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Literature as aesthetic knowledge: implications for curriculum and education

Alka Seghal Cuthbert

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an argument for aesthetic knowledge in the arts and more specifically, for an aesthetic model of literature to be central in the curriculum. I argue that there are important distinctions to be made between the everyday experiences unique to us as individuals, and the universality of human experience. In the English Literature curriculum, this important difference is manifested in the status of the text because it is through a triadic engagement between educator, text and pupil that the meanings of experience can be evoked objectively. Through changing cultural and policy contexts in the post-war period, the text has been marginalised in the curriculum. This has contributed to two detrimental effects. The first is that direct personal responses and experience have been overvalued in the English Literature curriculum. The second is that the idea of objective knowledge in literature has been misconstrued as knowledge of its linguistic substratum. Consequently, an important form of aesthetic knowledge is largely absent in Britain's secondary curriculum. The paper is organized into three sections. Section one describes main shifts in the cultural and policy contexts. Section two provides a brief empirical example of how shifts at the macro-level have been re-contextualised within the implied curriculum found in examples of national exams. Section three elucidates the deeper significance of these changes in light of a theoretical discussion of Kantian aesthetics and implications for a social realist approach to knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy derived from Durkheim.

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Cultural and policy contexts

The epistemological uncertainty of literature was implicitly recognised by early 20th century educators. For example, among the policy makers and educators responsible for the Newbolt Report in 1921 and the Hadow Report in 1928, there was great uncertainty as to whether literature could, or should, be an examinable subject like others on the curriculum. Instead of thinking through the relationship between language and literature, a pragmatic compromise was made, and English was divided into two separate subjects. For much of the post-war period, the Leavisite model of English (or versions of it) had been the normative model for school curriculum even if it was not always fully realized concretely in all schools.

However, as the century progressed, the centrality of canonical texts in Leavis' work came under increasing attack from sections of the profession and from within the academy. The focus on reading certain texts in certain ways – with a reverence for the authorship – had been underpinned by a commitment to a set of particular liberal cultural values. By the 1980s British society was more politically and socially polarized, and such values were considered by some to be more conventional than substantive (Medway, 1984, p. 137). Two further related criticisms were:

- The pedagogic practices of both the Leavisite model, and the more psychology-based personal response validated at the 1965 Dartmouth Conference of English Teachers (Sublette, 1973), were thought to ignore insights from the New Sociology of Education, as well as social theories of learning glossed from Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Volosinov.
- The liberal, autonomous individual at the symbolic and ethical heart of Holbrook (1961), Leavis (1963), and Plowden (1967), was thought by an influential minority to be prohibitive of a more socially engaged expression of selfhood. The preferred goal for English was deconstructive criticism rather than earlier forms of literary criticism. The latter's favoured pedagogic approach, and selection of texts, were thought to engender a sense of integration at the socio-psychic level which, in turn, were thought to hinder further socio-political progress (Barnes & Barnes, 1984; Medway, 1984; Rosen, 1992). To some extent, this view contributed to the blurring of an educational experience of literature and an experience of literature as social/political critique.

The debates over the English curriculum during this period could be seen as a struggle for epistemological authority: a sociological changing of the guard. The cultural liberalism of social democracy was increasingly questioned by sections of the profession, impatient to see more radical change in, and outside of, education. For example, Rosen thought it was necessary:

... to insist again and again on *the need to disrupt the authoritative voice with the unheard voices of our students* to help them engage with the difficult struggle to articulate, develop, refine and advance their meanings as against the mere reproduction of the words of textbooks.

(Rosen, 1992, p. 121)

The antipathy to liberal cultural values and the possibility of an objective view is more explicit in Barnes and Barnes, who wrote:

... a great widening of the rhetorical range of English so that at the extremes it encompasses passion, sarcasm and dispute: *a balanced viewpoint is too timid a virtue*.

