also Robert J. Marzano and Michael D. Todd's *Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference: A New Model for Teacher Growth and Student Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2013).

^{lxxxvi} For a reflection on the case against rewards systems promoting improvement, see Alfie Kohn's 2018 *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes, Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

^{lxxxvii} See Mattos at work on learning outcomes, learning interventions, and professional learning communities in the following YouTube clips: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SL_50Sf_7eY; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApzX15USq2w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApzX15USq2w;); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W26g073Tu2U&index=2&list=PLadhi-0XyG5f7bDLAFuQ3L2dsZnZzqx18> [accessed 30/8/2018]

^{lxxxviii} Biesta (2013) suggests that weakness of education, an idea he takes from both John D. Caputo and Jacques Derrida, is an essential component: "The argument I put forward in this book is that the weakness of education should *not* be seen as a problem that needs to be overcome, but should rather be understood

as the very “dimension” that makes educational processes and practices *educational*”, p. x. See also John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo (2009) *After the Death of God* ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins. New York: Columbia University for more on weak thinking.

^{lxxxix} See Beatrijs Dijkman’s “‘What Is This Asking From Me?’ An Extended Review of the Rediscovery of Teaching by Gert Biesta” in *Transactional Analysis Journal*, Dec 3, 2019, p. 93-100. Here Dijkman gives practical examples as a case study from her own teaching in adult education to argue that education is not about setting objective goals so much as discovering ways to become self-fulfilled.

^{xc} In his essay “Ethics and the Humanities: Some Lessons of Historical Experience” in *New Literary History*, 2005, 38, p. 1-7, Brian Stock argues that, despite the historical connections between the humanities and ethical issues, “[w]e live in a time when it is no longer fashionable to believe that ethical behavior can be taught effectively by means of the humanities”, p. 2. This, he argues, has resulted in a wariness on behalf of teachers in the humanities to speak of ethical issue without a degree of skepticism: “The pertinent question is whether the humanities were ever successful in teaching ethics, and, if so, how they managed to be so. This is an important matter, if only because our educational institutions seem to have run out of ideas on how to establish practical ethical norms that can work against the widespread immorality affecting many of our business and professional organizations. It may turn out that earlier thinkers on the role of ethics in the humanities have nothing to teach us. But we will not know whether any of the solutions proposed over the centuries are applicable to contemporary problems until we have a better understanding of what they were”, p. 2-3. In following issues of trauma and trigger warnings in the humanities and Judith Halberstam’s recent analysis of these warnings, this chapter argues that it is important to look at what trigger warnings are saying now and how they are effecting teachers and students in educational institutions.

^{xcii} For a critical reading of Adorno’s essay that argues for the importance of reading this essay in terms of contemporary educational issues, see Martin L. Davies’ “‘Education after Auschwitz Revisited’” in *How the Holocaust Looks Now: International Perspectives* eds. Martin L. Davies and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (London: Palgrave, 2006), p. 247-260. Adorno’s essay “Education after Auschwitz” first appeared as a radio-talk on 18 April 1966 and though “[i]ts immediate context makes it look dated... it does provoke reflection on contemporary educational practice”, p. 247.

^{xciii} Adorno’s opening line in this essay is empathic: “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again”.

^{xciv} See also J. Hillis Miller’s “Derrida’s Politics of Autoimmunity” in *Discourse*, vol. 30, no. 1-2, 2008, p. 208-225.

^{xcv} For an interesting critique of Biesta’s concept of “grown-up-ness”, see Claire Cassidy’s “Grown-upness or Living Philosophically?” in *Childhood and Philosophy*, vol. 13 no. 28, p. 481-492. Cassidy’s argument against Biesta is that grown-upness is paradoxically alienating and solipsistic and can draw the child away from the community.

^{xcvi} WHO (The World Health Organization) released the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) in mid-2018.

^{xcvii} This argument does not mean to conflate gaming culture with state control, merely to suggest that the development of culturally astute critical consciousness can also mean a politically astute criticality with broader ramifications. This is a response to Adorno’s argument here in “Education after Auschwitz” as well

as his arguments in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2004).

^{xcviii} See Shahak Shapira's YoloCaust webpage for responses from the selfie-takers here <https://yoloCaust.de> You can also see the images on the following page from London's *Metro* newspaper "Powerful Images that Show Why Holocaust Memorial Selfies are so Disrespectful" 19 Jan, 2017: <https://metro.co.uk/2017/01/19/powerful-images-that-show-why-holocaust-selfies-are-so-disrespectful-6391091/> [accessed 28/8/2018]

^{xcix} Halberstam's article appears on the "the Bully Bloggers" website at <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/> (last accessed 28/8/2008). In it he responds to new mandates issued by various third-level colleges in the US to issue 'trigger warnings' on classroom materials that may or may not cause offence or trigger traumatic memories in viewers. Halberstam's retort went viral in a very short period of time and elicited strong reactions across the blogosphere. See also his second blog on this issue on the same website: "Triggering Me, Triggering You, or Breaking Up is Hard to Do".

