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ON PURPOSE: INTEREST, DISINTEREST AND LITERATURE WE CAN LIVE BY

BEN HUTCHINSON

ABSTRACT

The idea of ‘literature we can live by’ crystallizes the paradox of art: defined by its distance from life, it requires, at the same time, proximity to life. We turn to art because it offers a protected space of *disinterested* play – yet we are also profoundly *interested* in its ethical implications. In the words of Rilke’s ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, the work of art – and through its Apollonian patron, literature in particular – tells us that we must change our lives. Ranging widely from antiquity to modernity while highlighting key moments in early modernity and the Enlightenment, this essay identifies a recurring tension between two visions of literature: to be able to comment insightfully on life, it must be apart from it; to be able to respond adequately to life, it must be a part of it. It is not just the metaphors we live by, in other words, but also the metonyms.

Keywords: Comparative literature; disinterest

IN 1940, AT THE VERY DARKEST MOMENT of the darkest of wars, two of the most influential poets of the twentieth century reached strikingly similar conclusions about the role of literature. In his elegy ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’, W. H. Auden famously claimed that ‘poetry makes nothing happen’; in ‘East Coker’, the second of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wearily concurred that ‘the poetry does not matter’.¹ Literature, it would seem, had deferred to life. Read in context, it is perhaps not surprising that even such powerful poets should have felt so powerless: in the teeth of a ‘total’ war, what words could be found? To adapt Theodor Adorno, poetry during Auschwitz must have seemed barbaric.

Zooming out again and viewing such statements within the *longue durée* of cultural criticism, however, what is striking is the presupposition underlying them. Literature is on one side, life on the other: art, when it comes down to it, seems to be irrelevant to existential struggle. Is this the conclusion we must reach when we pull at the seams of the relationship between life and literature: that it all starts to unravel? Is literature more – or less – valuable when it is directly related to lived experience? What is striking, of course, is that both Auden and Eliot decry poetry from within the very context of poetry, thereby negating their own abnegation. Poetry may not matter, yet they continue composing it; literature may make nothing happen, yet they

continue pursuing it. The relationship between life and literature, in other words, is always already slippery, since the creation and reception of literature is animated by a constant tension between the need to repeat life and the need to retreat from it. The text, that is to say, is both mirror and other to its context. To sketch out a cultural history of ‘literature we can live by’, as this essay proposes to do, is to sketch out the dilations of this dialectic, driven above all by the shifting possibilities of the modal verb. What we can or cannot endure determines what we can or cannot express.

If such dilations are as old as antiquity, they are as modern as the Millennium. From global systemic pressures such as Covid-19 and the climate emergency to local academic pressures such as the ‘impact’ agenda in higher education, it has become ever more imperative to consider the real-world applications of literature. The recent boom in ‘bibliotherapy’, in book-based solutions to life-based problems, reflects the contemporary sensitivity to issues of mental health and wellbeing – but it also draws, as we will see in this essay, on a long tradition of textual authority. Underlying all such epistemologies is the idea that literature – understood in its broadest sense as including philosophy as well as prose and poetry – can help us identify and express our blocked emotions. Feel again, feel better.

It will be the argument of this essay, however, that a latent tension remains constant throughout history between two barely articulated visions of literature: to be able to comment insightfully on life, it must be apart from it; to be able to respond adequately to life, it must be a part of it. It is not just the metaphors we live by, in other words, but also the metonyms: in order to be in a position to comment plausibly on existence, literature adopts the perspective of an ‘insider outsider’, an aesthetic part of the existential whole that is our life. The idea of ‘literature we can live by’ crystallizes, in this regard, the paradox of art: defined by its distance from life, it requires, at the same time, proximity to life. We turn to art because it can offer a protected space of *disinterested* play – yet we are also profoundly *interested* in its ethical implications. In the words of Rilke’s ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, the work of art – and through its Apollonian patron, literature in particular – tells us that ‘Du musst dein Leben ändern’ [we must change our lives].²

Establishing the existential ambivalence of literature is thus indispensable to establishing what it means to ‘live by’ literature. The idiom implies not some abstract Heideggerian sense of dwelling in or near writing, but rather a fully embodied consciousness of writing as a compass that can orient us, be it in moral, psychological, political, or personal terms. Literature we can live by is literature we can navigate by; its purpose is to take us out of ourselves and to bring us home again. It is no accident, after all, that the most emblematic of all literary plots describes precisely this process: *The Odyssey* functions as the paradigm of literature *tout court*, not least because it is exemplary of both Classicism and Modernism. James Joyce can live by Homer – modernity can live by antiquity – because myth functions as ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’, to cite Eliot’s celebrated review of 1923.³ This is literature, in other words, by which both writer and reader can orient themselves.

Understood in these terms, mythological writing forms the first and most obvious sense in which literature helps us live. Historically speaking, it underpins all subsequent forms of literature, and indeed much of life: from Homer and Sophocles in antiquity, via Dante and Boccaccio in medieval Tuscany, to Shakespeare and Cervantes in early modernity, the major authors have succeeded in establishing their fictional protagonists as placeholders for factual identity. We see ourselves as Odysseus or Oedipus, as Penelope or Electra; the myth structures the mind, providing an objective correlative to our subjective struggles. Moreover, the process of transference holds true on the macro, as well as on the micro level: Falstaff and Hal exemplify English ebullience, Don Quixote embodies Spanish romance. Notions, in this regard, become nations. The creation of cliché serves as the mark, in one sense, of true literary achievement.