(Barnes & Barnes, 1984, p. 116, my emphasis)

The social dimensions of learning and political context of education may not have featured largely in Britain's immediate post war educational discourse, but the idea that all teaching methods, and text selection, were necessarily geared towards the mere reproduction of words is questionable. Some examples from professional

discussions in *The Uses of English* and publications of *The English Association* from the late 1940s and 1950s suggest that, at the very least, this might not have uniformly been the case. Here is one example that shows due regard for subjective dimensions of learning, 'The range of a child's reading must be sufficiently wide to give the zest and stimulus that alone can make the schoolroom a starting point for lifelong love and study' (The English Association, 1948).

Irrespective of political partisanship, some criticisms made from within a social constructivist paradigm had merit. It is possible that the aesthetic and imaginative dimensions of the post-war English literature curriculum were less important than the rhetorical features and propositional content of texts. Additionally, it is quite possible that texts were selected more through custom than *epistemological* justification.

Perhaps one of the most important educational issues raised by some critics of the time was that of hermeneutics. Questions of meaning, and what is to be made meaningful and how, are not confined to literary criticism. The problem was that some critics threw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. To say 'that each reader must recreate *a text* for him or herself' (Barnes & Barnes, 1984, p. 113), is partially true in one sense, at the level of pedagogy. It is *meanings* that are recreated, not the text: and meanings are arrived at through an engagement with the text's symbolic form rather than from drawing on personal experience alone.

The increasing politicization of the English curriculum, on both sides of the debate, was bound to provoke a response. It came in the form of the 1988 Education Reform Act, which laid the basis for new institutional arrangements which effectively gave more control to central, rather than local, government. The introduction of a national curriculum was cause for much controversy, not least because it extended the government's reach into the curriculum itself in ways which marginalized established professional groups and bodies. Alongside changes in the inspection regime, the organisation and remit of exam boards following the introduction of a unitary national examination, GCSEs, also changed. Through a process of mergers designed to meet the requirements of the new assessment, boards affiliated with the University of Cambridge became providers of new suites of vocational courses and assessments in new international markets (UCLES, 1997). Businesses, as well as government, gained greater influence in curricular matters. For example, in the early 1990s, one of the boards in the Cambridge conglomerate, the Midland Examination Board, introduced a GCSE in Business Studies in collaboration with British Telecom.

To summarise, during the 1980s and 1990s, under New Labour as well as Conservative governments, the nature of professional work and relationships were fundamentally altered (Ball, 2003; Beck, 1999). The next section focuses in more detail on main changes in the English literature curriculum over this period. The changes illustrate how its selection and framing was recontextualised in an educational context characterised by weakening professional autonomy and weaker boundaries between educational and a wider range of social actors and interests.

The recontextualisation of the English literature curriculum

In light of the cultural and policy contexts discussed in the previous section, the introduction of knowledge about language (KAL) into the English curriculum exemplifies

how the curriculum itself came under more extensive government purview. It also exemplifies a longstanding construal of what counts as objective knowledge in the terms of disciplinary knowledge within the sciences.

In 1989 the government-commissioned Cox Report proposed that the English curriculum should contain a compulsory linguistic-based component, KAL in order to secure greater cognitive gains among other imputed benefits (Carter, 1994). This approach was reinforced in 1998 with the introduction of the national literacy strategy (NLS) and Framework at primary level, which was soon extended to secondary level. Such justifications reinforce the idea that cognitive gain in English is to be found in its most science-like component, linguistics. This is a very truncated view of what cognitive gain entails. This is discussed further in the third section.

At the time the NLS was criticised from many quarters within the profession and academia for disregarding teachers' prior knowledge and beliefs about reading (Poulson, Avramidis, Fox, Medwell, & Wray, 2001); endorsing a technical model of reading, focused on the sub-word level of meaning (Dombey, undated; Poulson et al., 2001; Wyse, 2003); and ultimately contributing to the de-professionalization of teachers (Davis, 1999, 2013). A central problem of seeking to improve either the content or status of English by recourse to linguistics is made by Hasan. Linguistics, she writes, is far too based on 'cognitive, representational or experiential' models (Hasan, 1996, p. 185) and concludes that formalist models of language needed to be revised so it was understood as:

a resource for meaning – for construing our experience, for enabling the construal of complex relations for expressing interpersonal meanings and for enabling meanings that will construe coherence, both within the communication, and between the communication and its social context.

