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Delivering the Undeliverable: Teaching English in a University Today

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ABSTRACT

In UK universities, English has seen a steep fall in admissions, in the context of a general decline in humanities enrolments and changes to the school curriculum which have turned students away from the subject. This article explores what teaching English in a university means in these difficult times. It asks: what actually happens in an English class? What do students learn? And why is it so hard to make the case for English, to find a form of words in today's educational vocabulary that will convince sceptics of its value? The subject's declining status is part of a more general sense that technological change and the free market have answered all the key questions about what skills we need to learn and how we should live our lives. We frame the delivery of teaching in terms suggested by technology and the market – as a frictionless process with a predictable and measurable outcome. This does not sit well with the untidily human, stochastic, accretive nature of humanities teaching. And yet the skills of close reading cultivated in literary study can teach students to plot a course through contemporary life. They can help them to navigate a digitized, online, data-driven world whose meanings and values are filtered through unexamined words and unacknowledged stories.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty-five years, I have taught English Literature in an English university. For much of that time, I have done my job with an absent-minded, self-contented, ill-defined sense of its intrinsic worth. Reading, talking, and writing about literature seemed to me an obvious source of pleasure, instruction and enlightenment. The rituals of the university year, the eternal pull of timetables and deadlines, the always reassuring sight of students diligently taking notes while I spoke, the confirming solidity of the buildings and the hordes of people loitering in and flowing purposefully along them – all these offered existential certainty, the feeling that what I did was useful, perhaps indispensable.

Recently, though, this sense of certainty has evaporated. English has seen a steep decline in undergraduate admissions – part of a broader decline in the proportion of students studying humanities subjects since 2012, as austerity and higher fees have driven more career-specific choices. The COVID-19 lockdowns had a similar impact in academia as they did in other workplaces, pulling apart the scaffolding of daily routines and forcing us to reinvent our jobs in ad hoc and unsettling ways. This overlapped with, and added to, a mood of suspicion towards universities in political and public life. Universities, in this dispiriting caricature, were havens of hidebound practices, woke politics and deplatforming. And now they were fleecing students, expecting them to pay thousands of pounds in fees and rent to sit in study-bedrooms and be taught online for a few hours a week. This caricature, while rooted in the practical issues of lockdown, had a wider political subtext. The government had signalled that the long expansion of higher education since the 1960s was over. The accompanying mood

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music was a series of sideswipes at arts and humanities courses at lower-ranking institutions. In early 2021 the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson spoke of 'slashing the taxpayer subsidy for such subjects as media studies' and urged universities to focus on addressing skills gaps instead of 'pushing young people on to dead-end courses that give them nothing but a mountain of debt'.1 English had a more serious problem: falling enrolments in schools. Secondary-school teachers of English attribute this decline to the governmentdriven focus in schools on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). They find it increasingly hard to convince students and their parents of the point of studying literature when education is seen mainly as a route to specific kinds of career. 'A lot of the time they're looking too many steps ahead', one teacher said.2

Many English teachers also blame the new General Certificate of Secondary Educations (GCSEs) introduced in 2015 as part of sweeping changes by the then Education Secretary Michael Gove. Gove, an English graduate, saw English teaching as intellectually lightweight, lacking factual rigour and focusing too much on student experience and generic skills at the expense of prescribed knowledge. Persuaded by E. D. Hirsch's work on cultural literacy, he believed that students should be taught canonical texts with high cultural capital. He also believed that, like History, the subject of English should foster a sense of national identity and pride. At the Conservative Party Conference in 2010, in his first speech as Education Secretary, Gove said that students should learn 'the great tradition of our literature' which was 'the best in the world—it is every child's birthright'.3

The new, compulsory GCSE in English Language adopted a complex and technical approach to language construction, with a dense linguistic terminology. The new, optional GCSE in English Literature demanded that students study 'the best that has been thought and written' and learn to 'appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage'.4 The prescribed content of the new syllabus had four elements: a Shakespeare play, a nineteenth-century novel, a selection of poetry since 1789 including the Romantics, and fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards. This last segment replaced a previous requirement to study 'literature from other cultures'. All texts on the syllabus had to be originally in English. More significant than course content, perhaps, was the methodology. There was now a much greater stress on memorizing facts and quotes from literary texts, part of an overall move from coursework to closed-book exams across all subjects.

