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## Reading, engagement and higher education

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the close association between higher education and reading. I draw on the resources of literary studies to illuminate the phenomenon of educational ‘engagement’. I explore the accounts of reading offered in the phenomenological literary theory of Rita Felski and Marielle Macé and extend their ‘stylistics of existence’ into higher education to elaborate engagement’s ‘eventful’ character: it is not in the power of teacher or student to ‘bring about’ engagement. In place of pedagogical ‘method’, I demonstrate how Padraig Hogan’s treatment of education as the ‘courtship of sensibility’ is consistent with this phenomenological treatment of engagement. I am thus able to illustrate how engagement is in tension with instrumental approaches to teaching and learning. I conclude by offering an ethical relation of mutual belonging to subject matter as a corrective to the centrality of ‘knowledge’ in recent attempts to unify the different degrees and objects of engagement.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Teaching in the university has always been associated with reading, or at least, reading aloud; hence the proliferation of ‘Lecturers’ and (in the UK at least) ‘Readers’. The metonymy whereby a student’s reading comes to stand for all of the elements of preparation for an examination (‘reading for a degree’) is as ancient as the universities; there is a possible attestation in Chaucer. Interestingly, one can detect even in much earlier usage an unapologetic instrumentalism: a student reads for the purpose of attaining the qualification. So we find in the curious publication Chambers’s *Edinburgh Journal*, in 1845 – alongside articles on such eclectic subjects as ‘Jacobinism in the Nursery’, ‘The Home Wreck’, ‘Traits of the New Zealanders’, and ‘Plagiarism’ – an article titled ‘English University Life’, in which the author (I suspect one of the eponymous Chambers brothers) writes of study at Oxford and Cambridge that:

There are two classes of students; those who are reading for *honours*, and those who merely wish to get their degree with the least possible work. It is perfectly optional to which class you belong. A great many who begin with reading for honours get tired, or find that, from insufficient previous preparation, they are unable to compete successfully with others. They then give up their first intentions, and at last offer themselves as candidates for what is termed the ‘ordinary degree of B.A.’ (Bachelor of Arts). The others, or honour men, or candidates

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for honours, take what is called an ‘extraordinary degree’ ... (Chambers & Chambers, 1845, pp. 88–89)

This article explores the close association between higher education and reading. It therefore constitutes a dialogue between literary studies and educational studies. In literary studies – both in the practice of interpretation and in the teaching of literature – there is the question of how to ensure a literary engagement, or how to encourage acts or events of ‘engaged reading’ (Douglas, Barnett, Poletti, Seaboyer, & Kennedy, 2016). The paradox of ‘pedagogical engagement’ in higher education is that engagement can be offered in opposition to superficial or ‘instrumental’ approaches to learning, and yet – in light of claims that the ‘engaged’ student is the ‘successful’ student – the promise of engagement invites instrumentalisation or strategic thought. I intend to consider whether an account of engagement can be offered that speaks both to literary studies – to the experience of reading – and to the event or encounter that is higher education.

I

The language of ‘engagement’ in higher education has been described as ‘chaotic’ (Trowler, 2015). A distinction is sometimes made between ‘engagement’ in terms of ‘student voice’ (meaning the involvement of students or their representatives in quality assurance processes, institutional deliberation and curriculum design) and ‘pedagogical engagement’, meaning ‘the degree at which students engage with their studies in terms of motivation, the depth of their intellectual perception or simply studiousness’ (Velden, 2013, p. 78; for the distinction, see University of Edinburgh, 2018). There is debate as to whether such a distinction can be sustained once a theoretical engagement with the concept is underway (see, e.g., Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), and although I will begin by restricting my focus to engagement conceived largely in this more individual, ‘pedagogical’ sense, the implications of the phenomenon will extend into a broader institutional, social and ethical context.