(Hasan, 1996, p. 185)

Although the NLS no longer exists in its original form, and despite robust critiques, the influence of a reductive version of socio-linguistics remains with us, notably in official endorsement of exclusively phonic-based reading strategies at primary level. However, linguistics is not the only influence which needs to be considered in the English curriculum. As discussed earlier, the position of the text and the pedagogic approaches to reading literary texts are hugely important. A few examples from a sample of national GCSE exam papers illustrates significant changes in these areas.

If we compare questions from the same exam board (subject to its structural changes discussed earlier) from the years 1957 and 2011, the very different historical contexts throw similarities and differences into sharper relief.¹ The particular examination board was selected due to a combination of practical reasons (access to archives with the most complete sets of documentation), and the fact that UCLES had been the second oldest exam board, which covered independent, direct grant and state grammar schools; and whose exams enjoyed high professional and official status. By 2011, UCLES had been incorporated into Cambridge Assessment whose main domestic exam provider is OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts examinations).

Here is question 12, based on Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, from the 1957 O Level examination:

Choose two episodes in this play which you find most amusing. Describe them briefly and show how in each episode Shaw obtains his humorous effect.

The question implies that pupils will have studied the whole text in sufficient detail so they are able to make a personal choice (of episodes) based on an evaluative judgement. They are required to be familiar with the text's content enough to provide brief descriptions. Finally, they are also required to provide an explanation of dramatic devices and literary techniques through which comedic effects are created. The text is clearly the object of study and propositional knowledge of both the text and literary skills is called for. But there is also some space for personal engagement and response implied in the element of choice. The questions on this single paper offer a choice of questions which require a wide range of literary skills as well as straightforward memorization. They also require a range of writing such as descriptive summaries, explanation and (reasoned) opinion. As such, the implied model of literature in this exam example falls within a Leavisite approach.

Leavis had emphasised that great texts should be experienced and not subjected to linguistic, psychological or political theoretical constraints (1930). And in this light, the approach implied in the 1957 paper may underemphasise the experience of the text. But it is also an *implied model* whose fleshing out in the classroom over the course of one or two terms may have included opportunities for more direct engagement and response which are less open to examination. Be that as it may, the place of the whole text is assured; and the literary skills required are not *per se* antithetical to an aesthetic engagement.

Now if we compare the question above with one taken from a paper in 2011, there are significant differences. Here are the two versions of question 1 (Foundation and Higher Tiers) from the 2011 GCSE exam, unit 3 – Prose from Different Cultures. The paper is organized so that pupils can choose one from two questions on each text. The examples below are for Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

1A) What vivid impressions of George and Lennie's relationship does this passage give you? (Foundation)

You should consider:

- the way Lennie behaves here
- how George reacts
- the words and phrases Steinbeck uses

Or:

1B) What are your feelings about Candy and the way people treat him in the novel? Remember to support your ideas with details from the novel.

And the Higher Tier questions for the same text are:

1A) How does Steinbeck's writing here vividly convey the relationship between George and Lennie?

Or:

1B) How much sympathy for Candy does Steinbeck's writing encourage you to feel? Remember to support your views with details from the novel.

It is noticeable that despite being a universal exam, the two tiers require very different forms of knowledge from pupils. The study of the whole text is not implied for either tier as questions refer to a given passage. It is also significant that the Foundation Tier question requires few or no literary skills: the question is worded as a direct address and asks for little more than a list of impressions. Further guidance for pupils is provided in the bullet points. In principle they could answer question 1A, for both tiers, based *only* on the passage provided for each question.

