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Grasshoppers and Goldfish: Literature, Subjectivation, and Ethical Democracy

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Abstract

As western society descends into a state of pervasive attention-deficit, a profound ethical crisis unfolds. The erosion of sustained concentration – exacerbated by the manipulative attention economies of digital technologies and the infiltration of neoliberal logics into educational spaces – has fostered an increasingly fragmented and polarized social fabric. In this milieu, the self becomes mediated through the fleeting validation of social media metrics, giving rise to desires oriented toward fame and superficial influence, and engendering widespread anxiety and alienation. Students, increasingly isolated and driven by an uncritical need for recognition, seek refuge within the transient affirmations of digital platforms. Yet, through a Foucauldian conception of 'care of the self,' cultivated via a dialogic, reflective engagement with the aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of Literature and the arts, individuals may recover the practices of deep self-reflection necessary for the emergence of a more ethical, inclusive, and resilient society.

Keywords: attention-deficit, ethical crisis, subjectivation, ethical democracy

Introduction

> ‘A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.’ Percy Bysshe Shelley (Shelley, 1821), *A Defence of Poetry*.

The concept of ethical democracy emphasises the importance of moral principles and values in democratic processes, ensuring that decisions reflect fairness, justice, and respect for human rights and cultures, while also promoting citizen participation and accountability. These moral principals appear to be under threat from ever-increasing nationalistic views which promote the atomised self and ignore or emasculate the Other. The normative narratives embedded in education curricula construct regimes of truth that shape both how students are perceived and how they come to perceive themselves. When, as in neoliberal curricula, students are positioned primarily as future human capital and commodities whose value is measured by economic productivity, individual success becomes contingent upon the failure of the Other. Within such a paradigm, the conditions necessary for dialogic cooperation are eroded, giving rise instead to a climate of competition marked by suspicion and the proprietary hoarding of ideas, fearing their appropriation.

The effects of neoliberalism, which emphasises the role of atomised individuals in society, devolving all responsibility onto the individual, and seeking competition rather than cooperation in all facets of life, especially in education, has had a polarising effect on society. In education, students are under persistent surveillance, continually tested to ensure arbitrarily defined targets are met. Here, citizenship has been conflated with economic rather than individual development. The incessant regimes of testing and competition have subjected the reading of Literature to a disciplinary logic, reducing it to a mere instrument for the production of measurable literacy competencies. No longer a site for the formation of ethical subjectivities, Literature is recast within a utilitarian framework that privileges standardization, surveillance, and the normalization of outcomes, thereby foreclosing its potential as a

space for the cultivation of critical, self-reflective citizens.

Similarly, the deep reading of Literature is undermined by the pervasive influence of "social" media which has inaugurated a regime in which distraction becomes a normalised mode of subjectivity. In this transitory environment individuals are conditioned to engage in perpetual multitasking whilst being besieged by ephemeral bubbles of information that dissipate without a thought. The circulation of unnuanced, chimeric utterances has fostered a 'newspeak' condition, wherein the complexity of thought is flattened into digestible yet vacuous clichés. As society sinks deeper into the digital morass – further accelerated by the proliferation of AI technologies that promise immediate answers without any personal reflection – the imperative to cultivate critically literate subjects grows ever more urgent. It is only through fostering capacities for nuanced interpretation, critical interrogation, and reflective articulation that the next generation might resist the machinic standardization of consciousness and reclaim the ethical depth of discourse. Students, constituted through pedagogical discourses within an evolving apparatus of disciplinary power and subjectivation, require ethical and moral guidelines with the means to interrogate societal norms and encouragement so as to critically develop their self through self-interrogation and self-reflection.