George Kuh’s explanation of a ‘plus dur tu travailleras ...’ logic of engagement remains an influential reference point for subsequent discussions of engagement in HE:

The engagement premise is deceptively simple, even self-evident: The more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become. The very act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive, satisfying life after college. That is, students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development. (Kuh, 2003, p. 25)

We should, of course, be wary of ‘deceptively simple’ premises. The questions that are thrown up by such a formulation are legion and have all been acknowledged to an extent in the HE literature. What does it mean to study, and to study ‘more’? How is learning being conceptualised here? What constitutes the ‘very act’ of being engaged? One begins to get a sense of how the idea of engagement can lend itself to technical or instrumental treatment (despite the aspiration to develop ‘habits of heart and mind’), where the task for tutors, institutions and students is for feedback and practice to be exercised efficiently or maximally in order to bring about the desired skills, dispositions or other

outcomes, such that Harper and Quaye are able to argue that ‘strategizing ways to increase engagement ... is a worthwhile endeavour’ (2009, p. 3).

Krause identifies a need for ‘multiple indicators of engagement’, offering the experiences of international students who (as a group) ‘spend more time on campus and in class than their domestic peers ... engage in online study far more ... and devote relatively little time to paid employment. Nevertheless, they are having difficulty engaging with study and learning and are feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do’ (2005, p. 10). Rather than accepting this situation as an immanent critique of the idea of engagement, Krause argues for a theorising of the concept, ‘which allows for multiple perspectives’ (p. 10).

Case (2008), following Mann (2001), has invited us to consider engagement in terms of its absence and offers alienation as a suitably expansive concept. Alienation can be manifested in social, institutional and academic terms. Its significance can extend to the existential – to the phenomenon of being an ‘outsider’ or ‘colonised individual’; students might experience alienation from the academy or even ‘from their own background culture’ (Case, 2008, p. 327). Case considers how academic ‘gain’ can involve personal loss: ‘these students seem to be stranded in a no-man’s land of identity which is “no longer at ease” at home but also not fully engaged in the new environment’ (p. 328). Case argues that the strength of the alienation-belonging framework is that ‘it does not separate the experience of learning from the broader experience of being a student, as do many other perspectives on learning’ (p. 330). Within this overall framework, ‘surface learning’ can be understood as a form of ‘alienation from the subject and process of study itself’ (Mann, 2001, p. 7). Thinking of engagement in terms of alienation reminds us of its relational significance. To be in a state of alienation is to be out of a relationship – or to be in a very different relationship from that implied by ‘engagement’. It reminds us of the indirect objects of engagement: one is alienated *from*, one engages *with* or *in*. It also opens the way to thinking of engagement as a phenomenon – with, I will argue, ‘eventful’ properties – rather than an activity, strategy or even an achievement. In her discussion of Newman’s ‘earnest but ill-used persons’ who ‘are forced to load their minds with a score of subjects against an examination’ and ‘commit demonstrations to memory’, finding that they have ultimately ‘gained nothing really by their anxious labours, except perhaps the habit of application’, Case makes way for the possibility that efforts taken in service of the end of engagement might themselves constitute forms of alienation (Newman, 1852/ 1964, pp. 112–113; cited in Case, 2008, pp. 321–322).

## II

*What kind of reading is ‘engaged’ reading?* The ‘reading resilience’ project (Douglas et al., 2016) has explored this question in relation to an intention to develop ‘advanced, engaged, critical reading skills’ (p. 245) in literary studies undergraduates. The desirability of critical and close reading is elaborated in detail, and a relational element of engagement is established in relation to Brower’s (1962) work on teaching literature: the ‘essential difference is between engagement and display’ (Douglas et al., 2016, p. 258); rather than asking students ‘to memorise for examination purposes the teacher’s own rhapsodic readings’ (p. 258), Brower advocates a ‘mutual demonstration society’ (1962, p. 10) in which teacher and student ‘are fully prepared to say something meaningful to each other’

(pp. 16–17). There remains a tendency, however, to import into literary engagement the loosely pedagogical sense employed across the literature of HE. So we note in the same work that students ‘are much more likely to stay engaged if they find ways into the text beyond simply passing one’s eyes sequentially along each line’ and ‘training in reading in the tertiary environment is training in active engagement rather than passive reception’ (Douglas et al., 2016, p. 260). Reading tasks are a ‘different and engaging way of learning’ (p. 263); reading is made transparent ‘by engaging the student in the knowledge “around” reading’ (p. 264); engagement is characterised as ‘deep’ as opposed to surface (pp. 260, 264); students ‘struggled with time management and engagement’ (p. 262) and after a different approach to assessment ‘students were more engaged and discussion was often more sophisticated’ (p. 263).