The Higher Tier paper shows a different kind of weakness: question 1A) is also passage-based but implies a restricted version of an authorial intention approach. Far from the sophisticated approach of locating author intention within historical context advocated by Hirsch (1960) it is easy to see how this type of 'how' question could readily collapse into an over-focus on technique spotting. In fact the presence of this approach in answer papers was critically commented upon by examiners in the OCR Mark Scheme of 2011.

The assessment for both Tiers is organised into four parts, one of which is course-work. For the three exam components, pupils have to answer four questions in total on four different texts. The breadth of coverage implied is undermined by the way the questions frame the text. In principle pupils could pass this, and the other two exam papers, by answering four very similar, passage-based questions all of which require a superficial engagement with the text and place personal response/feelings as the main locus of meaning. Written in a more convoluted manner, question 1B) of the Higher Tier paper also emphasises direct personal feelings but requires pupils to try and link this to the *author's writing*, which tacitly marginalizes any idea of the text as an imaginary diegetic world to be engaged with vicariously. The devalued status of the text as a source of meaning, a privileged status of direct personal response, and a mechanistic understanding of what literary reading involves, are evident across all papers, in all questions by the ubiquitous tag 'Remember to support your ideas/views with details from the text' (my emphasis).

The next section discusses aesthetic theories and symbolic representation in order to elucidate how reliance on either every day, personal experience, or writing techniques alone, which mark the 2011 paper, are inadequate. Neither provides the imaginative or hermeneutic resources required for the interpretative work needed to do justice to both great literature, and to an idea of education as a transformative endeavour.

An aesthetic model of literature

Background

Aesthetics, prior to Kant was 'principle-bound and rigid in many ways' (Kneller, p. 1). In the visual arts, for example, aesthetics' primary focus was on appreciation of formal qualities (which could have metaphysical or religious connotations) achieved in the observation and execution of techniques and procedures; the mathematical ratios of the golden section in drawing, for example. In literature, the strict meter of Latin classical texts was associated with the moral and political features of classical civilization, and was accordingly highly valued (Martin, 2012).

After Kant, aesthetic reflection was freed from empirical and moral conditioning. Unlike speculative reasoning, and its product – rational knowledge – the aesthetic faculty was conceived as disinterested; incapable of producing concepts. Concepts, according to Kant, are those mental representations through which features of external phenomena are made apprehensible to human thought. More recently, Rancière (2009) has elaborated this idea of aesthetic freedom in a socio-political direction. Central to his argument is the idea that the human sensorium is differentiated at a fundamental level in ways contingent upon our relational position in the social division of labour, which means all our energies when operating in non-aesthetic modes of thought are directed to some type of object of desire. Only the aesthetic moment offers a freedom from this. In relation to art, Rancière argues that from the conscious theorization of aesthetics from Kant onwards, it has been possible for humans to determine what counts as art for ourselves, and when we do so, we are exerting our agency freely. In as much as politics is rooted in social relations, the aesthetic is not directly political: but in as much as any political act requires inner-directed exertion of agency, the aesthetic moment is an important pre-requisite.

However, although Kantian aesthetics had won a new autonomy from its previous moral/ethical ties, it was also debarred from knowledge (Cassirer, 1957) and one consequence has been that art has had an uncertain status within a public conception of knowledge as that which is empirically provable and/or practically applicable. Although literature has been seen as important within the curriculum, this has been more due to its place within a broader national culture, or imputed therapeutic benefits, rather than its intrinsic aesthetic power.

What has been less explored, however, is Kant's point that the imagination was, at least in part, 'the source of all combinations of the sensible manifold, but not of the rules that prescribe its combinational activity' (Kneller, 2007, p. 3). Bayer's gloss on this point is, 'The poet can express simply anything, which is the inherent power of the imagination. But poetry has within it no method for the judging of images' (Bayer, p. 53). This apparent lack of method and criteria for public (i.e. generalizable) evaluation in the arts poses particular problems for education where developing a greater ability to distinguish truthful knowledge claims from personal opinions has been one of its central public justifications.