^c See also Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's "The Coddling of the American Mind" in *The Atlantic*, September 2015: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

"The idea that words (or smells or any sensory input) can trigger searing memories of past trauma—and intense fear that it may be repeated—has been around at least since World War I, when psychiatrists began treating soldiers for what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. But explicit trigger warnings are believed to have originated much more recently, on message boards in the early days of the Internet. Trigger warnings became particularly prevalent in self-help and feminist forums, where they allowed readers who had suffered from traumatic events like sexual assault to avoid graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks. Search-engine trends indicate that the phrase broke into mainstream use online around 2011, spiked in 2014, and reached an all-time high in 2015. The use of trigger warnings on campus appears to have followed a similar trajectory; seemingly overnight, students at universities across the country have begun demanding that their professors issue warnings before covering material that might evoke a negative emotional response". It should also be noted that in their book by the same name, Lukianoff and Haidt take an analytical approach to the issue of trigger warnings and provide a series of examples from college campuses across the US that have been arguing for and against trigger warnings. Likewise, the argument in this chapter is not designed as a pejorative against hypersensitive students, merely to suggest that when it comes to accountability in classes, what Readings calls "unaccountable obligations", a measure of circumspection and control is required to make appropriate judgement calls. Perhaps, the fact that these conversations are happening with growing urgency is an indication that appropriate dialogues are opening up. However, the difficulty is to equate trigger warnings with trauma events, which do not always coincide with the rhetoric being used to describe these events. The call here, again, is for circumspection and dialogue. As Campbell and Manning (2018) argue: "Many of those who call for trigger warnings focus on graphic film portrayals of rape, warfare, and other violence, with the intention of protecting those who have endured such extreme ordeals. Others, however, have a broader conception of what constitutes a trauma trigger. Mere discussion of violence may qualify. In February 2014 a student at Rutgers University wrote a column calling for trigger warnings to be attached to the novels and stories commonly assigned in literature courses, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Virginia Woolf's

Mrs. Dalloway, the latter of which contains ‘a disturbing narrative that examines the suicidal inclinations and post-traumatic experiences of an English war veteran’”, p. 76.

^{ci} Freud’s argument in the introduction to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Standard Edition* is worth further investigation, much more than I can give it here. Though in my opinion these arguments are not only rhetorically impressive they also point to the real difficulty in understanding what trauma actually entails.

^{cii} This is not to suggest that teachers as authority figures to not have the responsibility to act responsibly to ensure that their classes are safe spaces. The argument here is merely attempting to highlight the difficulties with understanding how difficult knowledge can have profoundly unpredictable effects on students and teachers, which authoritative voices may not be able to foresee or control.

^{ciii} See John D. Caputo’s essay below and also his *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

^{civ} For more on the concept of “foolosophy” see my “Love Foolosophy: Pedagogy, Parable, Perversion” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45:6 2013.

^{cv} The pedagogy of interruption requires some further commentary here as it will be central to an understanding of the argument of this thesis and its methodology. Near the end of his *Beyond Learning* (2006) Biesta introduces the idea of a pedagogy of interruption and reintroduces this concept again in *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2010) and frequently thereafter in his more recent works. Biesta’s argument is that, in general, arguments about what constitutes a “good” education fall into two camps. On the one hand, people argue that an effective education should prioritise qualification: standards and outcomes. On the other hand, people argue that education plays an important role in socialisation: the immersion of students into sociocultural and political orders. Biesta’s concern is with how education plays an intrinsic role in subjectification. “I take the position”, says Biesta, “that subjectification should be an intrinsic element of all education worthy of the name” (2010, p. 75). Subjectification refers, in Biesta’s language, to the idea that education should always have an interest in human freedom. A pedagogy of interruption is a way of thinking about how this can happen. For Biesta, after Immanuel Kant, effective education refers to the release of the human being from a “self-incurred tutelage” an effect which allows the student to make use of their own understanding without direction from others. In Kant’s terms, the “rational autonomy” of the individual is the primary focus of an enlightenment education, a move from heteronomous determination to self-determination which Biesta links to a crucial distinction in modern education between socialization and subjectification. The issue Biesta has with Kant is that Kant’s enlightenment notion of education is premised on an underlying assumption about humanism, namely, an essentialist understanding of what constitutes humanity and rational being. Biesta’s concern, after Foucault and Derrida’s well-known critiques of humanism and the end of man, is that these enlightenment views exclude subjectivities that do not cohere with preconceived ideas of rational being. In order to find an alternative direction to theorise the importance of subjectification, Biesta consistently points to five major theorists throughout his work: John D. Caputo, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas. From these theorists Biesta highlights the notion of “uniqueness”, which he sees as an essential element in education that is often foreclosed by socialisation and a dominant communal discourse, a notion that he feels is essential to human freedom. Citing Alphonso Lingis (an important translator of Levinas), Biesta recounts that community is often understood as a collection of people who have something in common. A “rational community” is a “special instance” of community whereby individuals enter into a shared discourse, a discourse that gives them a voice which is representative of that community. For