That such achievement has a vestigial religious resonance represents, of course, the ultimate source of its power. The bestselling book in history is both first and final example of literature we can live by. With all its anecdotes and apocrypha, with all its vivid characters and narrative longueurs, the Bible functions as a *vade mecum* of edifying writing. Much of the language we have inherited for understanding literature deviates surprisingly little from this foundational model: our exegesis of privileged texts, our hermeneutics of the canon, all adopt explicitly theological procedures. As George Steiner has notably argued, our very notion of the work of art has a quasi-sacralising force, investing texts or objects with the 'real presences' symbolized by the Eucharist.⁴ This is a monotheistic vision of literature not just for life, but for the afterlife.

The polytheistic legacy of pre-Christian antiquity suggests a less transcendent, more immanent role for writing. The gods guarantee meaning just as much as (the Judaeo-Christian) God does, but it is a meaning focused on this life rather than the afterlife. The Greeks invested their divinities with caprice and cruelty, largesse and love, not just to placate them – propitiation of providence being a prime function of all religious sentiment – but also to scapegoat them, to have them reflect their own drives and defects.⁵ They created the gods, in short, in their own image. Nietzsche grasped this Greek view of tragedy as well as anybody: 'Nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt' [only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence and the world be eternally justified].⁶ Only as literature can life be fully understood.

Such a vision of art suggests the crux of the relationship between literature and life – namely, that it is an expression of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. The Ancients reflected explicitly on this issue; indeed, it is perhaps one of their defining philosophical questions. The two most influential theorists took very different positions on the matter. Plato's desire to ban poets from his Republic was motivated by his mistrust of the mimetic power of literature, the existing examples of which he understood as mere 'representations at the third remove from reality'.⁷ Such an imperious verdict was predicated on his view that life itself is already at a (second) remove from reality, since 'reality' is the world of forms that is inaccessible to mere mortals. For this reason, Plato can declare that 'all the poets from Homer

downwards have no grasp of truth but merely produce a superficial likeness of any subject they treat' – because life itself is a superficial likeness.⁸ To live life by literature would be to distort it still further.

His most famous student took a very different view. Where Plato mistrusts mimesis, Aristotle celebrates it; where Plato is suspicious of the fact that poetry arouses emotion, Aristotle suggests that it exists precisely to evoke it. Whilst the argument about tragedy in the *Poetics* is often reduced to the notion of *katharsis*, it is worth remembering that the cathartic element of tragedy applies only to very specific, negative emotions – seeking 'through pity and fear the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions' – and that in any case the term is only mentioned once in the whole *Poetics*.⁹ So it hardly suffices as the basis for an entire aesthetics. A more promising avenue of enquiry lies in taking a more holistic approach to Aristotle's philosophy, drawing on his *Ethics* as much as on his *Poetics*. For such is surely the key difference between master and pupil: for Plato, the function of literature is epistemological; for Aristotle, it is ultimately ethical. It is not a question of what we can or cannot know so much as of what we can or cannot feel.

In Aristotle's view, then, tragedy – the *akmē* of literature at the time – exists to regulate emotional excess. Such a position implies that it should appeal most to those who require the most regulation; those who 'live by' such literature would seem to be those who are the least adapted to life, otherwise they would be in no need of purification. Whatever the merits of this argument – and Aristotle himself fights to refute it when arguing for the supremacy of tragedy – what is striking is the implicit binary: literature expresses pathos; life expresses ethos. The principal exploration of this latter realm, in Aristotle's work, is obviously in the *Ethics*, much of which is about the pursuit of happiness: as he argues in the opening and closing books of the *Ethics*, *eudaimonia* is the object of human life. Alongside his famous notion of the 'golden mean' – according to which, virtue is to be located in a judicious compromise between deficiency and excess – Aristotle notably argues that the true expression of happiness is self-sufficiency, since it aims 'at no other end beyond itself'. For this reason, he concludes in Book 10, contemplation may be said to be the happiest condition, since 'contemplation would seem to be the only activity that is appreciated for its own sake; because nothing is gained from it except the act of contemplation'.¹⁰

The contrast between the positions articulated in the *Poetics* and the *Ethics* inaugurates, one might say, the history of literature to live by: between pathos and ethos, between suffering and happiness, we look to literature for meaning. But it also brings out the constitutive tension underlying this history from its very inception. On the one hand, literature is to be leaned on and learned from, since it can help purge our emotions and improve us as people (the position, broadly speaking, of the *Poetics*). On the other hand, it exists for its own sake – 'works of art have their merit in themselves' – in a way that would seem to foreclose appropriation (the position, broadly speaking, of the *Ethics*).¹¹ To live by literature, in short, is to instrumentalize non-instrumentalization, to make a purpose out of something that refuses purpose. It is a paradox that will power the development of the discourse.