Cassirer's theory of symbolic representation challenges the strict separation between imagination and reason because he recognises that where there are strong antagonistic oppositions, there is usually some common ground (Brameld, 1956; Cassirer, 1957, 1979). For Cassirer, scientific and aesthetic modes of symbolizing (and their products scientific propositions and works of art) are *both mimetic* (Bayer, 2006). It is not the case that scientific knowledge has direct access to truth while art is less reliable because it can only copy and imagine. Although the principles and aim of mimesis are different in each case, art also is a *sui generis* form of knowledge with its own claims to truth in relation to subjectivity.

For Cassirer the mimetic images evoked by poetry are based on the perceptual contents accessed through a biological eye; the mimesis of philosophy is based on ideational images of the mind's eye. Bayer's discussion of the implications of Cassirer's theory for art suggests that mimesis based on artistic imagination might be more than

a compensation for the effects of abstraction needed in rational thought (although it can do this also). She also poses the intriguing idea that the imaginative, perception-based form of mimesis is a *precondition* for the abstraction entailed in rational thought to be apprehended and internally accepted. In other words, to undertake intellectual abstraction requires something prior from which to abstract. The source for this prior stage might not be direct experience, but an aesthetic form of knowledge; where phenomena can be known and experienced as an integrative whole before being subjected to deconstructive analysis. The wider implication of this is that the arts and sciences are complementary in a fundamental *epistemological* sense.

Aesthetics might be the difference between knowledge as sets of external propositions to be learnt by memory as an educational end point (with the understanding to come at some future time); and knowledge as sets of external propositions, which may include memorization, the content of which needs to be accepted with some degree of volition on the pupils' part. The first conceptualization of knowledge aims to improve memory and performance; the second aims to amplify generative intellectual and imaginative powers which may, or may not, result in improved performance as captured in public exams and external standards.

Cassirer on conceptual knowledge

Cassirer's theory of knowledge is intimately bound with his anthropological, developmental account of propositional language. In propositional language, 'we have a subject, a predicate, and a relation between both of them' (1979, p. 149). Propositional language is, Cassirer argues, concomitant with human discovery of an objective world inhabited by empirical objects, which have fixed and constant qualities that 'are identifiable and recognizable under very different conditions' (ibid. p. 151). In Cassirer's theory, propositional language, with its rules of grammar, syntax, morphology, phonetics and graphology, is the cognitive foundation for the development of scientific thought, knowledge and language

According to Cassirer, a scientific concept is a mental tool of thought by which an empirically given thought or idea is abstracted and re-located within a symbolic system. Two things follow from this: firstly, a scientific concept acquires its specific meaning within a system that exists prior to the empirically given concept. Secondly, through abstraction from the sensory and perceptual intuitive mode of thought and meanings we use in every day social life, concepts can be intentionally brought into inferential relationships with other concepts within and across disciplines (Winch, 2013).

Social realist epistemology, drawing on Cassirer, Durkheim and Bernstein, elaborates this fundamental theoretical differentiation between every day and disciplinary contexts. In the discursive context of specific disciplines, concepts are subject to discipline-specific rules and procedures but free from the everyday contexts and functions, which requires meaning to be more ambiguous and open to concrete contextual moorings. In this way, the abstraction required in scientific concept-based knowledge is the basis for its socially constructed generalizability and objectivity (Moore, 2013; Young & Muller, 2016).

However, one weakness of this account, pointed out by critics and acknowledged by social realist theorists, is disciplinary knowledge, thus defined, cannot deal very

well with experience. This is the task of the aesthetic and the imagination: but experience, like knowledge, can also be differentiated. The directness, volatility, and often spontaneous nature of feelings, can lead us to conclude that experience is of a piece; essentially undifferentiated. But we informally categorise experiences as personal, private, semi-public, public experiences, as well as make evaluative judgments such as embarrassing, pleasurable, boring and so forth. Feelings too, can also be differentiated or subjected to forms of structuring. The qualia of our subjectivity, which include feelings, memories, intuitions and beliefs, as well as what we know by way of propositional knowledge, are the unique object of study in aesthetics.