In an already STEM-friendly environment, these GCSEs have turned students away from English.5 A 2020 report by the National Association for the Teaching of English found that they were discouraging students from studying English at A-level. Fifty-eight percent of English teachers said that their students found the GCSEs unrewarding, and 52% said that they found them unrewarding to teach.6 The numbers confirm it. In 2012, English was the most popular A-level, with 90,000 students taking it. In summer 2021, 57,000 students took it – a fall of more than a third. By the January application deadline in 2021, 7045 18-year-olds in the UK had applied to study English at university – a fall of almost a third, from 10,740 in 2012. The decline in undergraduate admissions correlates closely with the decline in students taking English A-level.7
At least this more hostile habitat has made me less complacent, forcing me back to first principles. What is English for? And why is it so hard to make the case for it, to find a form of words in today's educational vocabulary that

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will convince sceptics of its value? The traditional line of defence is that English teaches useful, real-world skills, producing graduates who are accomplished writers, fluent communicators and creative thinkers equipped to service a flexible knowledge economy. Few English lecturers would disagree with this, and students understandably care about these instrumentalist benefits. When a university education costs so much, its consumers expect a clear prospectus and guaranteed product, an unimpeded throughline from action to outcome. But this focus on a throughline also narrows our vision. It implies that technological change and the free market have satisfactorily answered all the key questions about what skills we need to learn and how we should live our lives. Its story about what English is for does not fit with the messier reality of what goes on in an English classroom. The mismatch lies at the heart of the crisis of declining recruitment and plummeting morale in the subject.

Teaching Attention

This is not a radically new idea. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, modern Western pedagogic common sense has long seen learning as the act of crossing a threshold. You didn't know something, then you learnt it, and now you know it. In Eastern philosophies of pedagogy, in contrast, Sedgwick writes, 'to go from knowing something to realizing it ... is seen as a densely processual undertaking that can require years or lifetimes'. Japanese Buddhist teaching, for instance, seeks to shake the student into the awakening known as satori, of something they may already 'know' but have not 'realized'. In the western tradition, however, 'learning the same thing again makes as much sense as getting the same pizza delivered twice'.

Since the market-led reforms that began in the Thatcher era, schools and universities have been ever more closely monitored and regulated. Teaching quality must now be constantly evaluated and evidenced in performance data. A single word has migrated from the business world into education and become ubiquitous: delivery. With its root sense of handing over a physical thing, the word delivery reassures us, and our auditors, that something real and solid has passed intact from teacher to student, like a parcel being handed over to its addressee Nowadays pizzas are delivered via apps that require the customer only to swipe and prod a smartphone. These apps work by eliminating customer 'pain points' – tiny nuisances, such as having to ring up a takeaway or handle cash, on the way from order to delivery. Interactive technology and a consumer-facing market make us think of delivery as a goal to be reached as seamlessly as possible. The stock phrases and daily rituals of our online lives reinforce this. Thank you for your order. Your estimated delivery date is indicated below. Your item will be delivered today: track your package here. Your item has been delivered. How was your delivery?

Apps and wearable technology score us on how well we are delivering on our own self-set goals. My pedometer has a stick figure that raises its hands aloft if on a single day I complete 10,000 steps – a suspiciously round number of dubious scientificity that the Japanese company Yamesa promoted in the 1960s to sell its manpo-kei pedometer. Many interactive platforms, from exercise equipment to language learning apps, use leaderboards, digital trophies and achievement badges as rewards for delivering results. This migration of video-game methods to the wider world is called gamification. Gamification persuades us that life is like a video game – that getting better at anything means passing through a series of pre-planned levels of increasing difficulty. By making promissory notes to ourselves and

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delivering on those promises, we learn to be better, healthier, more useful and industrious citizens.

More and more, we frame the delivery of teaching in these terms – as a frictionless process with clear and measurable outcomes. Since the late 1990s, it has been common in schools for teachers to write the WALTs and WILFs on the board at the start of a lesson. WALT stands for 'We are learning to', which explains the lesson objectives, and WILF means 'What I'm looking for', which explains the lesson outcomes. University lecturers are also required to frame their teaching in this way, as a see-through, monodirectional process from start to finish. Each module's aims and learning outcomes must be approved by quality assurance processes before that module is taught. The student travels on a pathway through their degree, achieving progression through the levels and a state of graduateness at the end of it.

The arts and humanities subjects struggle to turn what they do into this story of delivery and data that corroborates that story. Most English lecturers end up trying to quantify the ineffable, converting it into some diluted or semi-fictionalized form that bureaucratic and IT systems will recognize. Fintan O'Toole has argued that, faced with the monolithic power of the Catholic Church in Ireland up until the 1980s, ordinary, unholy Irish people became 'masters of ingenious hypocrisy', this being 'the tribute realism paid to piety'. English lecturers under the current regime must practise a similar mental gymnastics. As in theocratic Ireland, this 'way of ambiguity and unknowing, of dodging and weaving around reality' is not a threat to the status quo but 'a homage to [its] stability and durability'. Behind the ingenious hypocrisy lies the reality that dare not be spoken. In English, learning is not a linear journey with a finish line that can be seen from the start. It is accretive. It begins by drawing on the student's initial response to a text and then challenges, enlarges and deepens it. This gradual layering on of more insight, awareness and depth does not fit the metaphor of delivery.

An English degree is hard to sell to the unconverted because the skills it cultivates and refines are ones the student already has. An English lecturer is not trying to deliver a parcel of learning so much as making the student aware of the parcel they already possess and showing them how to unwrap it. Most people cannot do computer coding or quantitative data analysis; most of them can read and write. But we do these basic skills with hugely varying degrees of virtuosity, and we get better at them incrementally and endlessly. In Patrick Collier's phrase, English teaches 'advanced literacy': the student learns to read texts with ever-greater subtlety and care.

