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Listening to Language and the Practice of Literature

Abstract:

Taking Heidegger's thought about listening to language as a starting point the argument explores some contrasting ideas about reading literature and the ways in which it might interact with the practice of creative writing. While recommending a kind of reading based in criticism rather than critique, the essay goes on to an assessment of some of the obstacles that stand in the way of realising this possibility.

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I

Imagine a creative writing workshop for aspiring poets that started with the injunction not to write a poem but to learn ten poems off by heart. Imagine that those poems might be of different kinds: sonnets, brief lyrics, but also longer poems. The first test of the workshop is a test of memory and nobody will be asked or required to write anything until the test of memory has been passed. Each member of the workshop will need to recite at least two of the poems out loud. They will be asked to reflect upon the experience and write about it, but they will be encouraged to avoid all the following words: 'identity', 'ethnicity', 'ideology', and 'expression'. Equally, they will be encouraged to explore the following words: 'sound', 'rhythm', 'line', 'work'. They will be invited to think about how metre, line and sentence structure interact in sonnets by Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. Everyone will be asked to write about the interaction between poetic form and grammatical structure. Hence the poetics of syntax will be one theme of discussion, as will some or all of the following: echo, allusion, etymology, and what Robert Frost called 'the figure a poem makes'. Nobody will be asked to present their own writing for at least the first four of the workshop's meetings. The process of memorising, reciting, and reflecting might go on for much longer. It could be that a whole term or semester is devoted to this kind of work[1].

The ethos of this workshop would include a commitment to the idea that good poems are born out of a special kind of attention to language. This kind of attention is not encouraged by thinking about poetry as craft or self-expression. Writing good poems may require and understanding of technique but they are never simply the result of a mastery of technique. A poem is not just a matter of choosing a set of means to achieve a preconceived end. To think in this way is to succumb to the illusion of linguistic mastery that Heidegger criticised in his essay, 'Poetically Man Dwells':

> Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. When this relation of dominance gets inverted, man hits upon strange manoeuvres. Language becomes the means of expression. As expression, language can decay into a mere medium for the printed word. That even in such employment of language we retain a concern for care of speaking is all to the good. But this alone will never help us escape from the inversion of the true relation of dominance between language and man. For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, may help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first (Heidegger 1971: 213–14).

The first response to these assertions may be to resist them—a resistance encouraged by their portentous and solemn tone-but there is also the possibility of attending to Heidegger's words even as we reach for the delete key. At first sight what he says may seem utterly counter-intuitive. What is language if it is not the medium through which I express my sense of the world? But what Heidegger invites us to think about is the many ways that language is always more than just my own. We learn language from others who have learnt it in their turn. Words have histories that can inform and sometimes take possession of our use of them. What we say is never quite what we

intend. There is an impersonal aspect to language, an aspect that gives some sense to the idea that 'it is language that speaks'.

Heidegger proposes that listening is one of our primary relations to language. At first hearing that could seem uninterestingly true. We listen to what others have to say and try to understand what they mean. But Heidegger has something else in mind. What we hear when we listen to language is its 'appeal'. What we hear when we listen to others is not just what they are saying but the language that speaks in them. According to Heidegger poets are the supreme listeners:

> The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying—the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening' (214).

How might language be thought of as making an 'appeal'? Is it anything more than a clumsy kind of personification, a way of mistaking the nature of language? Heidegger's assertion seems to make clear that if we think of language as primarily an instrument of communication or a material to which a set of techniques might be applied, we will be incapable of hearing its appeal. Similarly, if we think of it as something directed towards a medium—the printed word, for example—we run the risk of losing that capacity to listen to language that, for Heidegger at least, is at the heart of poetic work. To listen attentively to language is to acknowledge its being and to respond to the strong currents of emotion and thought that it brings to us. It puts in question the assumption that what we do when we use language creatively is give expression to something harboured in the secret world of our subjectivity. It also raises a question about what kind of reading might be compatible with listening to language. In Heidegger's argument there is a suspicion that the printed word may harbour language's decay. If reading is exclusively associated with the printed word then it may be that reading and listening are incompatible with one another. Whether this is the case or not is an issue that runs through the argument of this essay.