instance, electricians, doctors, and lawyers will speak within such a community according to the rules and principles of a rational discourse. In such instances, the point is not, according to Biesta and Lingis, how something is said or who says it, but that what is said “makes sense” according to a system of agreed upon rules and principles. What happens in such instances is that the voice that is used is not unique, rather, it is a voice that is representative, meaning that such a voice is interchangeable and not unique to that person. Education fosters rational communities by reproducing in its participants representational voices that make sense within such spheres. But there are times when saying something falls outside the remit of such communal discourse, times when a unique voice, for Lingis, Biesta, and Levinas, when what one says, does not follow tradition, discourse practices or shared schematics. The examples Biesta shares are at opposite ends of the spectrum, birth, and death. When someone is dying, Biesta claims, anything you say, “in a sense”, sounds “vacuous or even absurd”. The point is not what you are saying, however, but that you are saying something, with the emphasis on *your* responsibility to say something. *You* have to speak in *your* unique voice rather than through a representative voice (Biesta, 2010, p. 88). Something of this is also evident in speaking with children before they have entered the discourse of the rational community. In both examples the uniqueness of the situation requires a unique and singular response. What these examples point to in Biesta’s arguments is a crucial double bind in education. Rational communities are essential but limited by a “sporadic” sense of “the other community” which interrupts us. And this is the central point of Biesta’s argument concerning subjectification: uniqueness is not reproducible in a programmatic sense, not something that can be “a guaranteed outcome of a particular educational intervention or a particular pedagogy” (Biesta, 2010, p. 90). The flipside of this, according to Biesta and the argument throughout this thesis, is that “it is rather easy to make sure that this uniqueness will not appear” (Biesta, 2010, p. 90). “A pedagogy of interruption thus has its place in the domain of subjectification, not qualification or socialization—although it may work ‘through’ these domains as well. A pedagogy of interruption is not a ‘strong’ pedagogy; it is not a pedagogy that can in any sense guarantee its ‘outcomes.’ It rather is a pedagogy that acknowledges the fundamental *weakness* of education vis-à-vis the question of subjectification. This ontological weakness of education is at the very same time its existential strength, because it is only when we give up the idea that human subjectivity can in some way be educationally produced that spaces might open up for uniqueness to come into the world. This is what is at stake in a pedagogy of interruption” (Biesta, 2010, p. 91). The somewhat awkward coinage “untology” is designed in this thesis to respond to the unsettling nature of the pedagogy of interruption, to subjectification, and to respond further to how similar sentiments, though in different terminologies, can be seen to wend their way through the writings of Jacques Rancière. The methodology of this thesis is also designed around a series of concepts in education that may at first seem incongruous but this is part of the point. These concepts interrupt. The hope is that the readings interrupt the theories also.

^{cvi} For some of the works where Derrida speaks explicitly of the event, see for instance *Signature, Event, Context* in *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982); *Limited Inc.* trans. Elisabeth Weber (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988); “A Madness Must Watch Over Thinking” in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); “The Deconstruction of Actuality” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (ed) (Stanford University Press, 2002); *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 2003); “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Giovanna Borradori (ed). (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Ethics and Politics Today in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Ed.). Stanford University Press, 2002; Derrida, Jacques. *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (Ed.) (Stanford University Press, 2002); A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event

trans. Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry*, 33(2). (2007, Winter), p. 441-461.

^{cvi} The original quotation comes from Derrida's interview with Derek Attridge in *Jacques Derrida. Acts of Literature* ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 38.

