

Education beyond metaphor

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All good writing takes us somewhere uncomfortable. One of the great services given by Textual Practice over the past 30 years has been to create a comfortable place for uncomfortable criticism. Yet right now, it is not writing but the world itself that is proving incommensurable. What should criticism be doing in a political culture that has embraced hostility?

One response is to look to writing for new centres of human connection. If the terms of an earlier form of critical practice were desire and dissidence, today they are empathy and identification. Fiction, goes one very powerful claim, is where we imagine what it is like to be persons other than ourselves. This is why reading is good for the mind, as cognitive critics demonstrate, and good too for the progress of ideas about equality. The historian of human rights, Lynn Hunt, has gone so far as to claim that it was the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century that helped set the human rights idea in the political imagination. This is a less ironically worldly version of Richard Rorty's argument that sad and sentimental stories persuade us about the reality of 'people unlike ourselves' when reason fails to convince about the political wisdom of redistributing rights and resources.

Re-inventing moral sentiments is a smart move in an age of educational accounting. Look at all the good work literature does for minds and morals, we can say. But the conspicuous rise of literary humanitarianism over the past 30 years, like the rise of human rights itself, has also masked the rise of a set of inequalities that have now become intolerable. As David Hume argued, sympathy is required all the more in a world divided by wealth. Moral sentiments, Adam Smith pointed out, can also expose how very different life experiences are. We run the risk of congratulating ourselves for imagining the lives of the very people our own lives make wretched. Think about current calls to empathise with the plight of Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian refugees.

Claudia Rankine's acclaimed *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), begins with a poem that 'falls back' into a place she describes as 'that which get reconstructed as metaphor'. This is the place of the experience of being a black citizen in the USA, Europe and the UK. This is not a comfortable place. In a workshop in Oxford this May, the Palestinian poet and political theorist, Tamim al-Barghouti spoke of the places in the world where 'living in words is not a metaphor'. Refugee camps and borderland jungles; these are not comfortable places either.

I read both these refusals of metaphor as calls to resist reading the experiences of people 'unlike ourselves', in Rorty's patronisingly grating phrase, as standing in for something absent in the world. These places of discomfort are not invitations to empathy, or even ethics, but to political and moral education. I look forward to another 30 years of Textual Practice opening its pages to writing that shares discomfort, not (simply) to celebrate difference, but to better understand just how deep the hostilities of our culture cut into human experience.