The study of Literature is an essential element in creating an ethical populace and democracy. It is through the interaction of the reader with the text, the exploration of ideas, the confrontation of new ideas, the emotional connection, and the transformational potentiality of encounters with these which can encourage and foster ethical engagement with different perspectives. As (Bullock, p. 1975) explained in his report to the UK Government:

> ‘Literature brings the child into an encounter with language in its most complex and varied forms. Through these complexities are presented the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of people who exist outside and beyond the reader's daily awareness… bringing them within that circle of consciousness... It provides imaginative insight into what another person is feeling; it allows the contemplation of possible human experiences which the reader himself has not met. It has the capacity to develop … empathy (p125)

It is this empathy, this ‘contemplation of possible human experiences’ that encourages students to self-reflect and through this self-reflection shape themselves to be more empathetic towards others and to create a more ethically democratic society through action. Embedded within this discourse is a normative presumption that students will be ethically shaped in alignment with liberal-democratic ideals, themselves constituted through Western regimes of truth. This process of subjectivation is saturated with historically contingent assumptions and power-knowledge relations that exceed the analytical boundaries of this text.

Subjects and Subjectivation

Foucault contended that the episteme profoundly conditions the ways in which individuals are able to conceive of themselves, rendering self-reflection not merely an inward gaze but a practice deeply embedded within discursive regimes. The formation of identity, in this sense, is inseparable from the technologies of power/knowledge that produce subjectivities. Collet-Sabé and Ball extend this Foucauldian insight, asserting that ‘The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an “ideological” representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power’ (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2022, p. 5). While the individual may appear as an autonomous entity within the ideological imaginaries of society, they are simultaneously a material effect of specific power/knowledge assemblages – a subject constituted through disciplinary mechanisms and governmental rationalities that emerge from the prevailing episteme to regulate the conduct of conduct.

Three types of subjectivation are generally recognised: individualism, individualisation, and individuation. Individualism, as Zuboff (2019) explains, is a neoliberal concept of subjectivation which ‘shifts all responsibility for success or failure to a mythical, atomised, isolated individual, doomed to a life of perpetual competition and disconnected from … society’ (p33). This reduction of the subject to an entrepreneurial self — an isolated, responsibilised agent tasked with optimizing personal performance against neoliberal metrics such as Key Performance Indicators — reflects a mode of

subjectivation rooted in a governmental rationality that dislocates the individual from collective forms of belonging. Detached from any relational or communal identity, the subject is constituted as a calculable, self-regulating, atomised entity whose value is determined solely through their capacity to produce economic utility, in accordance with the prevailing episteme of neoliberalism. This limiting and limited conception of the subjectivation of the individual precludes any aspect of self that lies beyond their economic contribution as "human capital', a Foucauldian Homo Economicus. An education reflecting these principles excludes or excises those areas of the curriculum that encourage a dialogical examination of perspectives.

The second type of subjectivation, individualisation, occurs as the individual discovers that 'life is an open-ended reality to be discovered rather than a certainty to be enacted' (Zuboff, 2019, p. 33). This epistemic change from earlier concepts of forever being typecast by situation and class gave the individual a certain amount of agency in their own lives. New potentials of being became possible as earlier ideas of pre-defined identities faded. Graeber equates this move toward individualisation as being when society 'abandoned dialogue as its typical mode of writing, [and instead it] began imagining the isolated, rational, self-conscious individual not as a rare achievement, … but as the normal default state of human beings anywhere' (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021, p. 105). It was the beginning of the atomisation of the individual.