The reason for this, I want to suggest in this essay, is that the idea of 'literature we can live by' promises to reconcile a long-established antinomy. Already in antiquity, the language associated with the two categories is strikingly binary: time and again, the *vita activa* is contrasted to the *vita contemplativa*, with a recurring emphasis on the latter. The Ciceronian preference for *otium* (leisure) over *negotium* (business) provides perhaps the most celebrated instance of this: the life of the mind is the contemplation devoutly to be wished. The supposed supremacy of this *vita contemplativa* – which Hannah Arendt will later seek to reverse in *The Human Condition* (1958), arguing that it was the *vita activa* that led to the Copernican revolutions of modern science and technology¹² – re-emerges in Late Antiquity in thinkers such as Saint Augustine (354–430) or Boethius (c. 480–524), with their respective credos of self-examination and consolation. By the time of early modernity, their Christian conviction blends with the rediscovery of the classical heritage; the literature to be contemplated is no longer merely biblical but encompasses the full range of the humanist canon.

The tension this implies is obvious. What is the right literary model for life: secular or sacred? Seen from this perspective, dry philological debates are dusted down as urgent existential arguments. The idea of a 'correct' literary style becomes more than merely rhetorical, as it is now taken to express a whole world view.¹³ Perhaps the most celebrated debate of this sort was the so-called Ciceronian controversy in the early sixteenth century. In 1531, Julius Caesar Scaliger published a scathing attack on Erasmus's *Dialogus Ciceronianus sive de optimo dicendi genere* (1528), which had denounced the dominant Ciceronian style in early modern Latin as decadent and unchristian. Scaliger, for his part, maintained the view that Cicero was the exemplary model for good Latin style; others soon followed his lead, including the unfortunate Étienne Dolet, who would be executed in 1546 on account of his supposed atheism. That Dolet is said, on his way to the scaffold, to have composed the immortal pun on his own name *non dolet ipse Dolet, sed pia turba dolet* [Dolet himself does not suffer, but the pious crowd grieves] merely confirms the power of the pentameter. If literature, whether classical or Christian, could be lived by, it could also be died by.¹⁴

No figure is more exemplary of this early modern ambivalence than Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). In the statement he had engraved in Latin above the door to his library, Montaigne explicitly combines the Christian and classical traditions, orthodox and *otium*:

In the year of our Lord 1571, aged thirty-eight, on the day before the calends of March, the anniversary of his birth, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the court [and of] the servitude of the Parlement and public offices, still in the prime of life, retired to the bosom of the learned Virgins, where, in peace and security, he shall spend the days that remain to him to live. May destiny allow him to complete this habitation, this sweet retreat of his ancestors, which he has devoted to his liberty, his tranquillity and his leisure [*otium*].¹⁵

Notwithstanding such popular depictions as Sarah Bakewell's *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (2010),¹⁶ what the essayist seeks, we may infer from his inscription, is a literature to *retire* by. The prerequisite for such an aim is solitude: solitude, Montaigne argues, helps to secure the self. By

setting aside a ‘room at the back of the shop’, we can refocus our thoughts on our own well-being.¹⁷ Yet it is not enough merely to withdraw from society; we must also withdraw ‘from such attributes of the mob as are within us’. The aim of *otium*, in other words, is self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency accrues, however, by way of others. The *Essais* are dotted with – indeed, they are almost defined by – classical references; on almost every page Montaigne has recourse to examples from antiquity. In part, this is because he could count on the shared frame of reference of Renaissance humanism (although he was uncommonly erudite even for those times), a humanism that was equal parts Christian and classical. But it is also because the very nature of his undertaking was fundamentally classical in character. Above all, Montaigne was a Stoic.

If there is one thinker who defines Montaigne’s Stoicism, it is the Roman philosopher Seneca (4 BC–AD 65). Montaigne cites Seneca’s so-called *Moral Epistles* (known in Latin as the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*) no fewer than 298 times in the course of his essays, and even when he is not directly citing him the influence of the Roman thinker on Montaigne’s attitudes to such subjects as suicide or suffering is all too obvious. While Socrates’ life remained the supreme example of the Delphic injunction to ‘know thyself’, for Montaigne the quest for self-knowledge was always an essentially Senecan undertaking, defined as it was by the cultivation of simplicity and humility.

What, though, was the underlying purpose of Montaigne’s ‘essays’ on self-knowledge? It was to make himself, in his own words, a little wiser. In youth, one reads to be clever, he notes; in maturity, to be true. Montaigne reflects on this distinction in an essay entitled simply ‘On Books’.¹⁸ In true Socratic fashion, he holds that what matters is not our (almost inevitable) ignorance about a given topic, but rather our ability to recognize this ignorance. Such true ignorance can be attained, paradoxically, only through knowledge – the knowledge that the major classical authorities pass on to us. In Montaigne’s view, the supreme sources of such wisdom are Plutarch and Seneca, largely because – unlike their contemporaries Cicero or Caesar – they are less interested in writing beautifully than in writing wisely. Wisdom, unlike knowledge, knows its limits. For Montaigne the moralist, in other words, ethics always trumps aesthetics.