The most important skill developed on an English degree is the capacity to pay attention. 'Human beings have poor peripheral vision', Siri Hustvedt writes. 'Details vanish because we cannot focus on everything at once ... a donut takes on a charm when we are hungry that it doesn't have when we are not hungry ... We, all of us, are prone to these debilitating forms of blindness.'11 We are unaware of how badly we pay attention, being naturally inattentive to our own inattentiveness. We are unmindful of and incurious about the vast number of things that make up the world, because our nervous systems, as with all animals, receive more stimulus than they can process. Our attention is drawn to intense stimuli such as bright lights, strong colours, loud noises and rapid motion. That is why living so much of our lives online risks unbalancing our attention. The web's attention economy directs us towards the shoutiest, most polarizing and most attention-seeking content. Humans are social and

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mimetic beings, so attention is contagious. We pay attention to the things that others pay attention to, believing that there is some epicentre of importance to which our attention should gravitate. What we pay attention to then enters our working memories and mental habits, blocking out other stimuli.

Careful reading offers a corrective to this kind of dispersed or lopsided attention. The study of literature trains the attention, teaching us to be better noticers of life and the world. A lecture or seminar also has a certain duration that must be endured together. It teaches students to be truly present and attentive to the chosen text and to each other. The French thinker and mystic Simone Weil believed that paying full attention was the most elementary and most ignored of all human obligations, 'the greatest of all efforts' and 'the rarest and purest form of generosity'.12 Teaching's fundamental aim, for Weil, was to train the attention. It was our best hope of contemplating the world as it is, not as it appears through the clouded lens of the self or the cant and categorical thinking of society. By attending to the same thing patiently over time, Weil writes, 'illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible'.

Pouring our scarce attentional resources into careful reading feels especially important in an era so oversupplied with words. We read and write more than at any time in history. The word processor has turned almost everyone into a typist; the mobile phone is used as much for texting as for speaking; and the business model of the internet relies on the constant creation and dissemination of free content. Content is one of those newly inescapable words, like delivery, which tell us something about our own culture's shifting values. Most online newspapers and magazines monetize their free content by commuting page hits into advertising revenue or enticing people to pay for paid content. The rest of us are content providers by default. Just by sending a tweet or commenting below an article, we become a tiny part of the vast computational machine and its insatiable appetite for harvestable data.
Our culture's hunger for computable information means that words are more likely be seen as mere containers for data, as unremarkable building blocks assembled into 'content'. Writing, unlike many other cultural forms, can be scanned quickly. 'Nobody would expect to play a piece of music at twice the speed of the score and be able to enjoy it', Jeanette Winterson wrote in the early days of the internet. 'Yet, in literature this is happening all the time.'14 Since then, touchscreens designed for the uninterrupted ingestion of data have made swiping, skimming and scrolling a normal part of our reading habits. Reading is something done quickly to extract the 'takehome' or 'takeaway' lesson of the content.

Literary study obliges us to slow down and give words the attention they deserve and require. Brought up with and acclimatized to the ever-expanding sea of verbiage online, the students we teach have an innate but largely dormant sense of the power of words. Most of them will have worried about making their words fit for publication on social media, and will know how even a single tweet can burnish or destroy a public reputation. A text message will have left them feeling angry, tearful or ecstatic, or stirred them to decipher it with the care and patience of a biblical exegete. (Was that full stop inserted after the word 'fine' passive-aggressive or innocuous?) But most of them still think what our culture persuades them to think – that it is not the words, but their authors, that possess this colossal power to move, hurt, deceive, anger and enchant others.

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Poems are good ways of steering students away from this habit of mining words for their content. Our online literary economy always favours the production of more words, preferring content to its absence. Poets, like Quakers, know that words have more power when they break into silence and then return to it. Poems differ from other forms of writing in their lack of static or redundancy. The words only reluctantly intrude into the white space around them. Poems teach students something they already know but haven't fully realized: that writing is made of words and nothing else. A poem is not a 'take' on something; it cannot be distilled or separated from itself.

One of the hardest things to convince students is that poems are about what they say they are about – that the moose in Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Moose', for instance, may not be a symbol or metaphor so much as a great big hulking moose, seven feet tall at the shoulder, seen on the moonlit tarmac of a Canadian road with a fierceness of gaze only possible in a poem of twenty years' gestation. A poem is less a message than a recreation of lived experience that bypasses packageable ideas and arguments. Poems are not codes to be cracked; they allow us to both notice the world and to see how much that noticing percolates through words.

Students learn the same useful lesson – that words generate as well as describe our reality, when they look at how words form into stories. Every human system – religion, money, the law, constellations of stars, lines of latitude and longitude on the earth – demands that we swallow its story. In a contemporary culture that prizes self-expression and interactivity, we think of stories as a simple social good to be shared widely. Websites and broadcast media, in search of user-generated content, often carry such entreaties: Why not share your story with us? We'd love to hear your stories! But not all stories are healthy or helpful. 'What knits together out of nothing, and yet is solid enough to declare that it is so, recommends itself to us', Francis Spufford writes. '... In this lies the power, and the danger, of stories.