This historical shift opened new discursive possibilities for constituting the self, yet rather than a teleological movement toward an essential or 'true' self — as in Jung's notion of individuation as the integration of conscious and unconscious domains — the subject emerges as an effect of competing discourses and power/knowledge formations that delimit the field of possible subjectivities. This resonates with Foucault's notion of the 'care of the self' — not as a return to an authentic or pre-given identity, but as a historically contingent ethical practice through which the subject actively constitutes itself. Rather than passively inheriting socially inscribed identities, this practice entails a critical relation to oneself, exercised through technologies of the self that enable the ongoing fabrication of subjectivity within the limits imposed by prevailing regimes of truth. It is also an ongoing ethical practice, not a fixed state. Aho (2003) emphasised that 'The possibilities for our decisions and actions are always already socially constituted, through the language, public practices, and cultural institutions that we grow into as historical beings' (Aho, 2003, p. 10). Yet, following Foucault's contention, there is resistance to external normalisation, and it is this resistance through critical self-awareness that encourages and shapes the individual to be more ethical. It is the power of education and the encouragement of critical thinking that results in far-right governments (e.g. Orbán, Trump) to force schools and universities to follow their diktats, attack migrants and the Other, to limit press freedoms, to undermine the judiciary, and to create mythical national narratives to cover their less than ethical intentions.

In the traditional society, individuals would practise their resistance in the protective familial or school environment, where boundaries could be set and the societal morals expounded, providing a safety-net for the precarity of self-exploration. However, the modern arena

precludes such rootedness, and this precarity leaves the individual coping with shallow, foundationless influencers rather than a supportively guiding group, and ephemeral experiences which are driven by a fugacious social media which is subsequently fragmenting traditional society. Contemporary youth increasingly articulate a perceived right to autonomous self-fashioning; however, the substitution of social media platforms for the historically constitutive roles of parental authority, societal normativity, and the hermeneutic engagement with canonical Literature, functions as a technology of the self that reconfigures subject formation. Rather than facilitating a pluralistic exploration of identity, these digital assemblages operate as apparatuses of power-knowledge, producing echo chambers that simulate supportive communities while, in effect, delimiting discourse and orienting subjectivities towards both the banal and the extreme. For subjects whose critical faculties remain inchoate, the absence of dialogic interrogation and exposure to alterity enables a process of subjectivation in which beliefs are not only affirmed but internalized, resulting in the sedimentation of increasingly circumscribed perspectives. Such a dispositif forecloses the possibility of the critical self-reflexivity that Foucault identifies as essential to the practice of freedom and the ongoing project of ethical self-constitution.

Grasshoppers and Goldfish

There are many impediments to a critical 'care of the self', not least an inability to concentrate for extended periods. It has been posited by various scholars ((Carr, 2020; Firth et al., 2019; Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024; Healy, 1990; Mills, 2023; Ophir et al., 2009; Wolf, 2008, 2018)) that extensive screen time and the attenuation of sustained, in-depth engagement with extended literary texts constitutes a significant transformation in the regimes of attention and subjectivation operative within contemporary educational contexts. This shift, as articulated in the literature, signals a broader reorganization of cognitive and affective capacities, governed by the emergent dispositifs that privilege immediacy and surface engagement over the cultivation of sustained intellectual labour. The displacement of practices centred on deep reading by modes of fragmented, discontinuous consumption reconfigures the very modalities through which students are disciplined to concentrate and maintain focus over protracted durations.

Similarly, Cain et al. (2016) found that adolescents who frequently engage in media multitasking tend to have poorer executive function abilities, reduced working memory capacity, and lower academic achievement. They established that 'more frequent media multitasking in daily life was associated with poorer performance on statewide standardised achievement tests of math and English in the classroom … *and traits of greater impulsivity and lesser growth mindset*.' A meta-analysis by Uncapher et al. (2017, italics mine) similarly indicated that heavy media multitaskers show differences in cognitive control, including poorer memory performance and increased impulsivity. In schools, short paragraphs followed by comprehension questions, while having some uses, do not encourage students to think critically or empathetically, instead having the undesirable effect of promoting and rewarding the grasshopper mind. Complete the task quickly, move on to the next. However, Rothbart and Posner concluded that 'there is also evidence from research on neural plasticity that both older children and adults can improve their executive attention and self-regulation through training' (2015 p23), an indication of how the discourse of literature, when strategically employed within the educational apparatus, can function as a technology of power/knowledge to cultivate specific subjectivities and modes of social interaction. In essence, the study of literature, rather than being a neutral transmission of knowledge, becomes a site where power relations are enacted and potentially reshaped.