Montaigne thus adopts the standard doxa of Renaissance poetics – namely, that true poetry must both ‘delight’ and ‘instruct’ – as his benchmark not only for literature, but also for life. If the terminology is as old as Horace’s *Ars poetica*, with its epochal advice to mix the *dolce* (the delectable) with the *utile*, in Montaigne’s hands the scales tip very firmly towards utility, towards ‘books that use learning not those that trim it up’.¹⁹ Time and again he draws from literature lessons for life, on subjects as varied as cowardice and thumbs, solitude and smells. His view of books, in this regard, is explicitly instrumental.

The irony, however, is that he draws these lessons for life only once he has stopped living life. However much he instructs himself in the *vita contemplativa*, he has little intention of returning to the *vita activa*; the one seemingly precludes – or succeeds – the other. What Montaigne advocates, in short, is not just literature to retire by but literature to retire *from life* by. We may now read Montaigne to learn how to live; he, on

the other hand, reads – as he famously philosophizes – to learn how to die. In true Stoical fashion, he thus reconciles the binary by renouncing it. If he is a key figure in the history of our genre, then, it is precisely because he exemplifies its tensions.

Following Montaigne's more personal response to antiquity, neoclassical views of literature as a theatre of moral instruction reached their apogee in seventeenth-century France. In 1635, Cardinal Richelieu selected 'une société de cinq auteurs' to exemplify his approach to drama as an instrument of edification; literature, in his view, existed to 'instruct' life.²⁰ It is no coincidence, though, that by far the most influential of the five authors quickly demurred. Upon publication of his play *Le Cid* (1637), Pierre Corneille soon found himself embroiled in what became known as *la querelle du Cid*. At the instigation of Richelieu, the Académie Française criticized Corneille's drama on the basis that it did not respect the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action.²¹ Summarizing *Les sentimens de l'Académie Française sur la tragi-comédie du Cid* [*The Feelings of the Académie Française on the Tragicomedy 'Le Cid'*] (1638), Jean Chapelain did his master's bidding in attacking the supposed immorality of the play: presenting his remarks as a response to the Horatian distinction between the *dolce* and the *utile*, Chapelain contends that *Le Cid* 'Se peut dire bonne si l'on regarde seulement ceux qui n'y cherchent que le plaisir' [may be said to be good only if one follows those who merely seek pleasure].²² Corneille neglects, Chapelain claims, the lesson of Aristotle: namely, that literature should help us to regulate our emotions, not to revel in them. That strong-minded authors – and readers – should have sought independence from such orthodoxy is not surprising: by the end of the century, the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* had developed into a running battle over who got to determine not just how to write, but how to live. For such was the notable distinction of neoclassical debates: points of technical detail – the correct use of the unities, the precise meter of the Alexandrine – became proxies for broader questions of moral and intellectual legitimacy. Literary theory, as ever, was also ethical practice.

The eighteenth century retained this view while altering it drastically. As the era of the Enlightenment dawned, a new emphasis on subjectivity began to emerge. Classical authority continued to obtain – not least through the enduring status of Stoicism as the standard model for dispassionate reason – but it was starting to be contested as the final arbiter of meaning. Individual taste, and the very notion of 'taste', was becoming ever more central to the consumption of culture; such consumption – increasingly widespread, increasingly female – created a new cult of 'sensibility'. Particularly notable for our purposes is that this cult coincided with the rise of a specific literary form, namely the epistolary novel. The three major examples in the three major traditions – Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), Rousseau's *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) – responded to (and to some extent created) a new mode of reading, one that encouraged empathy and identification with the fictional heroes and heroines. That they also encouraged over-identification is the stuff of literary legend: 'I verily believe I have shed a pint of tears', declared Richardson's friend Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh on reading *Clarissa*; 'I loved with Werther, suffered with Werther, died with Werther',

declared the playwright J. M. R. Lenz.²³ This was not so much literature to live by as literature to cry by.

Importantly, however, it was the form of the novels that elicited these tears as much as their content, inviting readers to see events from the unmediated perspective of the protagonists. The epistolary novel ‘provided training not only in sympathy but also in empathy’, in the words of one recent historian of the Enlightenment.²⁴ Allowing readers to follow events in real time, it seemed to dissolve the barriers between fact and fiction, culminating in the notorious – although possibly apocryphal – copycat suicides of Werther. That literature and life are very different things did not stop readers from investing in the moral precepts of famous authors: through his treatise *Émile* (1762) the notorious egotist Jean-Jacques Rousseau was held up as a model of enlightened education, despite his endless quarrels and five abandoned children. Literature was increasingly seen as a vehicle of both moral and sentimental instruction, as Adam Smith captures in (the very title of) his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

The poets and romance writers, who best paint the refinements and delicacies of love and friendship, and of all other private and domestic affections, Racine and Voltaire, Richardson, Maurivau[sic] and Riccoboni; are, in such cases, much better instructors than Zeno, Chrysippus, or Epictetus.