Such a differentiation is implied in Cassirer's differentiation between forms of art devoid of aesthetic power, which prompt a direct emotional response and leave no expressive or cognitive traces, and great works of art with strong aesthetic power. In the latter, aspects of our subjectivity are expressed through the mediation of a work's aesthetic form. In these cases, it is rare for only a single feeling to be expressed or evoked; and a great aesthetic work can prompt a process of reflection that, in principle, is open-ended and can accommodate contradictions which are less tenable in everyday life.

To illustrate this point, if we read *Crime and Punishment*, and feel some level of empathy for Raskolnikov's character, the empathy draws on our feelings of empathy we have experienced in life. But aesthetically, our empathy is different in that it is experienced vicariously rather than directly. Our ability to empathize with an intentionally amoral murderer of an old woman arises less from the representational content of the novel, but from *its aesthetic organisation and expressive power generated*. The difference lies in the relative aesthetic autonomy – or imaginative freedom – from causal relations and determinations with which our feelings intersect in our everyday private and social lives. This is one reason why it is questionable whether aesthetic experience and knowledge (in any art form) is directly transferable to everyday life as hoped for by some who regard literary study as an ersatz form of moral education (Harrison, 1970).

Aesthetics, universal and concrete experience

Young and Muller consider whether the abstraction and generalisation of science might be the exceptional rather than the normative model of disciplinary knowledge (2016). Abstraction and generalizability offer compelling accounts of the production of knowledge, where meanings are relocated from contexts of lived social experience to discursive disciplinary contexts: but a return move is needed if such knowledge is to be more than an external memorising of propositions. Questions of experience and meaning need to be brought into relationship with disciplinary knowledge, but in ways which respect the knowledge differentiation explicated in social realism.

The aesthetic is where this return move happens: a move from the abstract to the concrete; where concepts originating in the more (but not completely) empirical determinations of social life can be infused with something of the universal. It is important to note that here the term 'concrete' is more strictly defined than its everyday meaning, where it tends to signify that which is open to observation. Here, a concretised concept is one,

which reaches in both directions: to its theoretical articulations and the social phenomena from which justifiable empirical correlates can be selected.

The aesthetic, then, is the hermeneutic dimension of disciplinary knowledge where experience can be dealt with in a disciplinary way, which requires freedom of individual interpretation as well as reasoned aesthetic judgement. Conceptual knowledge and aesthetic knowledge need to be understood, and valued, as two sides of the same phenomenon, rather than discrete categories. If one dominates at the expense of the other, it is less likely that the transformative, rather than the reproductive, potential of knowledge will be realized. This means working out how principles of abstraction, objectivisation and generalizability can work in both sides of knowledge – its conceptual, reasoned-based side, and its aesthetic, imagination-based side.

Aesthetic knowledge

Cassirer's idea of knowledge in the arts differs from the earlier notion that the arts deal directly with human experience because he recognises that experience alone can be *the starting point* for creating symbolic forms that mediate between external phenomena and our internalization of it. But direct experience alone is not its end point. The claim that the arts are about experience may be true, but thus formulated it remains over-general and too conventional a definition to do the heavy aesthetic and hermeneutic work Cassirer's account requires.

Langer (1957, 1961), following Cassirer, argues that aesthetic subjects have unique principles of objectivisation and abstraction. She argues that abstraction in the arts is not achieved through the deconstructive logic of conceptual knowledge, but through *aesthetic form*. The subjective contents of internal states of mind – the substance of experience – can be given objective form through aesthetic organisation of a work's material substratum (which could include a community's shared linguistic system as well as paint, clay, soundwaves and so forth). In such works oppositional nouns such as love/hate, dark/light, joy/sadness, comedy/seriousness are evoked, rather than explained through reason or logic. Indirectly, the contradictions evoked concretely in art, through abstraction from direct experience according to aesthetic principles of the particular form of art, can present aspects of our subjectivity *objectively*.