^{cviii} Derrida speaks of the other to whom he is responsible in many places in his work, see especially *The Gift of Death* trans. David Wills (p. 54-81), where Derrida tells the story of Isaac and Abraham on Mount Moriah and the concept of absolute responsibility and his interview with Richard Kearney "Deconstruction and the Other" in Richard Kearney, ed. *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 107-126. Though in terms of the event and responsibility Derrida is most explicit on this in "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* ed. Drucilla Cornell et al. (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3-67. Derrida says here: "Justice remains, is yet, to come, *à venir*, it has an, it is *à-venir*, it deploys the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this *à-venir*, and always has... There is an *avenir* for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations, and so forth. Justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history", p. 26-27. See also J. Hillis Miller's commentary on this excerpt in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham, 2009), p. 26. In this passage, Derrida is making a distinction between the future [*avenir*] and the to-come [*à-venir*]. The former is in some way predictable, the latter is absolutely unpredictable. For Derrida on this distinction, see also *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film* dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 51-53.

^{cix} See Martin G. Erikson and Malgorzata Erikson, "Learning Outcomes and Critical Thinking – Good Intentions in Conflict" in *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(12), p. 2293-2303 (see specifically pp. 2298-2300). DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2018.1486813

^{cx} For a recent sustained study concerning the contrast between accountability and responsibility in education, see Sarah M. Stitzlein's *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in the Age of Accountability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Here, Stitzlein contrasts accountability with responsibility and argues that the public school system in the US is failing because the public have a responsibility to challenge what outcomes are desirable for students, what criteria are being employed to measure success and why. Rather than placing blame on administrators for parcelling out agendas, strategies and outcomes models, Stitzlein argues that the gravity of the situation reflects a failure in the public to seek change democratically.

^{cx} See, for instance, Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); Chinua Achebe's *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87* (London: Penguin, 1990); Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Robert C. J. Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).

^{cxii} For an argument that sets literature up against the institution of the university and views it as excessive, while also calling into question its status as an "object" (as such), see Peggy Kamuf's *The Division of Literature: Or The University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997). Here Kamuf suggests: "When one asks what literary works should (or should not) be taught, another question is implied: what are the limits of the institution 'within' which something called literature ('great literature,' 'the

canon,' 'the literary tradition,' and so forth) is supposed to be taught? Why does the first question entail the second? And why does the question that literature poses itself put in question this other institution that is the university?... this means that, with the question of literature's institution, a space may be opened up for the *remarking* of institutionality in general, a space that is neither inside nor outside some pre-given (instituted) boundaries", p. 4-5. Kamuf's comments are of interest here because they not only historicise the literary (what is literature?), they also note how deconstruction has always viewed literature as an excessive phenomenon. Thus, Kamuf's understanding is not that there is a thing called "literature-in-itself" but that "literature" (with inverted commas) holds something in reserve: "With the notion of reserve, then, we mean that which precedes, exceeds, or is not fully drawn down by instituted divisions of meaning...", p. 6. The counterargument to this understanding is that Kamuf is once again lauding literature for its degree of difficulty, its excessiveness; but of interest to us here is that she claims, because of "this indeterminability of what is (or is not) literature, of what properly belongs to the set called literature", we can see that there are peculiar (excessive) difficulties with teaching it.

^{cxiii} One must be careful when using generalisations, such as poststructuralist thinking, as Chow above realises, since these categories are obviously not entirely closed. In this sense it might be important to view here how Jacques Derrida (often seen as a doyen in this category) views literature as such. It is his work, alongside J. Hillis Miller's – and others who are also influenced by Derrida – that impacts much of the thinking in this thesis. To be as clear as possible about the way literature appears in Derrida's work, not as some might have it, that it is a thing *as such*, that it is entirely subjective, or that criticism that takes seriously the power of literature to have performative purchase on the real world is misguided or romantic, it is worth nothing what he says exactly. In an interview with Derek Attridge, he puts it thus: "... there is no text which is literary *in itself*. Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional – social, in any case. Of course, this does not mean that literarity is merely projective or subjective – in the sense of the empirical subjectivity or caprice of each reader. The literary character of the text is inscribed on the side of the intentional object, in its noematic structure, one could say, and not only on the subjective side of the noetic act. There are 'in' the text features which call for the literary reading and recall the convention, institution, or history of literature". Jacques Derrida. *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 44. See also J. Hillis Miller "Derrida and Literature" in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 58-81. See Miller's reading of this passage on pages 61-63. See also Jacques Derrida's interview with Richard Kearney in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). "It is totally false to suggest deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact saying the opposite.... Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other", p. 123-124.