Literature, owing to its formal ability to invite sympathy and identification, was now held to cultivate ‘that moderated sensibility to the misfortunes of others’.²⁵

Such formal developments in the novel went hand in hand with formal developments in the theatre. The young *Stürmer und Dränger* rejected the Aristotelean (and by this time, French) model of drama, preferring a Shakespearean model of literature as the free play of the imagination. In the words of Goethe in 1771:

Ich zweifelte keinen Augenblick, dem regelmäßigen Theater zu entsagen. Es schien mir die Einheit des Orts so kerkermäßig ängstlich, die Einheiten der Handlung und der Zeit lästige Fesseln unsrer Einbildungskraft. Ich sprang in die freie Luft und fühlte erst, daß ich Hände und Füße hatte’.²⁶

[I did not hesitate for a moment to distance myself from regular drama. The unity of place seemed to me as claustrophobic as a prison, the unities of plot and time tiresome fetters on our imagination. I leapt into free air and felt for the first time that I had hands and feet of my own.]

If Aristotle’s unities were summarily rejected, so too was his emphasis on high-born characters as the only subjects fit for tragedy. Building on the development of the *comédie larmoyante* (tearful comedy) in the 1730s and 1740s, the emergence of the bourgeois tragedy or *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* saw attention displaced towards humbler, middle-class protagonists; Diderot, in France, and Lessing, in Germany, led the way in introducing ordinary people onto the stage. Lessing, in particular, theorized the emergence of a new kind of drama, arguing against Aristotle that tragedy should *cultivate* our pity rather than cure it: ‘Die Bestimmung der Tragödie ist diese: sie soll unsere Fähigkeit, Mitleid zu fühlen, erweitern’ [The purpose of tragedy is this: to

extend our capacity to feel pity].²⁷ A recognizably modern view of literature, as the expression of ordinary emotion, was beginning to emerge.

All of this suggests, then, that literature demonstrably *was* being lived by much more in the eighteenth century than it had been previously. But it was also increasingly being theorized in ways that took it in the opposite direction, away from the pursuit of passion and compassion. Underlying the expansion of literature's emotional range were more technical developments in the field of aesthetics, or rather in the development *of* the field of aesthetics. Inaugurated by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten with his two-volume study *Aesthetica* (1750–58), aesthetics emerged over the course of the Enlightenment as an object of enquiry in its own right. Moving away from the old Platonic idea of beauty as a property of things or forms, Baumgarten understood aesthetics, to quote the opening paragraph of his study, as '*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*' [the science of sensuous cognition].²⁸ The senses, in other words, were to complement sensibility: aesthetics was to be understood as the realm of subjective truth, with the individual apprehension of art henceforth to be considered as worthy of study on its own terms. Modern art could begin.

It was with the work of Kant, however, that the new field of aesthetics found its most consequential expression. In the third of his three critiques, the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant coined his epoch-making definition of beauty as '*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*' ['purposiveness without purpose'].²⁹ The true work of art, according to Kant, should contain its goal or *telos* within itself; it should require no other external framework of meaning to validate it. The claim would create a climate, that of Romanticism, in which the work of art was understood as self-contained and self-determining: Friedrich Schlegel, to cite perhaps the most influential of all Romantic theorists, understood the ideal artwork as '*Scharf begrenzt, innerhalb der Grenzen aber grenzenlos und unerschöpflich*' [sharply delimited, but within these limits limitless and inexhaustible].³⁰ Kant's claim also, however, created the normative notion of art as 'disinterested', with his hierarchy of the Pleasant, the Good and the Beautiful ascribing degrees of interest from which only the last of the three escapes unscathed: 'We may say that of all these three kinds of satisfaction, that of taste in the Beautiful is alone a disinterested and *free* satisfaction; for no interest, either of Sense or of Reason, here forces our assent.'³¹ Keats' 'negative capability' of 1817, to cite just one strikingly similar expression of this, is a close cousin to Kant's negative purpose, since to engage with literature 'without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' – and here the model is once again Shakespeare – is to resist instrumentalizing it for purposes beyond its own self-sufficiency.³² True poetry, according to Keats (as well as to Hazlitt and other Romantic theorists), should assert no 'palpable design' on us.³³

The relevance to our topic is obvious. Literature to live by, in this Kantian-Keatsian sense, is a self-*un*fulfilling prophecy: in order to be able to offer purchase on life, literature must inhabit a separate realm of disinterest; but as soon as we call on it to help improve life, it becomes part of the same messy stuff of self-interest. The paradox becomes plainer if we look more closely at Kant's phrasing. In Section 15 of the *Critique of Judgement*, he claims that

the Beautiful, the judging of which has at its basis a merely formal purposiveness, i.e. a purposiveness without purpose, is quite independent of the concept of the Good; because the latter presupposes an objective purposiveness, i.e. the reference of the object to a definite purpose.³⁴

With one adjectival swoop, aesthetics are thereby divorced from ethics, since its criteria are now ‘merely formal’ and ‘quite independent’. Literature, by extension, is divorced from life. We must seek interest, in short, without interest.