To think of language's appeal, then, is to acknowledge both the way it might call to us and draw us towards it. But there's a danger that lurks in nouns and pronouns. 'Language' and 'it' might imply something defined and stable, or something that we can contemplate from the outside. But, for Heidegger at last, this kind of detachment is not possible. We can only listen to language from within, as a moment in our linguistic experience. Literature is not exactly a record of such moments, but one thing that happens in some literary works is a presentation of language's appeal. This appeal may occur directly to the reader or through the medium of a character's experience. Joyce's novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1960), provides one example. The whole novel is threaded through with moments when language appeals to its hero, Stephen Dedalus. The sounds of words and how they come to mean things is part of the fabric of his experience:

> He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself:
> –A day of dappled seaborne clouds.
> The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord. Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the grey-ringed fleece of clouds. No, it

> was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself (Joyce 1960: 166–67).

This comes from a passage in the novel where the young Stephen, about to become a university student, wanders along the seashore outside Dublin. Before putting the passage in a box marked 'lush aestheticism'—a possibility that the book's author happily entertains—we might notice what it has to tell about listening to language. Stephen pauses to contemplate the words that have come to him. He repeats them, prolongs his attention to them, questions them not in an analytic but in a contemplative way. The phrase that comes from his 'treasure'—'a day of dappled seaborne clouds'—turns round in his mind first in association with colour, then with sound and rhythm. He is drawn into the possibilities of the phrase he has just quietly uttered. He listens to his own words as though they came from elsewhere.

We are told that this phrase comes from his 'treasure'. Stephen accumulates words and phrases as if they were riches. Whilst it is tempting, Bordieu-like, to see this 'treasure' as a metaphor for the accumulation of cultural capital, the way this moment of utterance is presented makes the phrase appear as a gift rather than an investment. It return us to an aside in Heidegger's account of the listening poet where he connects the nature of poetic attention to a particular freedom, one that is 'open and ready for the unforeseen'. To listen to language is to hear in it what you had not anticipated[2].

As Joyce makes clear elsewhere in *The Portrait*, what language gives is not always benign or harmonious. It can be charged with political and ideological tensions. These can arise in moments of misunderstanding and linguistic confusion that interrupt the flow of conversation, as in this example, when Stephen, now a student, talks to his dean of studies:

> –To return to the lamp, he said, the feeding of it is also a nice problem. You must choose the pure oil and you must be careful when you pour it not to overflow it, not to pour in more than the funnel can hold.
> –What funnel? asked Stephen.
> –The funnel through which you pour oil into your lamp.
> –That? said Stephen. Is that called a funnel? Is it not a tundish?
> –What is a tundish?
> –That. The.funnel.
> –Is that called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life. (188)

This exchange interrupts and diverts a conversation about Stephen's artistic vocation. He is reminded that the priest he speaks to comes from England and not Ireland, that the language they seemed to have in common may not be so. A little word—'funnel'—provokes in him a sense of dejection and a moment of inner speech:

> –The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine!...His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech (189).

Words matter to Stephen, as they did to Joyce. We might think that the difference between a 'tundish' and a 'funnel' is a fuss about nothing. But, as Stephen listens to

this difference, he becomes haunted by the history of colonialism not because of any political intention on his part but because that history confronts him in the form of a linguistic misunderstanding that means a great deal to him and very little to his interlocutor. One listens to language. The other does not. One pauses over words and phrases; the other is happy just to carry on chatting.

These two examples from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are sketchy illustrations of listening to language along the lines suggested by Heidegger. They might seem to have taken us away from the starting point of this essay, and its proposal for a workshop that has learning by heart and recitation as two if its central disciplines. What connects them together is an attention to language based on a certain kind of repetition. 'A day of dappled seaborne clouds', 'funnel', 'tundish'—these words are listened to by being taken in, repeated and given time to resonate. Learning by heart creates the conditions for a similar kind of attention.