In a content-heavy world, most of us have neither the time nor the inclination to read carefully the countless stories that give meaning to our lives. So these human-made things, stories, come to seem separate from ourselves. We grant them a false autonomy, a self-governing life outside of ourselves and our human compulsion to make meaning. They become information, according to the mathematical definition of that word – the abstraction of useful data from reality. But any piece of information is also a story, from the Latin informare, 'to give form or shape to', to fashion or arrange in a certain way.

A story is a mental device for making disparate things cohere into a narrative line. To convince, it must exclude or obscure all the incoherent, awkward bits that do not fit the story. The forward momentum of a story narrows our attention, rather as an aniseed-coated mechanical hare narrows the attention of a greyhound as it races around the track. By fixating on teaching as delivery, for instance, we direct our gaze at a finishing line we have drawn ourselves so that only part of the story of learning gets told.

An English degree teaches students how to read stories – often by focusing on the made-up stories that have a special dispensation to lie in return for telling a different kind of truth. Through them, students learn to handle stories with care, not just to accept without question their declared intentions and surface features. They get better at uncovering their hidden

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architecture, their fault lines and absences, and the significances buried in seemingly minor characters and trivial details.
In Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir The Woman Warrior, her mother says that the difference between sane people and mad people is that 'sane people have variety when they talk-story' and 'mad people have only one story that they talk over and over'.16 The words we read online can sometimes drive us mad, by telling us the same story over and over. As we share and like the things we agree with, the data-mining algorithms keep showing us more content like that, confirming all our presumptions. Or we encounter alternative voices mainly in the form of 'hate-reading' – reading things just to be angry with them and to chastise and dismiss.

English students learn that they cannot escape this storytelling impulse, still less find some objective standpoint outside of it where they can definitively decide which stories are true and which are false. There are too many stories and too many ways of reading the same story. What they can start to see, however, is that every story, and every way of reading a story, is a different version of reality. They can search for what Laurence Scott calls 'a sustainable, shared hallucination' – a thriving and biodiverse ecosystem of stories, where no one story is so dominant as to stifle or strangle the others.

Wisdom Work
The worth of an English degree is hard to compute because it deals with big and ultimately unfathomable questions about the meaning of life. Human beings, the philosopher Martin Ha¨gglund notes, 'are the only species on earth that do not know how they are supposed to live'.18 How we live our lives is always in question, however much those unanswerable nouns like content and delivery tell us that the question has been answered. Literature is about the important things a life contains – love, friendship, family, faith, work, war, loss, ageing, death, grief – and how we make meaning out of or in defiance of them all. Literary study thus naturally bleeds into what Old Testament scholarship calls 'wisdom work.
The student-facing language of the contemporary university is relentlessly upbeat. In official communications and extra-curricular events, students are repeatedly urged to follow their dreams, bounce back from failure, defeat impostor syndrome, build their confidence and learn resilience. Behind this well-meaning but platitudinous positivity, with its progress myths and redemptive arcs drawn from the self-help and personal growth industries, lies the marketization of education. A market must always claim to be selling something that will make the buyer happier or more satisfied. A culture steeped in free market values wants us to believe that everyone who works hard and wants something enough will be rewarded, that we are always on the way to becoming our best selves and living our best lives.

English can teach a more authentic and resilient understanding of 'resilience'. The measure of worth in a marketized environment where students pay fees – which, in the UK, are among the highest in the world – is student satisfaction. But studying literature is not about satisfying students. Often it is about disconcerting and discomposing them, if only temporarily. An English degree gives a student the time and space to read things that are weird, unwieldy, knotty, annoying and even boring. It can jolt them out of the feelgood arcs of crisis, healing and closure that pervade the wider culture. They might learn from Shakespeare's sonnets that love is simultaneously elevating and shame-inducing, or from his tragedies that not all human quandaries are redeemable or escapable. Middlemarch might teach them that the epic lives

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we imagine for ourselves peter out into regret and disappointment. Chekhov's stories – which taper off as if unfinished, or feature protagonists who have dramatic epiphanies and then swiftly relapse into their old ways – show them that life rarely yields 'learnings'. Beckett reminds them that words only partly fill the silence and confusion that divides us all.
Literary study deals not in solutions but in enriching complications. It offers students no short cut to empathetic connection, no instant echoing of their own lives. It shows them that it is not so easy to solve the puzzle of life carries on being beautiful and meaningful even as it remains unfair and unfixable. It then asks them to wrestle with these intractabilities in writing, a process of constant cutting and revision that they will find frustrating, stressful and even painful. This demands real resilience.

By learning how to read and write about literature, they learn how to live – but in a circuitous way which recognizes that literature and life are not the same. In the American educator Rudine Sims Bishop's formulation, books can be windows, sliding glass doors and mirrors. The windows offer 'views of the world that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange'. These windows are also sliding doors that readers can 'walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author'. And in the right sort of light, the window/sliding door becomes a mirror in which we see ourselves. Literature 'transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience'.