Multitasking in social media, hopping through posts and ideas, also reinforces the grasshopper mentality as, without critical thinking students dash through to the next clip or facile (but potentially damaging) utterance. The effect of multi-tasking and '…the number of stimuli vying for children's attention affect[s] their memory, *which affect[s] their comprehension*' (Wolf, 2018, pp. 116, italics mine). Further, she emphasises that 'Learning to concentrate is an essential but ever more difficult challenge in a culture where distraction is omnipresent' (p108). This resonates with Manwell et al's study where they found that excessive screen time (especially on devices) 'affects brain development increasing the risk of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural disorders in adolescents and young adults … Including impaired concentration, orientation, acquisition of recent memories …, recall of past memories …, social functioning, and *self-care*' (Manwell et al., 2022, pp. 1, italics mine). Indeed, they also argued that as 'Excessive screen time is associated with negative physical, mental and social health effects as well as learning and behavioural disadvantages' (Manwell 2021 p11). The importance of all these findings is that these effects are increasingly affecting the ability of students to concentrate for long periods, changing their brain structures and rendering the students unlikely to be able to become critical thinkers.

The effect in school performance is apparent in May and Elder's research found that 'The inherent mental habits of media multitasking—dividing attention, switching attention, and maintaining multiple trains of thought— have significant implications and consequences for students' academic performance. … The research indicates that media multitasking interferes with attention and working memory, negatively affecting GPA, test performance, recall, reading comprehension, note-taking, self-regulation, and efficiency' (May & Elder, 2018). Of course, many of these are neoliberal key performance indicators. They serve a purpose but should not be the aim of education. True education changes; excellent education changes ethically. The effect of constant testing and neoliberalism in the classroom has been extensively examined (e.g. Biesta, Ball, Giroux). Generally, the neoliberal scientific approach to education tends to marginalise any other form or approach. Constant testing

exacerbates the short-term grasshopper and goldfish effects as students rush to read short passages, answer questions, then promptly forget what they have 'learned'. It also compounds feelings of superiority/inadequacy in students. It kills the imagination. It submerges the risk as students fear failing/failure instead of embracing it. The desire to belong is strengthened and the youth cling to their social media for comfort.

The goldfish memory has similarly serious implications. If students are unable to remember, their ability to critically discern the effects of their behaviour could have dire consequences. The Netflix series "Adolescent' is a projection of the possible effects of social media on young people, pointing to the problems of a lack of critical thinking and leading to a disassociation with ethical behaviour. (Anti)social media, working in soundbites and 'like' emojis distances us from those we are purporting to interact with by creating a sub-world of indifference pretending to be thoughtful reflection in a contorted and restricted mimesis of real conversation. The 'newspeak' of Orwell's *1984* is replicated in the soundbites and emojis of modern communication, limiting critical thinking and people's ability to communicate abstract concepts, as complex thoughts are replaced and limited to simplistic interpretations. This, in turn, facilitates the manipulation of the population through echo-chambers and 'influencers' who have little conception of self-worth beyond their own self-importance and personal financial gain. 'Language can', Orwell warned, 'also corrupt thought' (Orwell, 1946, 2013, p. 11). This reduction of language is corrupting the ability to become ethically aware, as perpetrators are distanced from the effects of their injudicious soundbite, emoji, or comment.