The trick, then, was to make ethical virtue out of aesthetic necessity, to live by art through learning from art – not (only) in the sense that one can draw edifying conclusions from it, but (also) in the broader sense that the disinterested play of the imagination can itself be experienced as edifying. By far the most important contemporary conceptualization of this was that of Friedrich Schiller, whose letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) mark a key moment in the history of our genre. The aim of Schiller’s letters, in outline, was to use Kantian aesthetics to respond to contemporary politics, most obviously the recent French Revolution which had so shaken late-eighteenth-century Europe. Central to this response was the idea of ‘play’, which Schiller saw as the very essence of art. Autonomous, authentic art, ‘purposeless’ in the Kantian sense, encourages the development of a ‘Spieltrieb’ [‘play-drive’] (§14–16), which in turn powers the development of an ‘ästhetischer Zustand’ [‘aesthetic state’] (§21–23). This state functions as a bridge between the ‘physical state’, in which we are dependent on nature, and the ‘moral state’, in which we master nature (§24). Disinterest in aesthetics thus leads to disinterest in ethics: aesthetic education leads to ethical freedom. Man is now master of himself.³⁵

Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ (1821) offers a variation on this argument from the perspective of the second generation of Romantics. Conceived as a rebuttal to Thomas Love Peacock’s essay ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’ (1820), Shelley’s defence casts poets not only as the guardians of the ‘spirit of the age’, but also as the guarantors of posterity. Importantly, however, they themselves do not consciously agitate for any particular cause – they have ‘little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers’ – but serve merely as conductors of the ‘electric life which burns within their words’. It is their disinterest that guarantees their interest, their ‘unacknowledged’ status in the present that makes possible their putative ‘legislation’ in the future. ‘Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration’, writes Shelley in the penultimate sentence, just before his famous conclusion, ‘the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not’.³⁶ Poets do have impact on life – they ‘legislate’ – but it is indirect and unacknowledged even to themselves.

That such a line of reasoning offers a powerful and attractive argument for the importance of the Humanities, and for that of literature in particular, is clear from its enduring influence. Not only do we live by literature, Schiller suggests, but we also grow by it; not only do poets express the spirit of their age, Shelley claims, but they also look beyond it. It is equally clear, however, that two centuries later we inhabit a different age. Capitalism, for one thing, is so much more entrenched as an

epistemological framework, to the extent that the resistance to instrumentalization at the heart of Schiller's (and Kant's) argument is if anything even more necessary in the twenty-first century than it was in the late-eighteenth. As we flail inextricably in the straitjackets of output and impact, we need the liberating play of literature – and of art more generally – now more than ever. Globalization has also changed our vision of the possibilities of writing: if capital now circulates around the world without borders, so too does the imagination, to an extent barely conceivable in the late Enlightenment.³⁷ The stakes of our aesthetic education have duly been raised: we *can* (and, to whatever extent, we *must*) also draw on works from other cultures and continents. Such, in the twenty-first century, is the ethical lesson of *comparative* literature we can live by.

But then comparative literature, understood as the free play of the mind across borders and traditions, has long drawn on its own dialectic of interest and disinterest, loss and gain. Its emergence as an institutional discipline in the post-war period was determined above all by the experience of exile: a generation of Jewish scholars – Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek et al. – refined their comparative approach to Europe by being driven from it. The exiled condition, as a result, became both a contingent and a conceptual element of literary comparison, both textually and contextually at the heart of the emerging discipline. Literature was the one thing that such scholars could hold onto when driven into exile – while exile, conversely, was the one thing that now defined their view of literature. Auerbach's famous claim, in the epilogue to *Mimesis*, that the book owed its existence to the 'lack of a rich and specialized library' in Istanbul provides the *locus classicus*:³⁸ forced to focus on the primary texts themselves, Auerbach created a comparative canon of major Western works as seen through their style. Literary realism came to substitute for lived reality; high and low modes of writing – from the Christian to the comic, the sublime to the grotesque – alternately emphasized and effaced their distance from actual experience. If Auerbach thereby created a kind of literature to live in exile by, it is perhaps because the exile, more than anyone else, is incapable of living without literature. The refugee seeks refuge in their head.

Returning to this twentieth-century perspective helps us see that the tracks for modernity's interaction with literature, as set in the eighteenth century, led in two directions. On the one hand, the Enlightenment cult of sentimentality elicited an emotional, dependent response to literature, collapsing the distance between literature and life; on the other hand, the Romantic development of post-Kantian aesthetics encouraged an intellectual, independent response to it, cultivating the distance between literature and life, and seeing in this distance the very purpose of art. This twin inheritance descends, like two strands of DNA, through the history of modern writing. The sentimental education (Flaubert's title is telling) of mid-nineteenth-century literature rehearses the 'sentimentality' of the previous century, albeit in realist form; readers identified with the protagonists of the typical *Bildungsroman*, tracking their own lives against the fictional avatar. Stories of Victorians crying over Dickens, for instance, are legion, and recall the affective provocations of the epistolary novel a hundred years earlier. To be sure, the dangers of self-indulgence inherent in

sentimentality were apparent even to contemporary critics: Britain is ‘flooded with a perfect inundation of sentimentality far above anything known or seen before’, thundered one anonymous author in 1867.³⁹ And sentimentality can in any case be emotionally cathartic – to return to our critique of the all-too influential Aristotelian paradigm – without necessarily generating any real-world change. In the nineteenth century as in the twenty-first, the direct ‘impact’ of literature can be overstated.⁴⁰