Bishop's analogy is still more fertile when you consider that neither windows nor mirrors offer first-hand access to reality. Windows can be smeared with grime, misted over or cracked, and, like paintings and photographs, they only allow us to see what is inside their frame. The same is true of mirrors, which warp and deceive in other ways. Even a plane mirror seems to reverse our image and, uncannily, lets us see ourselves through the looking glass, in a different place from where we know we are. Literature, too, invites us into a contiguous world adjoining ours, familiar-seeming but as ineluctably other as a dream, and made only of words. The long work of literary study is about bridging this tantalizing and ultimately unbridgeable gap between word and world.

In his book Romeo and Juliet in Palestine, Tom Sperlinger shows how literary texts can speak to students even when they seem quite remote from their own lives. Sperlinger writes about the semester in 2013 that he spent teaching literature at Al-Quds University in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Jerusalem should be a twenty-minute drive from the campus, but because of the separation wall, visible from the main gate, it takes students who live there an hour and a half to get to class, through checkpoints that can close at any time. The teaching is a challenge. Sperlinger and his students are crammed into a tiny room and the classes are disrupted by evacuations and teacher walkouts. The students want to learn the English language, not literature, and often do not do the set reading (in common with students everywhere).

And yet still they manage to come up with readings of Shakespeare that illuminate the reality of their own lives. They instinctively understand the vacuum of political authority in Julius Caesar. They take Marcellus's judgment that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' literally, the West Bank streets being full of uncollected rubbish. And they read Romeo and Juliet through the problems they face when crossing checkpoints or falling in love with

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people with different ID cards. Shakespeare offers them not so much a mirror as a traversable distance – 'a space to reflect on their lives, without seeming to do so'.
Sperlinger's first job after getting his PhD, in 2002, was teaching on an access course in Liverpool. One of his students worked as a dinner lady at a private school, and she had signed up for the course because she got fed up watching the students she served go off to university while she stayed put. But she was struggling on the course. She found it hard to draw on her personal experience when discussing texts, because, she said, she had 'just spent a year being told not to write "I think"'We should try harder, Sperlinger argues, to help students like this, from non-traditional backgrounds, to bring what they know and feel with them into the classroom. Universities 'need the abrasion of different worlds of experience, in which ideas are brought to the test of life'.21 Sperlinger alights here on the most straightforwardly rewarding part of an English lecturer's job. It is when the communal act of reading comes together with the life experiences of those in the classroom, and both the text and the room's occupants are transformed.

This approach to teaching English is now under threat. Robert Eaglestone argues that the key impulse behind the reform of GCSE English is scientism, 'the mission-creep of scientific ideas from their right realm to a wider world'.22 The new curriculum stresses the mastering of a technical vocabulary; reductive applications of historical context; and 'feature spotting' or 'labelling', drilling students to identify literary features. Such a tick-box approach, Eaglestone argues, is ill-suited to a discipline dedicated to exploring questions of meaning, judgment and value. It undermines the central pursuit of literary studies, which is to help students marry their own creative response to a text with the subject's discipline-specific skills and interpretive traditions.

This enforced transformation of our discipline has happened – and not coincidentally – alongside a narrowing of the gene pool in English classrooms. The introduction of tuition fees led to falling enrolments on the kind of access course that Sperlinger taught on, and declining numbers of mature and part-time students at university. The most devastating effect on university enrolments in English, meanwhile, has been in former polytechnics like my own, with more socially diverse student cohorts. Since the government ended student number controls in 2013, high-ranking universities have been able to make up shortfalls in humanities admissions by relaxing entry requirements and taking students who would have previously gone to the post-1992s. The trend is consistent with two elements of government policy. First, fees should increase competition and curb artificial demand, even at the expense of the closure of unpopular courses and universities. Second, social mobility is best achieved through a small number of clever, poorer children attending the elite universities, or what newspapers across the political spectrum now routinely call the 'good' universities (not prestigious or even best, but good).

The government's definition of a 'good' university course is one where the size of its tuition fees correlates with the size of salary a graduate of that course can command. This inevitably favours the elite universities, especially since, with a greatly increased stock of graduates, employers have fallen back on traditional university rankings as an easy way of sifting job applications. The new fees regime, as Peter Mandler argues, is far more than a method of funding universities. It aims to sharpen the student consumer's knowledge of the market, create competition between institutions and curb demand for university places.24 The logical

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outcome is 'market exit': the closure of unsustainable courses and, perhaps, entire universities (not the 'good' ones). The knowledge-rich syllabus of Gove's English GCSEs is consistent with this policy. One of its key purposes is to allow a small minority of bright working-class children to acquire the cultural capital traditionally associated with an elite education so that they have a shot at attending the 'good' universities.