Another way of framing the question, which will enable us to draw more explicitly on literary theoretical resources, is to ask: *what kind of engagement is reading?* Rita Felski and Marielle Macé have offered answers to this question that make explicit use of phenomenology. I understand Felski’s expressed commitment to phenomenology to mean that she follows Gadamer in paying attention methodologically to what happens to us, or to how we are transformed, in our reading, rather than to specifying the critical tools that need to be brought to bear to read the text correctly. In ‘The Limits of Critique’, Felski argues, after Citton (2007), that ‘reading is never just a matter of cognitive or analytical decoding ... textual details vibrate and resonate with special force when they hook up with our passions and predilections, our affectively soaked histories and memories’ (Felski, 2015, p. 178). The hermeneutic circle ‘includes not just beliefs but also moods, perceptions, sensibilities and attunements: not only do we bring feelings to a text, but we may be brought to feel differently by a text’ (p. 178). Reading constitutes, for Felski, ‘an orientation in the phenomenological sense’ (p. 21), always guided by a ‘mood’ – be it critical, suspicious or hospitable – a ‘constellation of attitudes and beliefs that expresses itself in a particular manner of approaching one’s object’ (p. 21).

Recognising reading as a phenomenological ‘orientation’ means more than acknowledging that it has affective as well as cognitive elements; it extends reading beyond the epistemological, into an ontological mode. Felski alludes to Richard Kearney’s “‘carnal hermeneutics” that involves and intertwines body and thought, sensing and sense’ (p. 176; see also Kearney, 2015), characterising reading as an ‘embodied mode of attentiveness’ that encompasses ‘leaning toward or turning away from a text’ (Felski, 2015, p. 176) – ‘a dynamic of attraction and response’ (Macé, 2013, p. 217) – ‘rhythms of rapprochement and distancing, relaxation and suspense, movement and hesitation’ (Felski, 2015, p. 176). The critical reader might aim to ‘see through’ the text or come to know it ‘better than it knows itself’, but reading is not, in Felski’s and Macé’s account, primarily characterised or exhausted by the exchange of propositional content or the acquisition of knowledge; it is an event of becoming in which ‘Literary styles offer themselves to the reader as genuine forms of life, engaging behaviors, methods, constructive powers, and existential values’ (Macé, 2013, p. 214). Reading entails a dynamic transformation that confounds active/passive, inside/ outside distinctions – so ‘the effort to be oneself is simultaneously aided by literary models and captured by their efficacious, and redirective force’ (p. 219); at the same time we ‘feel these forces within ourselves, as possible directions of our mental, social or practical life, presenting us with opportunities to reappropriate, imitate or dismantle them’ (p. 216).

Felski singles out for special attention Macé's claim that 'Reading is not a separate activity, functioning in competition with life, but one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavour and even style' (Macé, 2013, p. 214). Books 'weave their way into the texture of our daily experience' in a 'bleeding of literature into life' (Felski, 2015, p. 176). This leads Macé to elaborate a 'stylistics of existence' in which reading is 'integrated with the other constitutive conducts in an aesthetic of daily life' (Macé, 2013, p. 217); literary experience is not then 'hermetically closed' but 'falls in line with the other arts and with all the other practices with which it concretely dovetails in our lives' (p. 217). Macé invokes Heidegger, who 'already casting existence in unambiguously *modal* terms, defines understanding as a "way of being", in an ethic of relation – to the world, the self, and other styles', concluding that 'reading is merely a particular case, one among many exercises in modalizing the self, the crucial mannerism at work in every kind of behavior – from ways of perceiving to crafting a gesture or an utterance ...' (p. 221).