II

The workshop, with its devotion to learning by heart and listening to the appeal of language, is only imaginary. It shows one way in which reading might inform the practice of writing. The mode of reading is deliberately not in the first instance interpretative or analytic. It is at a remove from the great engines of reading produced in the late twentieth century western academy. Structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, the new historicism now grown old, discourse theory, identity politics, queer theory, and so on have all proved immensely productive of ideas, debates, and publications. They have taken a strong hold of how literature is read in universities, and, in the process, largely displaced older institutions of reading based on ideas of tradition and the canon. They have often been fuelled by a vigorous scepticism. Works of literature are not to be trusted, but subjected to 'interrogation'. Or they are trusted when subtly made over into critical acts themselves, putting in question the rhetorical structures they seem to rely on. Reading and writing literature becomes one more way of exposing the illusions we might have about the relation of language to a world or a self.

This moment in the history of reading—one largely confined to universities—has itself become the subject of voluminous commentary. Amongst some of its most imaginative and daring exponents—Derrida, Barthes, Cixous and de Man amongst them—what's usually and blankly called 'theory' has produced some exceptional close readings of literary texts. These readings depend upon a sense of intimacy, of a life lived alongside literary works that call for reading and re-reading. They have often been contradicted by another tendency: the idea that critical reading depends upon a cool distance not just from literary works but from the institution of literature itself. The idea that the first task of a critic is to discover good literature and then set out reasons for thinking it good has been replaced by the idea that the purpose of scholarly reading is to remind readers of the ideological presuppositions that lurk in any and every value judgement. The sinister machines of power and exclusion are everywhere at work. Only a militant vigilance can keep them at bay.

It might be argued that militant vigilance is exactly what we need. The world

described by George Orwell in his essay 'Politics and the English Language', first published in 1946, remains recognisably our own:

> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification (Orwell 1962: 153).

To listen to language from this perspective is to discover the ways it is used to lie and deceive. As in Orwell's case, one kind of literary response to this situation is to write satire. He believed that literary works could still be written that would resist the corruptions of language he sensed everywhere around him. There was still just the possibility that literature might sustain a language that could be trusted.

Orwell's convictions about the corruption of political language were not, though, the result of a theory about discourse or power or the construction of subjectivities. His disenchanted and combative style drew both on an English radical tradition of plain speaking and his disturbance at the advent in the 1930s of a new kind of totalitarian politics. Orwell was haunted by the idea that these new political conditions had permanently altered our relation to language. We could be easily tempted into abandoning freedom. Verbal style—how we wrote or spoke—showed whether we had succumbed to the temptation or not.

A theoretical response to this argument might run as follows: the distinction that Orwell makes between political and other kinds of language is arbitrary. What he identifies as features of political language—'euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness'—are all rhetorical tropes that can be found in literary texts. Romantic poems and nineteenth century realist novels can and have been found to contain just the sorts of evasiveness that Orwell describes, the result of their authors witting or unwitting participation in class or gendered ideologies. It may exactly be a virtue of these texts that a critically informed reading of them can bring out these ideological themes. They are on display there and the informed act of reading creates an opportunity to become conscious of what before might have been a set of unconscious assumptions about how the world is[3].

The tone of these readings is often authoritative. Theory likes to have the last word in the sense that its awareness of language or politics or identity or how these three things combine is always greater than that displayed in the texts it analyses. Some find this authority exhilarating. Others find it a vexing and unintentionally comic jumble of abstractions, an example of what Geoff Dyer has described as 'artificial stupidity'. Dyer is not hostile to theory as such. Barthes, Adorno, and Foucault are all important thinkers for him, as is Nietszche, a major philosophical source for late twentieth century theory. What provokes his scorn is a style of that has become the settled idiom of a supposedly advanced and complex thought. In his essay, 'Artificial Stupidity' (1999), he takes an example from a catalogue for an art exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. It contains a series of 'divagations' by Jon Bird on the work of the artist, Michael Sandle:

> Bird proposes a series of 'divagations' on Sandle's work rather than a boring old essay. Aided and abetted by the obligatory citations from Benjamin—'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'—Bird's formidable achievement in these divagations is to cram virtually all the clichés of postmodern discourse into less than ten pages: 'topology of fragmentation', 'commodified social space', 'transgressive', 'dialectic of desire', 'relations of power/knowledge', and (my personal favourite) 'mnemonic'. Lest this froth obscure the underlying political issues, however, Bird reminds us that 'within the culture of late capitalism, dirt accumulates at points of production and consumption threatening the structure of economic and social relations (Dyer 1999: 257).