The many studies and conclusions of the effects of the neoliberal ideology and social media on children underscore the serious implications for the self-development of students, especially in terms of self-care and self-reflection. As students are increasingly distanced from the humanities — and particularly from critical engagements with literary discourse — the discursive resources necessary for cultivating reflexive subjectivities and ethical self-relation diminish. In the absence of such technologies of the self, individuals become more susceptible to the normalizing effects of algorithmically governed digital ecologies, wherein subject positions are shaped through repetition, affect, and enclosure. This erosion of critical agency undermines the formation of subjects capable of resisting dominant rationalities and participating in the ethical practices necessary for shaping an ethically democratic political environment. As Wolf rationalises: 'When words are not heard, concepts are not learned. When syntactic forms are never encountered, there is less knowledge about the relationship of events in a story. When story forms are never known, there is less ability to infer and to predict. When cultural traditions and the feelings of others are never experienced, there is less understanding of what other people feel' (Wolf, 2008, p. 102). There are, then, serious implications for the evolving student: with diminished higher-order functionality, decisions and subjectification or identity formation will be 'constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what [will remain] radically unthinkable'

Literature

Much has been written about the moral and ethical properties of Literature. Nussbaum, for example, suggests that the novel 'calls forth our "active sense of life", which is our moral faculty' (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 162). Greene (1995) suggested that 'Imagination is what … makes empathy possible'. D'Olimpio (2022), in her defence of aesthetic education, argues that 'the point of education is to support students to be in the best possible position to be able to live meaningful, autonomous lives, filled with rich experiences. The arts and aesthetic education are vital to such lives and to such experiences in the world' (p276).

Yet it is not just the experience of art, or the questionable ability of Literature to offer moral guidance, that is important. Through active and dialogic study, Literature has the ability to allow readers to appreciate vicariously the experiences of others, their thoughts and ideas, and the interplay of ethical standpoints. When students are taught how to reflect on these experiences, to be given the dialogic opportunity to investigate their own belief systems in conjunction/opposition to those just discovered, that the essential ability to self-reflect comes to the fore. This is not just an add-on experiential aspect of Literature. It is quintessentially the most compelling reason to experience Literature and to be actively taught how to develop critical thinking in terms of these experiences. Dunne, for example, theorises that

‘Wisdom… is not contemplation alone, not action alone, but contemplation in action’ (cited in Wolf, 2018, p. 202).

This is not to say that this is the sole reason to read Literature. Reading for pleasure, understanding, literacy skills (e.g. Chen and Derewianka (2009), hooks (1994, 2003), brain development Wolf (2008, 2018), the desire for knowledge, or the yearning for escape, are all good reasons to read. Yet how much more fulfilling are these when coupled with an ability to clearly relate to the characters and their situations, to meditate upon the actions taken and the assumptions that are made before the denouement, the self-reflection on how we might behave in such situations, or on the ethics of the characters.

Žižek argues for another reason to read Literature. He claims that “fiction is more real than the social reality of playing roles” because “there is a domain of fantasmatic intimacy which is marked by a “No Trespass!” sign … In other words, our attitude of engagement with something that is marked as ‘fiction’ allows us to see aspects or dimensions of a situation that we would not normally want to see’ (cited in Wall & Perrin, 2015, p. 8). It is this aspect of being immersed in worlds and ideas beyond what we have imagined that expands our propensity to engage more empathetically with the other and investigate our own alterity. There is, then, a ‘crack’ in those putatively immutable digital assemblages, ‘a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in’ (Cohen, 1992). Prising open the cracks, discerning new spaces and ideas, and dialogically exploring them, is indispensable to studying Literature so that we are less ‘constrained by … what is difficult to imagine, [or] what remains radically unthinkable’ (Butler, 1993/2011, p. 59) but instead more capable of engaging in dialogic practices that reflect a subjectivity open to the ethical labour of encountering difference. It also represents a rupture in the social bubble, prompting students to perceive the Other from a renewed and more critical perspective. It serves to cultivate a disposition through technologies of the self that enable a critical relation to dominant discourses and the possibility of constituting both personal and societal ethical systems**.**

