

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Resistance to Aesthetic Education

MICHAEL W. CLUNE

Twenty-first-century aesthetic education is so pluralist in its choice of objects, and so diverse in its audiences and practitioners, that it can seem, as Nicholas Gaskill and Kate Stanley remark in their introduction, that it represents the profession's shared commitment. While I admire their hopeful stance, this is at present far from the case. Resistance within and without the academy presents the major obstacle to realizing the diverse projects described by this stimulating set of essays.

The struggle for aesthetic education defines perhaps the major intellectual gulf dividing contemporary literary studies, and this struggle animates each of the authors. The fact that they find it impossible to make the case for aesthetic education without identifying that which blocks it signals their awareness of conditions in the neoliberal university. Naming the forces aligned against this pedagogical model represents the surest way of evoking the political and educational values that it seeks to secure.

For Kristen Case, the opposite of the aesthetic educator is the professor who knows. She rejects the figure of the teacher secure in political, moral, historical, or literary knowledge, for whom instruction involves the application of this knowledge to literature. Case writes that "as the years have passed," "not knowing" has "become more and more central to my idea of what it is I am doing when I teach literature." Unless professors cultivate the capacity to have their minds changed by the work, a capacity we might, after Keats, call "negative capability," then their hopes for facilitating the transformation of their students will fail. Case describes this attitude toward knowledge as developing over the course of her career, introducing an apparent paradox. It might seem as if the attitude of openness, of not knowing, is the novice's attitude, but in fact the reverse is true. Not knowing requires practice, discipline, and confidence.

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I will never forget, in my first seminar in graduate school, Sharon Cameron sitting with a poem before her. And while I, the novice, was full of confident proclamations about what was happening in the poem, she was not. She performed and expressed puzzlement. She pointed to features of the poem for which she lacked an adequate explanation. She wondered what was happening. This capacity to not know, to refrain from projection, is the prerequisite for discovering modes of value that challenge or transform, rather than reliably confirm, our prejudices and preconceptions.

If the figure of the professor insulated by knowledge from contact with the work constitutes an internal opponent of aesthetic education, Case also invokes an external opponent. She notes that the working-class students of her public university are deprived of the time required to open themselves to the different temporalities evoked by such artifacts as Henry James's late novels. Her analysis of this deprivation suggests an answer to the questions often posed by skeptics of aesthetic education. Why teach literature? The students can read literary works on their own time. If they don't want to read "difficult" works, why should the professor force them? Students can make their own aesthetic judgments.

But, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer also recognized, Case understands that the supposedly free aesthetic choices of her students are in fact highly constrained. Our commercial society condemns practically everyone outside the top ten percent to spirit-crushing forms of labor that leave them, at the end of their day, capable of absorbing little more than the culture-industry trash that floods the media. Aesthetic works offer what Erica Fretwell in her essay calls "an invitation to forge alternative sensibilities." As Case shows, the space of an English classroom may shelter delicate alternative forms of time that wither in the schedules of neoliberalism.

For Joseph North too, aesthetic education opposes the depredations of neoliberal capitalism. "If we imagine criticism as the defense and enrichment of an aesthetic commons, our natural enemies are privatizers and polluters—which in blunt terms

mostly means corporations and states." While both Case and North view market forces as a threat to aesthetic education's cultivation of richer alternative sensibilities, I note a difference in the way the two writers frame this threat. North envisions the aesthetic "commons" as a naturally thriving space of aesthetic creation and criticism. The role of aesthetic educators is to defend incursions from malign market agents. Case instead sees the classroom as a space whose relative shelter from the market is purchased by the hard work of teachers and students, a space in which alternative modes might be developed and fostered.

To decide which of these models is more compelling, we'd have to first identify the nature of the threat neoliberalism presents. It's certainly true that phenomena from commercials to the monetization of cultural forms "pollute" aesthetic life. But the market offers a more insidious hook in the faux freedom Case indicts. As I have argued elsewhere, and as Mark Wollaeger notes in his essay, the market encourages a faux egalitarianism, extending the crucial principle of equality of persons to the equality of consumer preferences. This—the key ideological move of commercial culture—has the effect both of concealing the constraints placed on choice by the conditions of labor and of invalidating the effort "to forge alternative sensibilities," by depriving people of any reason to question the adequacy of their current sensibilities, shaped as they are by the neoliberal environment.