The turn of the language of these 'divagations' is always towards a demonstration of the mastery of the writer over the phenomena he describes: 'dirt accumulates at points of production and consumption threatening the structure of economic and social relations' is like a sentence from a tribunal of judgement. The contradictions of capitalism are uncovered for the millionth time, with dirt playing a role in the dialectic. The cool objectivity of tone is allied to a diffuse political awareness whose sole purpose seems to be that it is exhibited, the verbal equivalent of showing a badge of membership.

Consider, as an alternative, the following reading of a line from Shakespeare's sonnet 74, a poem about age and the approach of death. The context of the line is a comparison between a ruined monastery and trees in winter:

> To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling in 'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves,... these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind (Empson 1961: 2–3).

The passage comes from William Empson's book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, first published in 1930. It has itself become a famous example of what it is like to read a poem closely. Some have responded to it as an arbitrary display of intellectual ingenuity. Others have read it as a compelling demonstration of the way language in a poem works. In the context of a comparison with the cool tone of theory what is striking about it is the way Empson's argument combines a commitment to reasoning with a capacity for wonder and admiration. For all that he finds in the line, he knows there is more to be said and, perhaps, in the end, there is something that cannot be said about the way Shakespeare's sonnet works on him. He is not suspicious of its power; he commits himself to reasoning about it and he acknowledges a limit to his own approach. Within this style there is an invitation to share a response and to come to an understanding of how a poem can be good and lastingly so.

There may seem to be an obvious conclusion to be drawn from this comparison. If one purpose of reading in the context of a creative writing degree at a university is to encourage thinking about what good literature might be like—and the encouragement of thinking here means being able to give reasons as to why something might be good—then Empson's style of reading is preferable to the style of average theory as represented, say, by Bird's 'divagations'. And, if we agree with Heidegger that a capacity to listen to language is essential to the creation of good poetry, then that kind of listening is much more evident in Empson than it is in the interrogation of literary texts by ideologically alert theoreticians. Such a conclusion may seem obvious. It's also glib and question-begging.

III

A number of obstacles stand in the way of developing a culture of reading based on Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. One is that Empson assumes that reading literature is habitual, voluntary and pleasurable. What follows is that the more you read the better you will be able to read. And reading, as understood by Empson, is not simply an analytic act, a matter of decoding signs, identifying conventions, or unearthing ideologies. It may well include all those things, but there is something more, too, an idea about how reading nourishes a life and is nourished by it. In this way, as Empson puts it in a passage that follows his analysis of the line in Shakespeare's sonnet, the reader will become 'more experienced in the apprehension of verbal subtleties or the poet's social tone ... become the sort of person that can feel at home in, or imagine, or extract experience from, what is described in the poetry' (3).

The implication of this is that there is something about good reading, and not just of poetry, that can only be acquired not taught. There may be environments that are more or less encouraging to this activity and these environments may involve what Empson refers to as 'that mysterious figure', the educator. The role of the educator is mysterious precisely because it is not teaching a text or a method of analysis that is at issue, but the acquisition of a habit. Literature, in this view, is something returned to; there is a range of meaning in literary works that cannot be made evident either by analysis of by acquiring more information, but only by re-reading. This is not a deep mystery, but a matter of the way a language is learnt; how that is we develop a sense of what is in the foreground and the background of any utterance:

> There is a distinction ... of the implied meanings of a sentence into what is to be assimilated at the moment and what must already be part of your habits; in arriving at the second of these the educator (that mysterious figure) rather than the analyst would be helpful. In a sense, it cannot be explained in language, because to a person who does not understand it any statement is as difficult as the original one, while to a person who does understand it a statement of it has no meaning because no purpose (3).