By way of illustration, consider Picasso's *Nude Woman in a Red Armchair* of 1932. Representationally and scientifically, it is an impossible image: yet it is wholly plausible *aesthetically*. The sensual pleasure and love felt by Picasso for his lover is not explained; he neither gives us his reasoned account of his affair or of this particular mistress, nor does he encourage us to form our own rational or moral verdict. Rather it is his experience of enjoying and loving a woman that is evoked in the viewer by his aesthetic re-presentation of an aspect of his personal experience. In this way the painting encourages us to reflect on our experience of sensuality and love in a subjective way; in vicarious aesthetic experience normative logic and values (about Picasso, his model, societal attitudes to sex or psychological theories of desire) hold less sway. In this way, we can get closer to meanings which are subjectively universal.

Aesthetic form subsumes all the particulars of a work's content: its 'sensuous and emotional content' (Bayer, p. 62), but also it arises from what Cunliffe (2013) refers to

as artistic accretion, which is 'principled procedural knowledge which draws upon several elements: the prevailing cultural paradigm; the artist's previous experiences and knowledge of the practices and history of his or her art; beliefs and values; the type of training undertaken; the knowledge and selection of materials.' (Sehgal Cuthbert, 2017, p. 130). The artist, like the scholar, does not working *ex nihilo*. Both enter at a point in a pre-existing artistic or academic tradition or practice; without this backdrop, the work of neither would make much sense.

And literature ...

Bayer (2006) writes that, 'Art arises in consciousness only when consciousness has freed itself from the empirical sense of the world Cassirer identifies with language.' (ibid. 57), but the language referred to is propositional language. The abeyance of subjective variables required by propositional language means it cannot be the source of aesthetic form in literature. Because every day and literary language share the same linguistic substratum, the demarcations between them are especially important. The differentiation is created exists through the semantic relations set up via syntax and selection according to prosodic as well as semantic criteria.

To illustrate, consider how the different ordering of words affects the aesthetic power of the opening phrase from the Bible's John I, even while the representational meaning remains the same:

In the beginning was the word.

The word was in the beginning.

It is the strength of this boundary – the boundary between quotidian and poetic language (which is not confined to poetry) that permits the imaginative freedom through which the reader enters the diegetic world and the vicarious experiences offered (Hough, 1963; Iser, 1978; McGilchrist, 1982; Medway, 2010).

Aesthetic reading of literature involves developing the ability to recognise such boundaries and be able to move between different levels of meaning: universal; the textual; and what we bring to our reading by way of prior knowledge, experience, expectations, cultural paradigms, prior political and ethical commitments. It is the reader's equivalent of Cunliffe's process of accretion described earlier. Reading aesthetically means attending to the constant, iterative creation of aesthetic meanings where a part, whether it be a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, or text, is made meaningful in relation to what precedes, what is predicted; and post-hoc judgments which feed into future predictions.

For Buesch (1973), this open-ended process of construing meanings through relating part to whole (or universal to individual) is at the heart literary genre theory and its dilemma of whether meaning is accessed at the level of word or whole text. To regard genre as a product of a linear process of classification alone seriously underestimates what is involved. Views which see the aim of genre theory as primarily one of categorisation of texts, Beusch argues, tend to ignore the fact that literature itself is a specific genre of language which is distinguishable from other language genres precisely through the presence, or otherwise, of aesthetic form.

The text is the central catalyst for this complex intellectual process, and its quality is vitally important. Phelan (2017) describes the ways in which forms of propositional knowledge can be gained through reading literature, but specifically *aesthetic* knowledge is gained when we experience ourselves, more consciously through the mediation of symbolic forms (both scientific and aesthetic) as the source of all meaning. Thus understood, literature, and its study in schools, entails something different to various instrumentalist conceptualisations which mark contemporary educational policy and professional discourse.