Thus, I incline to Case's model, in which aesthetic education helps shape sensibilities, as opposed to North's, in which aesthetic education serves to prevent malign shaping. The disagreement between North and me, at which North gestures, hinges on the different degrees to which we are comfortable with aesthetic education as a practice that endows persons with capacities and sensibilities they don't already have. This difference, however, occurs in the context of a shared resistance to the domination of commercial culture.

For Elaine Auyoung, Daphne A. Brooks, and Merve Emre, aesthetic education struggles against those forces that seek to limit it to certain privileged groups. These forces often assume the form of a

distorted image of aesthetic education. Auyoung points out that many people mistakenly believe that aesthetic judgment simply involves the subjective value different people place on aesthetic objects. From this perspective, aesthetic education looks as if it forces students to share the professor's opinions.

Yet, as Auyoung argues, the key question is not how different people judge a given object but how people come to notice the aesthetically relevant features of that object. The object perceived by a person endowed with aesthetic education is not the object seen by the person deprived of such education. This perceptual difference requires "taking seriously the question of how one learns to notice literary significance." Linda Dowling has provided a history of the mistake Auyoung identifies, showing how the conviction that aesthetic taste is free and natural rests on the concealment of the education required to make the kinds of judgments writers from Immanuel Kant to John Ruskin describe.

The paradoxical effect of denying that aesthetic judgment needs to be taught is denying students from lower-class backgrounds the kinds of perceptual training and enrichment that would enable them to judge for themselves. Aesthetic expertise names the capacity to recognize features, nuances, shades, and textures invisible to us before education. Deprived of such education, we might project what is familiar onto novel forms: "That painting looks like my toddler drew it."

The aesthetic expertise of the teacher aims to endow students with the capacity to forestall projection and to grasp surprising and subtle features. The animus often directed against expertise—visible outside the academy in right-wing attacks on science and within the academy in the hypocritical rhetoric whereby professors pretend to disavow their own expertise—represents another enemy of aesthetic education. Attending to the processes by which aesthetic attention is shaped enables us to counter a false egalitarianism, the material effect of which is to deny rich aesthetic experiences to those who don't already have them. In his essay, Thomas Sorensen offers a compelling practical example of the operation of aesthetic expertise. Beginning by engaging the negative capability to recognize that

we don't yet know how to think about literary atmospheres, he develops techniques of close reading to focus our attention on atmospheric effects, allowing them to appear for us.

Brooks tackles a different malign image of aesthetic education, one that unduly circumscribes the sphere of acceptable aesthetic objects. She decries the barriers in the English classroom to appreciating "multifaceted intellectual experimentation," and compellingly counters this by gesturing at her own pedagogy, which incorporates works by artists from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Bessie Smith, creating resonances that are invisible when the classroom is dedicated to a single period, genre, or tradition.

Yet it's odd that Brooks's essay ends by identifying the enemy of aesthetic education as anyone who tells you "what or how you can or cannot read." As a professor, she presumably uses a syllabus, which requires students to read, watch, or listen to certain works. The syllabus represents a very strong determination of "what" to read. While presenting a purely autobiographical reason for why the professor includes a given work—I like it, but I'm not saying *anyone else* has to—may appear egalitarian, the student will be forgiven for asking, Well, then why are you making me read it? In fact, in her essay, Brooks gestures to specific aesthetic qualities that abundantly justify the attention she asks students to pay to the diverse works she describes. But we should acknowledge, for the reasons Auyoung alludes to, that this amounts to showing students what and how to read. Furthermore, in endowing the students with sensitivities they may not already have, this practice is not restrictive but liberatory.