There is little evidence to support this current orthodoxy that the meritocratic rationing of elite education will help to drive social mobility. The last three decades have seen a big rise in the number of students in higher education in the UK. But participation continues to be sharply divided according to race and class. The much smaller increase in the number of working class and black and ethnic minority students has been heavily concentrated in the former polytechnics and non-Russell group universities. The poet Caleb Femi's brief career as an English teacher offers one telling version of how this new orthodoxy plays out in a classroom setting. Femi was raised on the same block of the North Peckham estate where his near contemporary, Damilola Taylor, bled to death in a stairwell in 2000. As a teenager, his poetic instincts were roused by listening to grime artists such as Skepta, Wiley and Dizzee Rascal on pirate radio and mimicking them by writing 12-bars. Only when he studied A-level English did he become interested in other kinds of poetry. In Eliot's The Waste Land he found echoes of his own life on the estate, a similar sense of 'existing in spite of everything, thriving in spite of everything'.

In 2014, after attending two Russell Group universities (Queen Mary University of London and King's College London), Femi started as a newly-qualified teacher in a Tottenham academy. He felt uneasy about the students being constantly graded on attendance, behaviour and performance, the scores posted on corridor walls. This data-driven culture, he felt, prioritized the so-called 'gifted and talented' over those that the school tried to usher through the system 'without [them] causing substantial reputational damage'.28 Tottenham, one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the UK, is home to a youth subculture of global influence. Its large housing estates have nurtured some of the grime scene's biggest acts, such as Skepta, Frisco, Chip, JME, Abra Cadabra and Meridian Dan. How different might Femi's teaching experience have been had he been able to make use of this in his lessons? With its elaborate broken rhymes, its mix of persistent rhythm and elastic metre, and its sheer rhetorical bravado, grime is a great way of teaching students that poetry is more about the words themselves than some meaning that needs to be squeezed diligently out of them like juice from a lemon The 2015 curriculum makes these kinds of links between popular forms and the literary canon harder to make. The recent Lit in Colour study found that fewer than 1% of candidates for GCSE English Literature in 2019 answered a question on a novel by a writer of colour. Eighty-two percent of students surveyed did not recall ever studying a text by a Black, Asian or other minority ethnic author.29 These problems predate the 2015 changes. Little was done after 1999 to act on the Macpherson Report's recommendation that the National Curriculum be amended to 'valu[e] cultural diversity and preven[t] racism, in order better to reflect the needs of a diverse society'.30 But the new GCSEs have certainly made the problem worse. Writers of colour are only found on the syllabus in single poems in the poetry anthologies and in the post-1914 British text. Twenty-seven point four percent of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students agreed that 'the books I study in English Literature make me feel like I don't belong' Femi found himself hamstrung by the new syllabus. 'I didn't have the best experience of school growing up', he said, 'but there was still space for

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your imagination and your individualism to at least stretch its legs a little bit.'32 The new curriculum, he felt, was 'not about creativity, it's become about how well you can regurgitate or memorise'.33 After two years, he gave up teaching to take up the role of London's Young People's Laureate.

The Art of the Possible

Teaching in the humanities will always be an intricately human and interpersonal activity. An English lecturer is first and foremost a body, occupying space and making that space resound with their words. As Seamus Heaney once said, lecturing week after week is more of a physical and mental test than most people realize. For much of his career, Heaney combined writing poetry with teaching students, at St Joseph's College of Education, Belfast; Queen's University Belfast; Carysfort College, Dublin; and finally Harvard. This long experience taught him, he said, that it is less important to amass teaching prep than to 'come in fresh, like an athlete on to the track'.34 I have learned this too. Better to be well-rested and alert than to over-prepare for every possible permutation of a discussion, an impossible task anyway. 'The teacher's key skill is sleep,' Daniel Pennac writes. 'The good teacher goes to bed early.

The institutional settings and protocols of universities conceal these untidily human aspects of teaching. Bruno Latour has pointed to the ways in which a university lecture theatre silently mediates our behaviour. Unspoken elements such as the arrangement of the seating, the position of the lectern and the acoustics and soundproofing all allow the lecturer to behave in professionally predictable ways. Classrooms have what designers call affordances, which provide cues about how to act. Lecterns are for standing at, whiteboards are for writing on, and chairs are arranged to make the teacher the centre of attention, primed to speak. Wordlessly, Latour writes, the space has been 'tailored for you—the generic you, that is, a large part of you'.36 But crucially, affordances won't iron out individual idiosyncrasies and improvisations. If your voice is hoarse or does not project, the acoustics won't save you. A lectern might tell you where to stand but won't help if you dry up, garble your words or lose your train of thought. You might suddenly start crying or burst into song in the middle of a lecture and the affordances will not object. And, as Latour says, 'nothing can stop the students from falling asleep as soon as you open your mouth'.

When we talk of delivering a lecture, we imply the presentation of a prepared text and slides that are somehow separate from the lecturer. Nowadays many lecture theatres place the lecture console (and the lecturer) to one side so we won't get in the way of the data projector and the main attraction, the PowerPoint presentation. But teaching cannot really be abstracted from the teacher like this. It is a physical activity happening in time and space. Students, often stereotyped as digital natives who live their lives on their phones, understand perfectly well the importance of being present in the room. Their online lives have only deepened feelings of FOMO (fear of missing out), presenting them with copious evidence of people enjoying themselves at events of which they are not part. Teaching speaks to this craving for live, non-reproducible, synchronous experience. No activity requiring extempore interaction can be wholly contained within the transactional language of delivery.