Yet realist aesthetics nonetheless took the relationship between literature and life – or rather, the fact that there *was* a relationship between literature and life – for granted. Real-world problems were addressed in accessible prose; readers were moved by the fate of their fictional reflections. Compassion – with echoes of its eighteenth-century avatar, empathy – provided the emotional impetus for literature.⁴¹ Naturalism took this impetus a step further in its scientific obsession with social problems such as alcoholism or prostitution. Echoing Émile Zola’s famous declaration that the work of art is ‘un coin de la nature vu à travers un temperament’ [a corner of creation seen through a temperament], Arno Holz’s aim was to reduce the distance between literature and life – ‘Die Kunst hat die Tendenz, wieder die Natur zu sein’ [Art has the tendency to become nature once again] – to as little as possible, culminating in the mathematical formula ‘Art = Nature – X’.⁴² X marked the spot where literature and life were to meet.

Running alongside such sentimental education, however, there remained the aesthetic education offered by supposedly autonomous art. If realism – and a fortiori naturalism – was profoundly *interested* in life, art for art’s sake defined itself as proudly *disinterested*. The ‘Romantic agony’ at the beginning of the century, to cite the English title of Mario Praz’s celebrated study, culminated in the Symbolism and Decadence at the end of the century: life was to become literature, rather than literature life.⁴³ If all art aspired to the condition of music, in Walter Pater’s era-defining phrase, then all life now aspired to the condition of literature. Earnest affirmations of sentimentality were derided; rather than crying over Dickens, one was now to distance oneself from him. In Oscar Wilde’s telling *bon mot*, one would have to have had a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell. Sentimentality, in short, had given way to irony.

That these two strands continued to descend into the twentieth century is easy enough to demonstrate. Didactic, often overtly political literature took the ‘interested’ model to its logical conclusion: Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* are no doubt the *locus classicus* of this model, but examples abound from both the left-wing (social realism, Sartre’s *littérature engagée*) and the right-wing (conservative writers from Ernst Jünger to Céline). Much of modernism, conversely, advocates the disinterested model, whatever the politics of the individuals concerned: from Surrealism to Expressionism, from movements such as Imagism to techniques such as stream of consciousness, the avant-garde emphasis on form over content asserts the primacy of art over experience, literature over life. ‘BLAST their weeping whiskers’, thundered Wyndham Lewis in 1914, not uncharacteristically, about Victorian notions of art – ‘hirsute RHETORIC of EUNUCH and STYLIST – SENTIMENTAL HYGIENICS’.⁴⁴ More recent styles of writing play out the same dialectic, albeit with the roles

increasingly reversed: 'interest' now inheres in the formal strategies – from the magical realism of late-twentieth-century postmodernism to the multilingualism of twenty-first-century world literature – as much as it does in the content. Critical trends have followed suit, with a return, following the impersonal approaches of structuralism and post-structuralism, to a more personal engagement with literature as lived experience – as autofiction or 'affective turn' – in the new millennium. *Logos* has given way to *ethos*: in our globalized, pressingly political world, disinterest has come to seem a luxury few can afford.

What is striking as one traces this duopoly ever closer to the present, however, is the extent to which it merges with value judgements regarding the worth of literature. The *interested* view of writing, whereby the reader seeks to identify with the characters and events of stories, comes to be perceived as a middle-brow, mass-market ideology; the *disinterested* view of writing, whereby the reader distances herself from plot and sentiment, privileging form over content, becomes ever more high-brow and elitist. That these value judgements are themselves, of course, inescapably contingent could be illustrated by any number of further examples, but it has been amply demonstrated by our historical survey. We live by literature in different ways at different times, not only because we privilege different ideas at different times but also because the very idea of 'literature' is itself contingent. That we now take it to mean literary writing of a certain quality may seem self-evident to us, but it is by no means the historical norm, excluding as it does much that used to fall under the term in the past (philosophy, economics, history, etc.). It is only really as we reach the threshold of the Enlightenment that a recognizably modern understanding of literature emerges, as humanist erudition gives way to human emotion and predetermined classical references give way to an increasingly democratized, increasingly individual reflection of lived experience. If the 'realism' of the Middle Ages, to put it in the scholastic terms proposed by Terry Eagleton, cedes place to the 'nominalism' of modernity,⁴⁵ one of the principal ways it does so is by nominating literature as a particular mode of emotional expression.