Emre attacks another misconception about aesthetic education: that one can draw a firm line between literary scholarship and literary appreciation. She provides a fine-grained analysis, through a particular example drawn from Virginia Woolf, of the inextricability of aesthetic judgment from the philological project of editing a text. The resistance to aesthetic education is often fueled by the idea that one can separate "subjective" judgments from "objective" scholarship. But when examined closely, as Emre does in this instance, literary

scholarship will almost always be found inseparable from aesthetic judgment.

Nan Z. Da and John McGowan focus on aesthetic education's role in combatting the authoritarian political tendencies that threaten it. For Da, such education cultivates moral discernment, which she opposes to a force we might call moralism and which underwrites the logic of the surveillance state Can Xue depicts. The overlapping Maoist, Orwellian, Soviet, and commercial forms illuminated by Can Xue's writing operate according to a kind of cognitive shorthand, instantly conveying eminently accessible meanings that, as Can Xue shows, conceal techniques of control and debasement. The difficulty of aesthetic works like Can Xue's plays a political role in resisting the reductive ease of moralism, a resistance Da amplifies through techniques borrowed from art history.

For McGowan, aesthetic education disrupts the conformity that, as writers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Hannah Arendt have shown, shadows modern democracy. As he notes: "It is easy to have a common world emerge when all the communicants are mostly cut from the same cloth." Aesthetic education, which McGowan envisions as a "dialogic" activity, creates connection while preserving diversity by enabling different perspectives on a given work.

Yet, like Brooks, McGowan oddly disavows judgment on the part of the professor. Here, I would suggest, his ostensible Arendtian vision breaks down. For Arendt, art offers temporal as well as spatial forms of connection. The quality, belonging to certain artworks, that Arendt calls "permanence" is crucial to founding the common world in which meaningful intersubjectivity can emerge: "Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things" (Arendt 167).

This permanence is hardly natural. Whether the work is by John Donne or Frederick Douglass, it requires renewal through aesthetic education, a process that can hardly avoid the kinds of judgments that McGowan disavows. Not every work can support multiple perspectives and found a common world. The fear of violating the dogmatic equality

of commercial culture undermines the project of aesthetic education.

Jonah Siegel confronts head-on the distorted image of aesthetic education that exerts a subtle pull even on such able proponents as McGowan, North, and Brooks. This is the idea that aesthetic education and the aesthetic judgments on which it depends are reactionary. As we have seen, the authors just mentioned undergo contortions to defend themselves against this implicit charge. But, Siegel argues, when we closely examine the supposed link between aesthetic education and reaction, it melts into air. "To put the matter bluntly, is it really possible in the United States in 2023— . . . or pretty much anywhere—to keep pretending that the cultural formations we associate with elite aesthetic taste really subtend dominant elements in the social hierarchy? And if they don't, what is the political value" of subverting expert aesthetic taste?

This point has been made many times,¹ yet the suspicion that aesthetic education is somehow reactionary seems curiously unkillable. Little evidence is ever offered for the idea that aesthetic hierarchies and aesthetic cultivation contribute to oppression today, yet the intuition persists that it somehow does, fueling the ever-renewed effort to undermine and eradicate aesthetic education.

What, in the contemporary neoliberal university, could be the source of this intuition? Where could the pressure to tear down aesthetic education originate? Where but commercial culture itself, which insinuates itself more deeply into the university every year? The eradication of the values fostered in the classrooms of aesthetic education leaves one measure of aesthetic value left standing: market value. The hostility of much of elite academia to aesthetic education shouldn't surprise us. That hostility simply marks the coincidence of the interests of academic and commercial elites, a coincidence that is hardly novel.

Lest readers imagine that the forms of opposition variously cataloged and expressed by the cluster's essays represent straw men, beliefs that no one actually holds, I will conclude with a starkly concrete example.