For Foucault, ethics ‘is the responsibility of each individual to reflect upon and choose how they wish to exist in the historically and culturally specific situation they find themselves in’ (O'Farrell, 2005, Ch9). And yet what is a ‘historically and culturally specific situation’ in a world that is changing so rapidly? How, within a digitally saturated regime of truth governed by attention economies and algorithmic rationalities, can the subject engage in practices of critical self-reflection? In a milieu where discursive formations systematically fragment attention, amplify the sensational and the extreme, and enclose users within epistemic echo chambers that circulate mis- and disinformation, the very conditions for ethical subjectivation — and thus for the possibility of democratic life — are destabilized? This attention-deficient society is being shaped by the biopolitical and governmental logics through the use and abuse of technology and the dearth of reflective critical reading. For example, Harris argues that ‘While tech has been upgrading the machines, they’ve been downgrading humans - downgrading attention spans, civility, mental health, children, productivity, critical thinking, relationships, and democracy’ (Harris, 2019). In his dystopian summary of the current state of technology platforms, he posits that ‘We often consider problems in technology as separate – addiction, distraction, fake news, polarization and teen suicides and mental health. They are not separate. They are part of an interconnected system of harms that are a direct consequence of a race to the bottom of the brain stem to extract attention’ (Harris, 2019). Practices of critical self-reflection become almost impossible when accepting the discursive formations of immediate gratification, identity thinking and acceptance.

Through a study of Literature it is possible, as Rita Felski suggests, to relate to others through affect, connection, and co-implication. She argues that attachment, resonance, and enchantment are quintessential ways of relating to texts, fostering an ethical understanding in that they honour complexity, emotion, and openness. She posits that “Interpretation is not extraction but implication: we are involved, attached, enmeshed” (Felski, 2020). Martha Nussbaum suggests that a study of Literature emphasises empathy, compassion, and universal human capabilities. In works like *Love’s Knowledge* and *Poetic Justice*, she defends the idea that reading literary fiction can enhance our ethical sensibilities. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault discusses how literature resists and reconfigures the way we think about truth, knowledge, and subjectivity. For him, literature can reveal the hidden ethical frameworks of a given era. Literature, in this sense, can be a medium through which individuals engage in ethical self-exploration. It is a heterotopic space of alterity where ethical limits can be safely tested.

If, as Felski claims, 'The moment of self-consciousness, of individual insight, is simultaneously a social diagnosis and an ethical judgment' (p36), then students require an in-depth study of 'the arts – learning, making, critiquing, and receiving the arts – [which] is a vital component in a flourishing life' (D'Olimpio, 2022, p. 272). Not only does critical involvement of the arts encourage a flourishing life, 'The moment of self-consciousness, of individual insight, is simultaneously a social diagnosis and an ethical judgment' (Felski, 2008, p. 36).

A critically reflexive engagement with Literature operates as a technology of the self — a discursive practice through which subjects may cultivate an ethical sensibility attuned to complexity, contingency, and alterity. By foregrounding narrative multiplicity and exposing the moral failures inscribed within social imaginaries, such study enables the formation of subjectivities capable of empathetic engagement, critical resistance, and ethical reflection. In this way, Literature becomes not merely a site of aesthetic experience, but a mode of ethical work on the self — one that reorients the subject toward pluralism, justice, and democratic participation within contested regimes of truth.

Ethics and Ethical Democracy

Foucault emphasises that "ethics is the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself … the care of the self' (Foucault, 1982). Ethics and 'creat[ing] ourselves as a work of art' (Foucault, 1984, p. 350) demands critical engagement with societal norms (including perceived norms through social media interactions) and an ongoing process of subjectivation that resists domination. It is this resistance against the norms espoused by social media echo chambers that encourages a self-reflective ethics. 'The care of the self is...a sort of permanent attention to oneself, which is a form of vigilance' (Foucault, 1986), and a constant critical analysis of the barrage of influences is even more crucial today.