^{cxiv} For an intricate argument concerning the difficulty with the definition of the literary, see J. Hillis Miller's opening chapter of *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1-23. Here Miller provides commentary on the recent emergence of the term "literature" by tracing its emergence in English usage via Thomas and Joseph Warton (1728-1790; 1722-1800). "Words", claims Miller, echoing Jean Paul Sartre, "used as signifiers without referents generate with amazing ease people with subjectivities, things, places, actions, all the paraphernalia of poems, plays, and novels with which adept readers are familiar. What is most

extraordinary about literature's power is the ease with which this generation of a virtual reality occurs" (2002, 17). Miller traces, throughout this work, various attempts by authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Proust, Sartre, Derrida, and host of others to come to terms with the peculiarity of literature and its power.

^{cxv} See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, second edition, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 1-17. In his introduction Eagleton argues that to view literature as "self-referential language" is deeply problematic and that objectifying is also a misrepresentation: "Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-defined entity, as entomology is the study of insects, is a chimera", p. 19. See also Jacques Derrida in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 41. "...even if something called 'literature' appeared historically in Europe, at such and such a date, this does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn't mean that there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite".

^{cxvi} There is a caveat to all of this, and that is that deconstruction falls under the general heading of poststructuralism in these arguments concerning self-referentiality. The notion that poststructuralism promotes a radical self-referentiality is problematic in other ways for other theorists. "Deconstruction", argues Hillis Miller in *Black Holes* (1999), "never rejected the referentiality of language. Far from it. But it saw the inescapable referential vector of language as a problem to be interrogated, not a solution that be taken for granted", p. 83.

^{cxvii} At the time of writing, for instance, a wave of protests and strike actions are continuing across the UK, which *The Times* newspaper has called "the worst industrial action at universities in modern times" (March 9, 2018). Disputes about superannuation schemes, pensions, and student fees have spiralled into a serious crisis in the education sector and the turmoil does not look like abating any time soon. The University and College Union (UCU) and Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) are both embroiled in what looks like long-term disputes in around 65 universities across the UK. *The Guardian* newspaper is calling the strike action a significant indicator of how wrong the marketization process of education has become. University staff are battling with stagnating pay, mounting workloads, and increasingly ambitious targets. Young academics entering the field are also realising that part-time contracts with no prospects of job security in the future are the new norm (the so-called "gig economy"). While student debts are becoming increasingly unsustainable, universities are now looking at a new precariat within their own ranks as staff there are finding that the cost-benefit of teaching and working in that sector are no longer viable. In Chile, there has also been widespread civil unrest as protestors are forming a nationwide uprising against economic disparity. In a country where 33% of the nation's wealth is controlled by 1% of the population, the deep-rooted disillusionment of the disenfranchised workforce and student population is evidenced in a wave of recent protests that has seen eighteen deaths and over 7,000 arrests (Franklin, *The Guardian*, 2019). In the US, second-level schools are seeing strikes from California to West Virginia over similar erosions to pension schemes and a general withdrawal of state funding. In the past two years, the following states have seen significant strike action: Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Virginia. Donald Trump Jr. (son of the current president), in a speech in El Paso, Texas, in January 2019, responded to these strikes by commenting that "these loser teachers [...] are trying to sell you on socialism from birth" (Wolf, 2019).

^{cxviii} Beck's work has had a profound effect on thinking about education in a general capacity, as can be seen in *Education and the Risk Society: Theories, Discourse and Risk Identities in Education Contexts* eds. Steven Bialostok, Robert L. Whitman, and William S. Bradley (Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2012). The focus on

risk here is an attempt to view that term in light of specific moments in literature classes.

^{cxix} This is also true of what Thomas Docherty thinks, after Edward Said and John Dewey, about the experience of a university education and its promises: 'Risk' is precisely what 'the student experience' cannot accommodate. The very language of its documentation is dominated by 'guarantees' and assertions of what the University *will* 'provide' or 'deliver' by way of this commodity. But genuine experience is, as we can now see clearly, something that is oriented towards the future, towards the ongoing emancipation of human possibilities or potential. Insofar as it is future-oriented in this way, it is by definition *unpredictable*" (Docherty, 2011, p. 50).

^{cxx} See John D. Caputo on hospitality and the threat of welcoming the other in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996) and Jacques Derrida's lectures "On Hospitality" in *Jacques Derrida and Religion* ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 356-420.

^{cxixi} Harold Bloom's death on October 14, 2019, elicited a flurry of obituary notices and appraisals in the popular press that brought to light once again his notoriety in this respect. A life-long defender of the canon of great literature and an unrelentingly polarising force, Bloom was remembered invariably for espousing a literary canon that was Western, white, and male. Rey Chow's *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (1998) opens with the following epigraph attributed to Bloom: "I would say that there is no future for literary studies as such in the United States. Increasingly, those students are being taken over by the astonishing garbage called 'cultural studies'" (Chow, 1998, p. 1).

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