### III

I am led to consider to what extent Macé's 'stylistics of existence' can be extended into the educational domain, or to what extent education is a 'mode of existence' that can be informed by the account of reading offered above; I believe that this can take us beyond the teaching of literary studies and into higher education more generally. Admittedly, Macé wants to argue that reading is a 'curious case', but none of the caveats she offers should deter us from seeing how far the description of the engagement that is reading can play out in the context of the experience of higher education: it is 'strongly relational ... operating through many different channels – power, dependence, mediation, and reciprocal support ... it is the confrontation with the styles of others that activates our own and the struggles against other forms that gives us shape' (2013, p. 221). What kind of engagement, then, is higher education?

Macé urges us to consider reading 'as a conduct, a behavior rather than a decoding' (p. 216). To this, we have added orientation (in an existential sense) and a moment of 'becoming'. This foray into phenomenological – even specifically Heideggerian – regions links us to the literature of the 'ontological turn' in higher education, which Barnett (2004), Dall'Alba, Barnacle and others have offered in response to 'the largely instrumental function universities are seen to have within contemporary societies' (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007, p. 679), calling attention to the way in which we 'increasingly instrumentalize, professionalize, vocationalize, corporatize, and ultimately *technologize* education' (Thomson, 2005, p. 244; cited in Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007, p. 679). Dall'Alba and Barnacle have identified students' epistemological expectations of the higher education experience – that their programme of study comprises a body of knowledge whose contours they roughly understand in advance but which they do not yet possess (and the addition, absorption or mastery of which will leave their hopes, desires, dreams and fears largely untouched) – and opposed these to education's uncomfortable, risky, ontological reality: education does not simply add knowledge or skills but changes who we are.

An ontological turn must account for the 'intentionality' of the educational event in terms of the existential directedness of its participants rather than the propositional

content of their knowing; intentionality in phenomenological terms here stays close to its etymological roots, of stretching out and stretching towards. This resonates with the to-and-fro dynamic expressed by Felski and Macé – the ‘pas de deux’ (Macé, 2013, p. 219) – and their language of journeys and possible ‘paths’; an educational turning towards the world in a new way implies similarly topological relations. Central to both Gadamer and Heidegger’s phenomenological accounts of understanding is the orientation towards the subject matter or the shared concern (die Sache) that emerges between two participants in dialogue or between reader and text (for development, see Linge, 1977 and Aldridge, 2013). Although Felski and Macé say little about the phenomenological subject matter – the ‘thing at issue’ – I take it to be implicit in Felski’s attempt to sketch out a ‘neo-phenomenology’ of literary engagement (Felski, 2008), and in particular her defence of literature’s claim to truth: how it can ‘expand, enlarge or reorder our sense of how things are’ (p. 83). Drawing on Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, Felski urges that ‘The work only comes to life in being read, and what it signifies cannot be separated from what readers make of it. Mimesis is thus recast as a tri-partite rather than a dualistic structure, with reception as vital as production’ (p. 87). In the event of literary understanding, I want to add, a shared concern ‘emerges’ in-between reader and text (Gadamer, 2004, p. 294); texts can hold out the possibility of a new orientation to the world – of an encounter with truth – because they ‘crystallize, not just in what they show but in their address to the reader, what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential interwovenness of our being to the world’ (Felski, 2008, p. 104).