Literature works with subtlety and power on these ranges of implication, sometimes, as Empson argues, by changing or challenging our assumptions about the implications

that we take for granted. Although he is understandably cautious about how far analysis can take us in the discovery of these implications, his own reading of Shakespeare's sonnet shows how the process might be got underway.

It is hard to tell how widespread this habit of reading is today. Although pessimism may be too readily assumed, there are a number of discouraging signs. The first of these has to do with something that as yet we don't know much about: the habits of reading encouraged by what used to be called 'new media'. The activities of surfing, sampling, downloading and text manipulation all seem to encourage the idea that language is a disposable substance, no sooner read than used for the purposes of a creativity far removed from Empson's practice of reading or the patient listening of Heidegger's poet. This is not to set up a simple antithesis between the speed of technology and the slowness of a mode of literary reading. Literary style can work in the instant through puns, sudden reversals or revelations. A practice of reading or writing that ignores these simply cuts itself off from a range of literary possibilities. But if literature works in the instant, it also works slowly and over time. It calls for a corresponding kind of engagement, one that is not immediately circumscribed by its manipulation for a purpose or by its rapid availability.

It would be dogmatic to argue that 'new media' simply undermine the form of attention to literature under discussion here. This is not an area in which proof one way or the other is readily available. What is at stake instead is the description of a set of circumstances that could be argued to favour, or not, a form of attention to literature. The circumstances are a 'set' in the sense that they are all interacting one with another. If digital based technologies encourage an attitude towards language as a disposable substance, then this becomes significant because it interacts with other tendencies at work in the modern academy. One of these is indicated by a word that Empson uses casually, assuming that people will readily understand what he means without further elaboration. In his analysis of 'bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' he sets out reasons that 'all give the line its beauty'. He takes it for granted that one of the things a critic does is to make judgements of beauty and, in doing this, provide an account of why something might be judged in this way without being described as 'merely subjective'.

It's not so much that beauty has been subject to ideological critique, although that's true, nor that this critique has recently produced an attempt to reclaim the value of beauty, although that's true too[4]. It's more that, as Simon Jarvis has argued in his essay, 'An Undeleter for Criticism' (2002), the contemporary academy has grown very uneasy about the equivocal nature of these judgements themselves. Following on from, but also attempting to change, the statement of this equivocation in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Jarvis identifies the 'fragile and equivocal middle', opened up by the nature of critical judgments of beauty. On the one hand, no one can compel another into an agreement that something is beautiful by appeal to a body of knowledge in the way, say, that a very compelling proof can be put forward for the fact that the earth goes round the sun. As Jarvis, makes clear to say that a line of poetry is beautiful is not to report a fact about it, but to discover a value in it. But it doesn't follow from this that the judgement is 'merely subjective' either. Kant describes the other side of the equivocation in this way: '...if we then call an object

beautiful, we believe we have a universal voice, and lay claim to the agreement of everyone, whereas any private sensation would decide solely for the observer himself and his liking' (Jarvis 2002: 5, Kant 1987: 59–60).

This difficult terrain, working between claims to demonstrable knowledge on the one hand and the 'merely subjective' on the other, has not been especially welcome in an academic culture devoted to the historical materiality of the text or literature's place within 'discursive formations' or the world of identity politics. Indeed it has become the tacit and unintended function of these different forms of contextualisation to hurry us on from criticism to critique, from aesthetic judgements of particular works to the ideological conditions of textual forms, so bypassing the difficulty of working not against method but beyond it, the difficulty implied by criticism.