One thing that remains constant, however, is the threshold position of literature as an 'insider-outsider'. Inside our lived experience as it necessarily is, by the same token literature seeks a perspective outside our experience in order to gain purchase on it. That there is ultimately no Archimedean point from which to do so is the reason why, for all its transhistorical consistencies, writing remains a messy, contingent thing. Constructing a history of our changing 'interest' in literature is thus imperative, since it helps us to see that our view of it depends on our ideological commitments. From the classical to the contemporary era, from early modernity to late modernity, the ways in which we live by literature have always depended on the ways in which we conceive it. The meaning of a work of literature is a function, that is to say, of the meaning of literature, of the role that we ascribe to it in improving, enriching and enlightening our lives. Poetry *does* make things happen, *pace* Auden, but the mode of its happening – interested or disinterested, political or apolitical – depends on our view of it in the first place. Do we prioritize *pathos* or *ethos*, self or other? If the notion of 'literature we can live by' provides a means to reconcile this binary through that third

musketeer, *logos*, it can only do so if we are fully apprised of its paradoxes, of what it can and cannot express. The modal verb ‘can’, to return to our starting point, is as important as the nouns ‘literature’ and ‘life’, since it expresses the parameters of possibility for the relationship between them. In order to be able to live by literature, in short, we require a differentiated, historicized sense of what literature means for life, of the ways in which it oscillates between reflecting and resisting our own search for meaning. To reflect on how we can live by literature is to reflect, in the final analysis, on purpose.

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NOTES

¹ W. H. Auden, *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 50; T. S. Eliot, ‘Four Quartets’, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, 2 vols (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), I, p. 187.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘Archaischer Torso Apollos’, in *Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, ed. by Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1996–2003), I (1996), p. 513. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are my own.

³ T. S. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, *The Dial* (November 1923), 480–84 (repr. in *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robert Deming, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), I, pp. 268–71 [p. 270]).

⁴ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).

⁵ For the classic argument about such scapegoating mechanisms, see René Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik*, in *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. by Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1954), III, p. 39.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 340.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), 49b27f.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. by J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), pp. 329–30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹² See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1998), esp. Chapter 1.

¹³ Such, of course, is the premise of Erich Auerbach’s masterpiece of comparative literature, *Mimesis* (1946).

¹⁴ For an account of the Ciceronian controversy – as well as the anecdote about Dolet – see Marc Fumaroli, *L’Âge de l’éloquence* (Geneva: Droz, 1980, repr. 2009), pp. 92–115.

¹⁵ Cited from Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 197.

¹⁶ See Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010).

¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne, 'On Solitude', in *The Complete Essays*, ed. and trans. by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 266–78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ On Richelieu's view of drama as 'un véritable outil de propagande politique' [a veritable propaganda tool], see Catherine Guillot, 'Richelieu et le théâtre', *Transversalités*, 117.1 (2011), 85–102.

²¹ For an overview of the debate, see M. Amelia Klenke, 'The Richelieu-Corneille Rapport', *PMLA*, 64.4 (1949), 724–45.

²² Jean Chapelain, *Les Sentimens de l'Académie française sur la tragi-comédie du Cid*, ed. by Georges Collas (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1912), pp. 9–10.

²³ Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh, Letter of 6–11 January 1749, cited from T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 224. J. M. R. Lenz is cited from Stuart Atkins, *The Testament of Werther in Poetry and Drama* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 68.

²⁴ Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680–1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 324.

²⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 165. For more on Smith's theory of moral sentiments, see Robertson, *The Enlightenment*, pp. 268–72, where this passage is cited.

²⁶ J. W. von Goethe, 'Zum Schäkesspears Tag' (1771), in *Berliner Ausgabe. Kunsttheoretische Schriften und Übersetzungen* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verl., 1960–), XVII: *Schriften zur Literatur* (1970), p. 185.

²⁷ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Letter to Friedrich Nicolai, November 1756, in *Werke*, ed. by Karl Eibl and Herbert Georg Göpfert, 8 vols (Munich: C. Hanser, 1970–79), IV: *Dramaturgische Schriften* (1973), p. 162.

²⁸ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik: die grundlegenden Abschnitte aus der 'Aesthetica' (1750/58)*, ed. by Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1983), p. 3.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), §15. For the original German, see Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, ed. by Karl Vorländer (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1922), p. 66.

³⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäumfragmente* 297, in *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958–), II, Part 1 (1967), p. 215.

³¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §5.

³² John Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22 December 1817, in *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Horace Elisha Scudder (Boston, MA; New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899), p. 277.

³³ John Keats, Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818, *ibid.*, p. 285.

³⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §15.

³⁵ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), references given to letter numbers in the paragraph.

³⁶ All quotations from Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Selected Prose Works* (London: Watts, 1915), pp. 75–118 (p. 118).

³⁷ Such is the thrust of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³⁸ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 557.

³⁹ 'Nineteenth Century Sentiment', *Saturday Review*, 24 (2 November 1867), 561–66 (p. 561).

⁴⁰ For a critique of Victorian notions of sentimentality, see Carolyn Burdett, 'Introduction: Sentimentalities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16.2 (2011), 187–94.

⁴¹ For a critique of the relationship between empathy and sentimentality, see Carolyn Burdett, 'Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16.2 (2011), 259–74.

⁴² Arno Holz, *Die Kunst. Ihr Wesen und ihre Gesetze* (Berlin: Wilhelm Issleib [Gustav Schuhr], 1892), p. 90.

⁴³ See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951).

⁴⁴ Wyndham Lewis, 'Manifesto – I', *Blast*, 1 (1914), 11–29 (p. 13).

⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), especially pp. 1–18.