Gadamer adopts dialogue as his model for the event of understanding, and thus in reading, a text is approached as a Thou which ‘would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we couldn’t know by ourselves’ (2004, p. xxxii). Let us be clear what this claim does *not* mean. Felski argues that conceiving of the literary encounter as a site of disclosure of truth does not mean that texts are not always in some ways limited and partial, or that they cannot also ‘mislead or mystify’ (2008, p. 104). The text does not teach by instruction or by offering a substantive proposition to which the reader must assent. Gadamer argues for the ethical significance of approaching the text as if it has something to teach about a shared concern that is not yet fully understood or ‘agreed’ by each party. The alternative is to be closed to the text’s claims and to insulate oneself from its transforming possibilities (Gadamer, 1991). This is the sense in which Felski argues that the perspective of critique ‘cannot yield to a text’ (2015, p. 188).

This appeal to the text as teacher now shows educational experience to be the ‘curious’ case. In the educational situation, there are texts *and* teachers, so that the constellation or ‘engagement’ we are trying to grasp has a threefold constitution – teacher (or, to avoid later confusion, ‘tutor’), student, and ‘text’. The splitting or multiplying of the role of the teacher in this transfer from the phenomenological account of reading is not clean. Students stand to learn both *from* and *about* their tutors as they can learn *from* and *about* their texts, so the role of teacher is distributed throughout this constellation – even if the tutor here has, when all things are considered, an intermediary function, as a suitor who woos on another’s behalf. And what is called ‘text’ here takes in much more of the ‘materiality’ or fabric of the educational situation: in literary studies (as in other subjects) what is offered to students is often (literary or other) ‘texts’, but this

materiality can also take in whatever reductions, representations or exemplars constitute the 'object of study' in a given educational moment.

The object of study cannot be identified with the shared concern or subject matter (*die Sache*). This distinction is vital because whereas the objects of study can be planned or selected as part of a prescribed curriculum, a shared concern is necessarily emergent. The emergence of an indeterminate subject matter can be identified, however, with the moment of educational engagement, which we are now in a position to sketch out in representative, although not exhaustive, terms. A tutor selects or is given a certain object of study, which he or she presents or holds out in the context of an academic, disciplinary or other commitment to the world of experience that it might open up for the student. The student comes to this offer perhaps with a nascent commitment to the discipline with which he or she is beginning to identify, or is drawn by the charisma or expertise of the tutor, or finds appealing or is adept in certain familiar ways of approaching the object of study; quite likely there will be a mixture of all these and more. An effective history of motivations, perceptions and desires – an 'entire life vector' (Macé, 2013, p. 220) – has brought each participant to this point. Since the prejudices that constitute the being of each of the participants can never be mastered or fully known – even to the participants themselves – what is 'at work' in the object of study cannot be predetermined. Engagement occurs – or the participants 'become' engaged – to the extent that, and at the moment when, a shared concern or subject matter emerges. Because engagement would constitute an existential orientation towards the world, the subject matter can hardly be described in propositional terms. It might, in the case suggested above, constitute some sort of reconciling or convergence of the tutor's commitments to the 'world' on offer and the student's nascent commitment to the discipline – but such an explanation can only barely hope to be suggestive of what would be constituted in the 'fusion of horizons' of tutor and student.

It might be objected at this point that significant assumptions have been made about the 'ideal' motivations of the participants in this encounter: tutors might be motivated by various institutional obligations or only casually motivated to teach (more interested in their research?); students might come into the university with no particular commitment to the discipline, with the desire only to obtain a useful qualification or to enjoy a certain kind of social existence. In fact, the description I have offered does not exclude any element of a participant's effective history as potentially constitutive of the moment of engagement. Furthermore, while I have only offered a description of the phenomenon of engagement (it cannot be a prescription, for reasons I will elaborate below) this nevertheless has the normative implication of offering an account of an engagement that is characteristic of a higher *education* rather than, say, going to university, or attending lectures. It is quite possible, according to this description, to spend hours in the library without becoming engaged, or for students and tutors to be engaged in the sense that they 'come to an understanding' about their increasingly misaligned interests and demands on one another. The description does not at this stage, therefore, rule out the 'dark' engagements attended to in Trowler (2010, pp. 4–5). It can redescribe as authentic forms of engagement some of the acts of aversion, dissent and refusal of voice that Fulford has sought to describe as educationally valuable *disengagement* (Fulford, 2017). A student might, moreover, fail all of his or her exams but nevertheless remain 'engaged' in the sense elaborated above. The description does not deny that tutors and students are implicated in a significant



number of other ‘engagements’ in an interwoven stylistics of existence, but privileges the constellation of tutor, student and object of study for an account of what is distinctive in the experience of higher education.