In his book An Odyssey, Daniel Mendelsohn writes about an undergraduate seminar he runs on Homer's Odyssey at Bard College, New York. The format of the class, like most in the humanities, is simple and low-tech. Every Friday morning, for two and a half hours with a

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coffee break in the middle, Mendelsohn and his students work methodically through the text, book by book. In the first class, he feeds the students leading questions and half-lines, which are met with embarrassed pauses and one-word answers. The first thing a student says is 'It's long!'. Odysseus, others chip in, is 'kind of mopey', 'depressed' and 'a loser'.38 These stilted contributions end on that unconfident, rising inflexion familiar to all teachers of young people.

Mendelsohn has taught the class for several years, but this iteration is unusual. His 81-year-old father Jay has asked if he can sit in, and Mendelsohn has, with some trepidation, agreed. Jay Mendelsohn is a retired research mathematician and professor of computer science. He likes precision and distrusts nuance. He makes statements like 'Excellence is excellence, period' and 'A rhyme is a rhyme, you can't approximate!'. He has intimidated his arts-leaning son for years with his disdain for anything 'soft' and his insistence that the truth is hard, crystalline and incontestable.

Predictably, and in what reads like a sitcom premise, the father turns out to be a mordant, unbiddable presence in his son's class. Jay's readings of the Odyssey are aggressively literal and unequivocal. He derails the discussion with continual criticisms of Odysseus for cheating on his wife, getting his men killed and only succeeding with help from the gods. But Jay also brings a different eye to the text, as someone with memories of war like Odysseus, whose marriage is even longer than Odysseus and Penelope's, and who has some of the wiliness of the hero he so disdains. Over the weeks, the other students grow in confidence and articulacy and their responses become fuller and more synchronized with each other. They begin spotting odd little details in the text that Mendelsohn helps them flesh out into broader points. Slowly the class unravels the Odyssey's core themes: fatherhood, marriage, home, the depredations of time, the triumph of realism over dogmatism and, most crucially, the way that human life is sifted through words and storytelling.

An Odyssey is the best account I have read of how a literature class works – by collectively clarifying, thickening and particularizing textual meaning. When students come out with cliches, these are not dismissed but, since most cliches contain a seed of truth, built on and sharpened up. Personal responses are welcomed, but then tied closely to the text. Students like Jay – the ones who won't shut up, or who send the discussion down a siding while others roll their eyes – need to be managed with a mixture of tact, breeziness and conversational sleight-of-hand. By gently prodding the students and subtly rerouting the discussion, the tutor moves them away from reductive readings and towards richer and more rewarding ones.

All this demands patience and time. The Odyssey course runs from late January to early May, from hard midwinter to full spring: twelve weeks with a break in the middle, the last six weeks feeling shorter than the first, as if going downhill. Every university teacher knows how a set number of weeks can shape a class like this. This portion of the turning year, a semester, gives each class a narrative spine, a pattern made by the darkening or lengthening light of afternoon sessions and the subtle shift from one micro-season to another. And over that just-long-enough tranche of time, the mere fact of proximity allows near-strangers to get to know themselves and each other better, united by an object of shared attention Jay Mendelsohn wants to sit in on his son's class because he regrets giving up Latin at school. He tells a story of the classics teacher he had in his Bronx high school in the 1940s. One day the teacher, an

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impoverished JewishGerman refugee dressed in a threadbare shirt and suit, asked the class which of them was planning to continue with Latin into their senior year, when they would get to read the Aeneid. An awkward silence fell; no one planned to carry on. After telling them that they would regret refusing the riches of Virgil, the teacher closed his briefcase and left the room. Soon afterwards, Latin teaching at the school ended. Told this story as a boy, Mendelsohn was floored by its 'almost unbearable image of a teacher filled with knowledge that no one wanted'.

This story, returned to several times, encapsulates a key theme of Mendelsohn's book: the dialogic and volatile nature of humanities teaching, its reliance on an unstable compound of teacherly coaxing and student receptivity. However skilled the teacher, no class is exempt from the strange chemistry that can make it fizzle out and refuse to be revived. As a eulogy for Mendelsohn's father, who died a year after taking the class, An Odyssey suggestively links teaching with parenting, another open-ended activity learned only in the doing, for which no manual or drill is adequate preparation.