There is one further obstacle I want to briefly sketch. It is the sense that the main purpose of education, including higher education, is to help students realise their career ambitions or a personal development plan, or to equip them with a set of skills that will enable them to compete effectively on the job market. To question the assumption that this is the main purpose of higher education, rather than one of its purposes, is to immediately risk accusations of a terrible lack of realism and responsibility. Yet there are other responsibilities than those to the fragile but forceful self and its ambitions. One of them might be to a practice of reading and writing that exceeds the self in different ways. In Sonnet III, Shakespeare provides an ironic reflection on one of the consequences that dedication to a practice; one that many commentators have assumed refers to his work in the theatre:

> And almost thence my nature is subdued
> To what it works in, like the Dyer's hand (764)

The mood of the Sonnet suggests that this kind of subduing can be a servitude or social humiliation. Shakespeare is branded by his art and he cannot escape the social status, or lack of it, that the practice of his art brings. But the lines help describe one way in which immersion in an activity begins to define as much as express a selfhood. The self becomes the medium of a practice as much as the other way round. There may be something to regret in this or simply a sense of welcome release from the demands of identity.

The lines in Sonnet III point to one way that dedication to a practice can exceed the self. A practice, at least in the sense that I want to try and develop it here, has a life that is longer than any individual who engages in it both in respect of the past and the future. For all the notorious solitude of writers, a poet or a novelist can never be alone. The activities implied by these names and the works created necessarily assume the existence of others whether as precursors, contemporaries, readers, critics and all those who by their actions, choices and utterances constitute the ongoing life of a practice. It implies a medium that is inevitably and often unintentionally being passed on and remade.

Let's, for the sake of argument, call the practice of reading and writing sketched in this essay a practice of literature. Of course, under a certain description, this can be described as arbitrary, historically variable, or ideologically conditioned. Almost

anything can. But, what if that description misses something that actually makes literature into a practice: namely a commitment on the part of those who practice it, however guarded and ironic that might be, to its potential to create values that cannot simply be turned into money equivalents or celebrity or fame. These values will not be fixed and absolute, but they will have some reference to what has been achieved by the practice of literature in the past and to what it might achieve in the future. Nor will a simple commitment to the possibility of such values be enough to make them real. That will depend upon a number of things, including the works created by writers engaged in the practice of literature. It clearly includes the study of literature and the work of creative writing in universities, but what is evident about the practice of literature at least is that it does not depend upon any single institution.

These tentative proposals are not intended as a contribution to a new theory of literature. Instead they are brief sketches of a description of something that, if it is working well, will always exceed any theory, however sophisticated or nuanced. Nor is it a proposal to establish a new consensus about the value of literature, one that relies upon examples drawn from the past. The thought that literature might be conceived as a shared practice is not the same thing as an argument about a consensus in value. Again it is likely that the opposite will be the case: the liveliness of the practice of literature is likely to produce strong debates about value, but they will be debates not just a shoulder shrugging willingness to let people get on with whatever they like.

I've suggested some of the things in the current culture of the academic humanities that make what is recommended in this essay unlikely. But one thing seems to be working in another way. It is something that is happening outside universities but is beginning to shape the ways that literature is thought about within them. The writing and reading of literature has probably never been so diverse and varied as it is now. Nor has so much writing travelled, whether through the medium of translation or not, from one culture to another. This is bringing about an unprecedented encounter and interaction between different forms and traditions, one that may well reshape our sense of what literature is and its relation to print culture. In these circumstances the appeal of language or languages, and the capacity to listen to that appeal, has become both urgent and compelling.

Notes

1. The poets and the forms used could vary. They don't have to be sonnets or those by Shakespeare or by writers within a particular national tradition. But a sense of the history of forms and of previous writers is important. To learn by heart needs to include words from the past.

2. Pierre Bourdieu's arguments about cultural capital have proved highly influential as a way of extending our understanding of the impact of class differences on people's lives. For one powerful statement of the argument see his essay 'The Forms of Capital' in *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson (1986).

3. Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) is one example of an argument about romanticism's evasiveness.

4. Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) and Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction*

(1984) are two examples of powerful critiques of the idea of beauty. Eagleton's work is historically wide-ranging and explores the arc of aesthetic thought from the eighteenth century to the present day. Bourdieu's work shows how judgements of aesthetic preference are not just statements about the qualities of art but also assertions of social superiority.

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