I have not yet elaborated engagement’s ‘eventful’ character. What is meant by this is that the moment of engagement, as an intentional relation between student, teacher and object of study, transcends the will or action of any individual participant – it happens ‘over and above their wanting and doing’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxviii). Áine Mahon (2016), writing on the teaching of literature in higher education, draws attention to the ‘weak pedagogy’ implied in the ‘event’ of reading. This is characterised by the reader’s (to which we add – the teacher’s) preparedness to be surprised, in an attitude of faith, vulnerability and exposure. It is not in the power of teacher or student to ‘bring about’ engagement; rather it ‘befalls’ them. Engagement is also a contingent relation, and maybe a fragile or fleeting one. There is no method or technique for ensuring that participants, once having fallen into it, will remain in this relation.

#### IV

Felski’s objection to the unquestioned dominance of the ‘critical’ approach to literature is its idealised detachment; it wants ‘engagement without the original sin of appropriation’ (2015, p. 177). Her ‘post-critical’ or ‘neo-phenomenological’ approach, in contrast, does not deny the importance of critical reading, but seeks to make space for those events of enchantment, recognition, shock, and the encounter with truth that give the lie to the idea of detachment (Felski, 2008); these moments cannot be planned for but ‘befall’ a reader in a moment of ‘application’ of the text’s offered world to the reader’s being. As Macé elaborates, ‘Each literary form does not present itself to her as a restful identification, but as an idea that seizes hold of her, a power that tugs the threads and possibilities of being within her’ (2013, p. 216). The moment of educational ‘engagement’ might be described in Gadamerian terms as a ‘hearkening’ or ‘belonging’ to subject matter that cannot escape the ‘sin’ of appropriation/application: the emergent relation to the subject matter brings one’s mode of being into question and involves “‘taking on” and testing out new perceptual possibilities’ (Felski, 2015, p. 176), or ‘rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives’ (Barthes, 1985, p. 101; cited in Macé, 2013, p. 217). Felski acknowledges the ‘sheer happenstance by which “ways of reading” ... connect up with “modes of being”’ (2015, p. 177). In her admonishments that ‘the uses of literature cannot be totted up via a one-note calculus of power’ (p. 177), and that we cannot ‘somehow arrive at a way of engaging with the literary work that is scrubbed clean of our mundane needs, desires and interests’ (p. 176) we can thus also hear educational insights.

If engagement is not subject to expression in terms of predetermined outcomes that can be planned for and pursued with more or less efficiency – if there is, that is to say, no possible ‘technology’ of engagement – we certainly have not reached the end of what we can say about the experience of engagement, particularly when we acknowledge the ‘romantic’ sense in which an engagement follows a period of courtship. Elements of the account that precedes resonate for me with the work of Pádraig Hogan, who has argued for an account of the experience of education as a ‘heartwork’ (2009) or the ‘courtship of sensibility’ (1993). Descriptions of educational events in propositional terms such as ‘I taught

X to A' or 'T brought about in A the intentional learning of X' neglect 'the *play* of influence in any event of teaching and learning' (1993, p. 9) in which 'every declaration or impersonal utterance, invariably entertains *some* designs on the hearers: and not just on their cognitions or abilities, but also on their outlooks and sensibilities' (p. 9). Anticipating the to-and-fro 'pas de deux' of Felski and Macé, Hogan elaborates 'the subtle dance of influence and attraction, of anticipation and eventuality, of disappointment and fulfilment, of acrimony and harmony, as courtship unfolds in human experience' (p. 10). Hogan argues that the experience of teaching and learning can be described as 'a defensible cultural wooing' and that 'This remains true in different ways from the infant school to the university' (p. 10). I will quote the next section at length and hope to elaborate its implications in particular relation to the phenomenon of engagement:

There is a kind of courtship which declares its intentions with honesty, which recoils from the forcing of a suit, which has the courage to face difficulties as they arise, which prizes both frankness and the dignity of personal privacy, which seeks to escape the indolence of the habitual, and which owes its special character to the delights, the disappointments and the surprises of mutual discovery. We are all aware however that there is another, perhaps more common kind of courtship, where considerations of a more politic kind are to the fore; where posturing eclipses sincerity, where the arts of seduction are harboured and nurtured, and where all of the salutary attributes mentioned just now are secondary to securing the prize, or perhaps more accurately, the imagined prize. (p. 10)

Literature abounds with warnings about the dangers of attempting to win love by being other than our true selves. We learn from numerous examples of the lover who 'strives too hard'; this ranges in portrayal from the pathetically tactless or gauche to a more sinister sort of manipulation. Hogan's dance or 'play of influence' is altogether more tentative: an offering of the possibilities of the object of study that is authentic to the teacher's commitment to what is 'rich and enduring' (p. 11) in what is offered, but at the same time sensitive to a student's response or 'push back' against a particular kind of advance. In this way the role of teacher is further distributed throughout the constellation of tutor, student and object of study, since the tutor too must learn from the student, coming to a growing awareness of a student's 'expectations and sensitivities ... strengths and limitations ... inclinations and aversions ... agilities and awkwardness' (p. 13) and thus the 'idiom' of their interaction develops in the to-and-fro of educational dialogue.

Just as love is not won by striving, the phenomenon of engagement is not something that can be 'aimed for' by strategic thinking on the part of the student or by proprietorial claims on the student's attention; we might say that it happens in spite of explicit instructional efforts. Students can be instructed (for example) to spend more time in the library, or rewarded for attending teaching sessions, just as they might be instructed or rewarded for turning a certain number of pages in a book, but such instrumental interactions are in tension with education's 'erotic' dimension, by which tutor and student come to be open in a related way to the unfolding of the subject matter; neither knows what will become of him or her as the dialogue continues.

Rather than striving, the tutor who is concerned with a student's relation to the object of study develops a certain sensitivity – the attentiveness of the lover. Such an attentiveness would need to reject notions of the purity of a pasteurised educational ideal and accept contamination of the shared concern by the collateral constituents of a stylistics of existence in which their educational interaction – this particular event of reading – plays only a

part. I acknowledge that there is much more to be said to complicate Hogan's juxtaposition of an 'honest' courtship with a 'more common' kind. On the one hand, there are those philosophers of education (Alston, 1991; Todd, 2003), who have called out the prudishness of others' attempts to praise an educational 'love' for the subject while downplaying eros and desire in the student-teacher relation. On the other hand, Michèle Le Doeuff has drawn attention to the tendency of gendered institutional relationships to bring about an 'erotico-theoretical transference' (2002, p. 104) that consigns the woman student to the role of 'amateur'.

The descriptive understanding of higher education as courtship embraces such ambiguities and leaves the materiality of university life untouched: those involved continue to memorise, recall, rehearse, assess, and implicate themselves in those activities associated with the accountability that encroaches on educational experience. Students attend or miss lectures, work part time, stay up late, participate in or shun their university's union, and form and break relationships. Tutors struggle to find time for their research and the energy to resist institutional bureaucracy. But the opportunity for engagement, as with the event of 'becoming' through appreciative reading, consists in the possibility that the encounter between student, teacher and object of study can be 'among other things, a way of fashioning a sensibility, redirecting one's affections, re-evaluating one's priorities and goals' (Felski, 2015, p. 178).