Teaching, like politics, is the art of the possible. It demands pliability, pragmatism and a phlegmatic attitude to the many things the teacher cannot control. The university calendar might decide to lop a week off the semester, or add one. A set text might go out of print the week before the module starts. You might have to teach in a room with dodgy sound quality or bad air conditioning that dries out your voice. The room might be slightly too small or slightly too big for the class, the chairs arranged in serried rows that inhibit discussion but are hard to rearrange. A data projector might refuse to project, a computer fail to power on, a video clip play stubbornly on mute. A seminar group might soar or fall flat for reasons of group dynamics or social atmospherics. It helps as a teacher to have a sense of the absurd, an awareness that the best-laid lesson plans can descend into comedy Like a football game, the same class has never happened twice. Try to over-control it and you will get frustrated, and the students will feel your frustration and tense up. You must fight the inevitable bouts of fatigue, stress and loss of heart that attend all repetitive work with uncertain outcomes. Collier refers to this as 'teaching literature in the real world' because it 'necessarily takes place among, and has to work with, a steady stream of frustrations and small failures'.41 Literary study is an activity that can make few firm guarantees at the start of the process. Successes may be long-deferred and look very different from the success you had envisaged.
An English class exemplifies what the economist John Kay calls obliquity: the theory that our most treasured goals are best approached tangentially. Kay developed this theory as a critique of hyper-rational theories of business which assume that the solution is always more sophisticated modelling and harder targets. Obliquity is vital, he argues, in systems too complex to be perfectly understood in advance. Here we must revise our goals in the course of accomplishing them, using a mixture of nous, intelligent conjecture and intellectual humility – the humility to see that the intricacy of reality defeats any programmatic plan to understand it.

English in Lockdown

When the first lockdown arrived in March 2020, these humanly vulnerable and glitch-ridden aspects of teaching were peculiarly exposed. The bolstering institutional props of my job vanished overnight. I found myself recording lectures on capture software at home and, for the first time in a quarter of a century, watching myself at work, asking myself the same

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question that every other lecturer was asking: is that really how I look and sound? The dull vocal tone, the bizarre hand gestures, the verbal fumblings, the insistent, unpersuasive cheerfulness: suddenly my work made it impossible to get away from myself.

Then, as the pandemic persisted, and the media fixed its gaze elsewhere on a supposed free speech crisis in universities, colleagues at other institutions began losing their jobs. Every week seemed to bring another e-petition or open letter against planned redundancies to sign. My own department was targeted for voluntary redundancies and cut by a third. New jobs in English departments, never plentiful, virtually dried up, leaving new PhDs and precariously employed lecturers locked out of the profession. Even with all this going on, I found myself looking forward to my online classes. Having long considered an English class to be unavoidably analogue, I found Zoom's affordances to be flawed but workable. An online seminar felt oddly intensive and intimate, because the students were all head on, looking straight at me and each other. It was easy to share screens and examine poems and passages closely together. As the weeks went by, and despite the inevitable problems with buffering and screen freezes, we grew more at ease. A diasporic community started to form on the Zoom face wall. We began to talk about the set texts in ways that addressed, tangentially, their feelings about their lives in this time of fractured contact and fear of the unknown. I learned that, as long as this basic human connection can be made, an English class can thrive in the most inhospitable terrain. However joylessly process-driven the professional discourse around English teaching might become, the unique responses of the participants and the ungovernable business of textual interpretation keep breaking in.

According to the rational choice economics that now dominates our public life, a university education is a 'disutility' – the sacrifice of one's time and convenience for money. By these lights, what goes on in a classroom does not much matter in itself. What matters is what it leads to: in the crudest metric, a job with a salary high enough to justify the expenditure of the fees. This kind of sought-after job is what economists call a positional good: a scarce resource that not everyone can have. The marketization of higher education has thus happened alongside a growing sense that educational opportunities need to be rationed and rigidly hierarchized. This starkly elitist idea – which I have come to think of as the self-exonerating myth of an unequal society – underpins much of the current thinking about 'social mobility'. It has tied English to quasi-scientific notions of 'rigour' and 'excellence' which imagine academic ability to be a scarce, static and quantifiable commodity. English Literature, framed as 'our' literature, remains a key part of the school curriculum. But in universities it is in danger of becoming the new Classics – a luxury of the elite universities.

A crisis at least concentrates the mind. It has forced me to decide what I really believe in, not so much to justify it to unsympathetic audiences but to maintain my own sense of purpose. First, I believe that literary study is meaningful in itself, not simply as a way of preparing students for something outside it, such as 'the world of work', as if what happened in a classroom were not work. Making shared meanings, the aim of any English class, is as vital to us, as interpretive animals, as our creaturely needs for food, water, shelter and sleep. Secondly, I believe that literary study does prepare students for the rest of their lives in concrete ways. This may be hard to capture in standard performance criteria, but it is not intangible or invisible, even though many experiences that enrich our lives are both those things.

Our students have spent their lives, from the age of seven, being graded and assessed, but with decreasing confidence that jumping over these educational hurdles will lead to secure

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employment and a debt-free future. Many subsidise their studies with precarious, emotionally depleting work in the zero-hours economy. They expect, with good reason, to be worse off than their parents' generation. They could hardly be blamed for succumbing, as some do, to discouragement and despair. Instead we see them, slowly and cumulatively over weeks and years, becoming better writers, readers and thinkers, and more nuanced sensemakers of their own lives. What happens in our classrooms is stochastic: a process that will, on the strong balance of probabilities, produce something valuable if we invest it with enough time and care – and something more valuable, in the end, than the failsafe and satisficing. We should take heart that even in hard times, when so many university English teachers feel anxious and dispirited, this process carries on.