Ethics, in the Foucauldian sense, is not a fixed moral code but an ongoing performative practice — a mode of subjectivation enacted through self-relation and constituted within networks of sociality and power. This ethical labour is not solitary; it is intersubjective, shaped through encounters with others and mediated by discursive formations that inform the subject's understanding of self. Literature functions here as a discursive mirror — a space in which the subject can interrogate, rehearse, and reconfigure ethical relations, testing the contours of identity, responsibility, and care. However, the crux here is that one cannot attend to others, take care of others, or help others, if one has not first attended to oneself. Felski, following Levinas, suggests that 'Ethics means accepting the mysteriousness of the other, its resistance to conceptual schemes' (Felski, p. 26), but this becomes next to impossible if students are only subjected to an ever-increasing spiral into the depths of social platforms and attention-grabbing echo chambers.

This kind of ethical awareness through self-care is, according to Foucault, 'the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (Foucault, 2002, p. 284). It is a freedom of thought and action untainted by the influences of influencers and echo-chambers, instead critically questioning them. The yoke of the undermining subterfuges of social media, that 'constant visibility to others [which] fuel[s] mass social anxiety and a mental health crisis (Harris, 2019), and which push people craving companionship towards extremist groups (Shukman), is undermining democracy. Without due care to construct an ethical self, the extremes in society are becoming more prevalent. As Foucault warns, '…the risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only *when one has not taken care of the self* and has become the slave of one's desires' (Foucault, 2002 p 288). This is not a freedom; it is an enslavement brought about through a lack of critical awareness and a fundamental disregard of the other.

Conclusion

Society is in a perilous situation. It has reached a precarity where normally trusted sources are deemed fake; where people are short-circuited into a spiral of extreme and disturbing self-views, where technology and neoliberal educational outcomes have 'downgraded our attention spans, downgraded our capacity for complexity and nuance, downgraded our shared truth, downgraded our beliefs into conspiracy theory thinking [such] that we can't construct shared agendas to solve our problems' (Harris 2019). It emerges as a locus where individuals, adrift in a tempest of mediated and ephemeral relations, confront the existential erosion of their sense of self and significance.

If society is to combat this degradation of ethical nuance, of understanding, of truth, then education must change to incorporate deep reading of consequential Literature. It is not the only solution, but the effect of attention deficiency begins in the early classrooms and extends into the senior school. Even young children 'learn to experience new feelings through exposure to reading, which, in turn, prepares them to understand more complex emotions' (Wolf, 2008, p. 85). An critically reflective exploration of Literature in education is essential in creating an ethically democratic society. It is through the discursive engagement with Literature that the conditions for a critical interrogation of the social order — and of one's situatedness within it — are made possible. Literature serves as a site of subjectivation, enabling individuals to problematize inherited norms, to examine the contingent nature of their beliefs, and to engage in practices of ethical self-formation in relation to others and the sociohistorical forces that shape them.

Within the rationalities of neoliberal governmentality, time itself becomes a regulated scarcity — the subject is interpellated as an autonomous economic agent, governed to prioritise productivity and self-survival over reflective thought. This depoliticised and individuated mode of being forecloses the possibility of sustained engagement with complex ethical questions. Yet, the disciplined study of canonical Literature opens a space for slowness — for prolonged cognitive and affective labour that exceeds instrumental rationality. Unlike the procedural certainties and depersonalised abstractions often privileged in STEM discourses, Literature offers a terrain for ethical subjectivation: a discursive and aesthetic practice through which the self may encounter ambiguity, contradiction, and the moral entanglements of lived experience. In contrast to the neoliberal fantasy of the self-sufficient individual, Literature reintroduces the subject to their embeddedness in social, historical, and emotional relations — a process crucial for the formation of ethical, politically engaged selves amidst precarity and fragmentation. Through an intensive and dialogic engagement with literary texts, individuals can cultivate a deeper understanding of the self and the Other, thereby fostering societal progress toward a more cohesive, inclusive, and ethically grounded democracy.

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