For example, reading certain novels might be associated with increased (but temporary) measures of emotional intelligence, but as Young (2017) points out, this approach ignores the intrinsic value of reading which, in a Leavisite vein, he defines as 'an opportunity for experiences' (p. 11). The important point is to emphasise that the experience to be aimed for is primarily aesthetic. Experiential, personal knowledge plays a constructive role in aesthetic interpretation, but only if it is a starting point from which iterative intellectual and imaginative moves are made in an engagement between author, pupil, text and teacher.

It is this form of interpretative reading that distinguishes reading as a technical exercise from a richer humanistic endeavour. Interpretation is a predicate for producing (as artist) and re-producing (as reader) aesthetic form of knowledge. If taken up, the invitation to constantly move between different levels of meaning and make evaluative judgments concerning both the reconstructed narrative world and our own preconceptions can be powerfully creative and potentially transformative. For example, having experienced empathy at an aesthetic level we do not necessarily become more empathetic in real life, but it is possible that we can approach real life situations with richer inner resources, including empathy. When the judgments and preconceptions we use to navigate lived experience collide with contradictory aesthetic responses, we can be prompted into revising, or indeed re-affirming, some of our everyday precepts. When the judgements and preconceptions we use to navigate lived experience collide with contradictory aesthetic responses, we can be prompted into revising some of our everyday precepts.

An aesthetic model of literature, as noted earlier, requires a lot of teachers: a high level of substantive and disciplinary knowledge of literature. And it requires a lot *for* school teachers in terms of professional trust and autonomy at the level of pedagogy where the general level of pupils' prior *educational and literary* experience also needs to be considered, in conjunction with the selection of texts according to aesthetic merit, and subject-specific pedagogic approaches in the classroom.

Conclusion: wider implications

Through presenting three different levels of analysis: policy context; concrete empirical analysis with implications for the curriculum and pedagogy; and a philosophical case for aesthetic knowledge, I hope to have elucidated some of the socio-cultural and philosophical complexities that lie behind what we understand by literature in the curriculum, and what might be better or worse pedagogic principles for teachers. Through a fine-grained analysis of the language use in examination papers, we can see that a model of literature as an aesthetic symbolic form been missing. The 1957

examination paper, because of its focus on the whole text and broad range of literary skills, was closer to an aesthetic model than the 2011 model, which is marked by a too one-sided focus on either direct personal response, or technique spotting.

The philosophical discussion of aesthetic knowledge suggests that a qualitative improvement in the literature curriculum would require significant changes in the content of teacher education and the direction of education policy more generally. A more capacious understanding of knowledge is required: one where the imagination, central to aesthetic forms of knowledge, is accepted and valued as important and powerful knowledge of human experience and subjectivity. Aesthetic knowledge points to a different idea of experience and its relationship to thought: for educators the question or problem may be less one of how to negotiate between the everyday experiences pupils bring to school and school knowledge, but rather how to render disciplinary knowledge into a meaningful educational experience. If we could do this, we could go some way to making powerful, but abstract, propositional knowledge more meaningful, and thus actualise its power.

Finally, there are two more general claims implied in my account of aesthetic knowledge. First, although it is not structured according to the logical rules or conceptual systems of other forms of knowledge, aesthetic knowledge *is* structured. Second, aesthetic knowledge cannot be conflated with personal or everyday experiential knowledge without entailing an important loss in developing our ability to think abstractly. It could be further argued that an element of abstraction is central for systems of universalist thought and belief, but abstraction does not come only in the form of scientific concepts. If the ability to think abstractly and to imagine more broadly are conducive to holding a temporarily disinterested view (in the sense of placing immediate self-interests/preoccupations and beliefs in the background for a while), then their presence in public life, including education, could be important for social solidarity.

To be sure, social solidarity is a broader project than education alone. However, in as far as education is able to validate and exemplify a disinterested view through the teaching of disciplinary based knowledge in the arts as well as sciences, education could, in the general sense argued by Pickering (1979), contribute to social solidarity.

Notes

1. These examples are based on my longer empirical analysis of exam papers found in [author].

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