In a recent essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the Columbia University English professor Julie Stone Peters argues for a vision of literary education diametrically opposed to aesthetic education. Humanities education has attracted criticism from both the left and the right in recent years for embodying a vision of political activism as indoctrination. While some have tended to dismiss such critiques, suggesting that they don't actually describe many professors' work, Peters accepts the veracity of the descriptions, but reverses their values. She finds the positive, transformative work of the humanities in the generation and circulation of bits of academic jargon that stand for progressive or radical political ideas. She writes:

Not all of our students will be original thinkers, nor should they all be. A world of original thinkers, all thinking wholly inimitable thoughts, could never get anything done. For that we need *unoriginal* thinkers, hordes of them, cloning ideas by the score and broadcasting them to every corner of our virtual world. What better device for idea-cloning than the cliché? Maybe we should instead strive to send our students forth—and ourselves too—armed with clichés for political change.

Peters thinks this isn't simply an idealistic vision of how the humanities can change the world; she believes that the humanities have already changed the world through this mode of education. And it's hard to disagree with her. Peters points out the steady infiltration of English and humanities jargon in a variety of elite spaces—from law to journalism to television. "What matters is that in such places we can see—concretely and demonstrably—how the humanities does things with words."

This vision, which tacitly underwrites the aspiration of many English departments to become sites of social justice activism, contains several key features: English professors know what's politically good, and they know the most efficient language with which to express it; we possess this knowledge and this language before the encounter with literary works, which merely serve to illustrate our political knowledge; and we hand this knowledge and

language down to our students, whom we expect to reproduce it, and thereby to change the world.

Peters would serve students the kind of degraded language that Da exposes, secure in a mastery Case rejects, in order to inculcate the kind of conformity McGowan finds incompatible with democracy. Her essay projects a classroom devoid of the "multifaceted intellectual experimentation" Brooks celebrates, hostile to the "alternative forms of sensibility" Fretwell calls for, and ignorant of the capacity-endowing educational psychology Auyoung recommends. Note too the contrast between the presumably egalitarian, liberatory content of the jargon Peters circulates, and the authoritarian position of the professor, contemptuous of her students ("not everyone should be a deep thinker"). All this is justified by Peters's conviction that she's right about politics, and political strategy, and by her faith that the bits of language she circulates really do have liberatory political effects.

Yet here is the danger in failing to think carefully about expertise. When English professors disclaim the expertise to which their training reasonably entitles them—in literature, creative writing, composition, or film—they tend, as Peters does here, to lay claim to unreasonable and unchecked forms of authority. For example, Peters's unfounded, unevincenced confidence that her pedagogy has good political effects might be qualified by anyone armed with a few commonsense observations and a few pieces of widely available information. A recent piece in *The New York Times*, for instance, paints this picture of the political environment:

For the first time in a Times/Siena national survey, Democrats had a larger share of support among white college graduates than among nonwhite voters—a striking indication of the shifting balance of political energy in the Democratic coalition. As recently as the 2016 congressional elections, Democrats won more than 70 percent of nonwhite voters while losing among white college graduates.

(Cohn)

When Peters sends her Ivy League graduates out into the world armed with the language she has given them on race, class, gender, and history, it's

likely that she's having the opposite effect she intends. Instead of spreading egalitarian ideas, rendering them more effective by circulating them widely through culture, she has simply helped lock those ideas within the cultural capital of an elite, rendering them repellent to working-class voters of all races. A working-class person, hearing the humanities jargon coming from the lips of the Ivy League graduate, is more likely to experience it as the class aggression it is rather than the helpful wisdom Peters imagines.

The essays gathered in this section don't see students as passive receptacles of the professor's knowledge. The patient, indirect political work of aesthetic education, by imagining that students can become "deep thinkers," endows them with new capacities. Aesthetic education gives students the means to become the professor's equals; its violation of commercial culture's superficial egalitarianism thus serves a deeper, truer equality. We must work to extend aesthetic education, especially to institutions that serve lower-class students. And we must beware of the lure of the shortcut, of the promise that English professors are expert political strategists. We should decline the faux liberations purveyed by the elite institutions of neoliberalism, and we should be prepared, as these essays prepare us, to

confront resistance from those institutions at every level.

NOTE

1. See "Too Much Sociology," especially its discussion of Guillory's *Cultural Capital*.

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