## V

An implication of the account I have developed is a re-evaluation of engagement's close association with so-called 'active' approaches to learning (see Trowler, 2010), at least where 'active' might imply a strategic 'taking control' of one's learning experience. In the language of existentialist literature, which is closely related to the phenomenological work I have discussed so far, 'engagement' goes hand in hand with responsibility; ultimately, all educational moments are self-educational (Gadamer, 2001); it is only against 'a mood ... which allows certain things to matter to us and to matter in specific ways' (Felski, 2015, p. 21) that any event of reading, of education, of understanding, takes place. This is engagement in the Heideggerian sense: to be always already thrown into a situation, to be projecting possibilities into that situation, and to be responsible for the 'project'.

But I have also elaborated above how the event of belonging to a subject matter confronts active-passive distinctions. Felski urges the possibility of 'yielding' to a text, Macé writes of 'letting our will yield ground' (2013, p. 219) and Gadamer offers willingness to 'submit' or 'be conducted by' the unfolding subject matter as a characteristic of hermeneutic understanding (2004, p. 360). I should clarify that these observations do not countermand my earlier unwillingness to specify particular pedagogical methods: the recognition of the student's responsibility for self-education does not relegate the academic to the role of 'facilitator' any more than yielding to subject matter implies instructional or transmission-based learning. Both student and teacher, after all, 'belong' to the subject matter in the moment of engagement.

A further implication, connected with this insight, is that where other theorists have argued for 'knowledge' as the central concept to which the 'chaotic' language of engagement can be anchored, I have offered 'subject matter'. So Ashwin and McVitty argue

that ‘our framework re-emphasises students’ engagement in higher education as primarily about an engagement with knowledge by placing their development of an understanding of disciplinary and professional knowledge at the centre of their engagement with higher education’ (2015, p. 356). I contend that understanding engagement as the mutual belonging of teacher, student and object of study to an emerging subject matter is preferable for three reasons: (i) it offers no privileged position in engagement to the discipline or to the value of professional knowledge. Such considerations are ‘in the circle’, so to speak – not least in the academic’s commitment to what is ‘at work’ in the object of study – but to hold such commitments in too proprietorial a way will hinder the teacher’s openness to what emerges for this or that student in a particular engagement; (ii) it allows for a fuller ontological, as opposed to a narrower epistemological, assimilation of higher education into a ‘stylistics of existence’, and (iii) it is more etymologically and grammatically satisfying.

This last point merits further elaboration. It is common in the literature of HE to read that students ‘engaged’ or ‘became more engaged’, or that certain tutors or particular activities ‘engaged students’ more than others. This neglects the indirect objects of engagement – what it is that students are engaged *in* or *with*. The picture I have sketched allows for engagement as an emergent relation between student, teacher and object of study that ‘befalls’ or occurs in the sense, possibly, that the baby’s emerging head ‘engages’ with the birth canal – without or perhaps in spite of the striving of the parties involved. Engagement is not ‘about’ or ‘with’ a student’s ‘learning’, or any of the materiality of the educational interaction (students hardly, in this sense, are engaged ‘in their work’) but is always directed towards the subject matter.

The relation of belonging to the subject matter has an inescapably ethical significance when combined with Hogan’s notion of an ‘honest’ courtship. I could suggest a further ethical implication, drawing on a final resonance of ‘engagement’ in existentialist thought. Macé draws attention to the way that literature allows us to ‘constitute ourselves as subjects and reappropriate our relation to ourselves through negotiation with other forms’ (2013, p. 218); this requires (in a fusion of the agency of reader and text, individual and community) ‘a receptive state that produces subjectivity’ (p. 219); Felski embraces the confounding of action and passivity when she paraphrases Latour’s claim that ‘emancipation does not mean freed from bonds, but well-attached’ (2015, p. 146). The resonance here is with Sartre’s (1948/1985) account of literary engagement, where the writer, in adopting a form that assumes the freedom of the reader, aims always at that reader’s emancipation. We might invoke Biesta’s concept of ‘subjectification’ at this point (Biesta, 2011). The teacher, in embracing a profession that assumes the freedom of the student, ‘engages’ to the extent that he or she acts towards the subject-becoming of that student.

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