

# ATTUNEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC LITERATURE EDUCATION, OR FREE TIME WITH CLINT EASTWOOD

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## Abstract

This article takes its starting point in the idea that literature education has democratic potential. It questions a view of literature education as fundamentally a fosterer of democratic citizens, and aims to conceptualise a literature education which in itself can contain democratic moments. The quest for such moments is informed by a Mouffean agonistic understanding of democracy, particularly the aspect of collective identity formation. It is also informed by Masschelein and Simons' understanding of school as 'free time' and by Felski's concept attunement from her theory of literary reading. A fusion of these theories works to form an understanding of the literature classroom as a space for becoming, individually and collectively, in an open, non-predetermined sense. The theoretical argument is illustrated by a discussion between four upper secondary school students about the short story 'Farangs' (Lapcharoensap, 2005). I use Felski's attunement and the metaphor of harmonising, singing in harmonies, to conceptualise a relation between literature education and democracy that centres on becoming in collective terms.

Keywords: Attunement, literature instruction, democratic education, free time, harmonies

Anyway though, couldn't it be that with different subjects, some are for work life some are for, you know, life? - Noah

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of literature education as an important democratic actor is not new. A common argument is that literature can serve as a fosterer of democratic citizenship (Nussbaum, 2003). Often, it is the assumed potential of literature to support the cultivation of 'empathy' that is in focus (Chieregato, 2023; Kidd & Castano, 2013; McGinley et al., 2021; Porto & Zembylas, 2020). The liberal arts tradition, in which Martha C. Nussbaum is a prominent figure, posits that literature has the potential to foster 'narrative imagination' (Nussbaum, 2003)—the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others. This ability is regarded as a necessity if democracy is to thrive in a globalised world (Nussbaum, 2012). In this reasoning, there are a few underlying assumptions about democracy and the position of literature in democracy that should be addressed.

One such assumption is that democratic citizenship is concerned with empathy and empathetic relationships. Another assumption is that the democrat is a particular kind of subject, one that needs to be developed—sculpted in a certain way (Nussbaum, 2003). A third assumption is that a legitimate place for literature in a prospering democracy is that of a fosterer of democratic citizenship. Taken together, these assumptions form a relationship between literature education and democracy that centres on the shaping of students—future citizens—in a certain way, by cultivating certain values and dispositions. In broader terms, this understanding of the relationship between literature education and democracy relies on a conception of democracy as a set of democratically skilled individuals, who are empathetic and have refined their narrative imagination. The task given to education in such a democracy is then to ensure that this skillset is acquired in school. Gert Biesta (2011) has called this a socialisation conception of citizenship education, because it foregrounds socialising aspects of democratic education. Democracy is treated as an already established set of values and skills, which students can obtain. Biesta (2011) contrasts this approach to a subjectification conception. A focus on subjectification in democratic education means an open attitude toward democracy as negotiable, and toward the classroom as a space where students can act in ways that are unforeseen.

The point of this article is not to question liberal values in themselves, or to question the general value of empathy in social relations. However, there is good reason to question the unassailable status of empathy, and of liberal values, in our understanding of democratic literature education (see for example Ahmed, 2014, for a critical stance on empathy). In this article, I argue that proposals for democratic literature education that stem from the liberal arts tradition operate within a hegemony that puts a strong emphasis on liberal aspects of liberal democracy (see

Mouffe, 2009), and that this somewhat restricted view of the relationship between literature education and democracy could benefit from being broadened.

In order to broaden the discussion on the role of literature in democratic education, we should direct our focus at our perceptions of democracy, and of what democracy can be in a classroom context. This requires an openness to regarding democracy as a concept that is not fixed, but open for negotiation (Biesta, 2011). I propose here that literature education is regarded not as a space for fostering democrats, but as a space where *democratic moments* can occur. By this, I mean that the classroom itself can become a space of democratic negotiation, at least momentarily. Sketching this proposal, I turn to the scholastic theory of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, in which school is traced back to its Greek origin *scholē*, meaning ‘free time’ (2013, p. 9). Free time, in a scholastic sense, is not time for relaxation, as our modern day use of the term might connote. It is time that is free from work; it is non-productive time, time that is granted the future generation, in which they must neither produce something, nor be produced as a pre-set something. Central to the argument of Masschelein and Simons is that school is a time and place for what Hannah Arendt (1961) calls *becoming*. School is not a place where preconceived identities are sedimented; it is a time and place in which students are allowed to mature, to become someone in relation to the subject matter presented to them. The end goal for this becoming is not stipulated in advance, by politicians or by pedagogues.

Because subject matter in the case of literature education is literature and literary interpretation, I fuse the idea of free time with Rita Felski’s elaboration on the concept *attunement* (2020), to explore becoming through theory of literary reading. Attunement is what happens when a work of art and its reader (or beholder, or listener) harmonise. It is an emotional and an intellectual process, in which the work of art becomes important to its reader. In this article, attunement is approached as a collective process, in which the voices of multiple readers unite in the act of interpretation. *Harmonising*—singing in harmonies—functions as a metaphor to illustrate this collective process of becoming. I argue that a literary discussion understood as free, non-productive time, can create a space for students to attune to the text, and I discuss the democratic potential of a literature classroom that offers opportunities for students to come to care for something that initially seemed unimportant. Chantal Mouffe’s (2005, 2009) agonistic understanding of the state of liberal democracies opens the argument, and it is followed by a conceptual fusion of Masschelein and Simons’ school as free time with Felski’s attunement. I illustrate the argument with an empirical example from a literary discussion between a group of Swedish upper secondary students about the short story ‘Farangs’ (Lapcharoensap, 2005), and make a case for democratic moments in literature education.

## 2. A DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT (IN LITERATURE EDUCATION?)

First, there is a need to clarify a statement made above, namely that proposals for democratic literature education that stem from the liberal arts tradition operate within a hegemony that puts a strong emphasis on liberal aspects of liberal democracy. In *The Democratic Paradox* (2009), Mouffe writes of liberal democracy as a tension between two logics—a liberal logic and a democratic logic. These logics are rooted in different ideals. The liberal logic contributes values such as individual liberty and human rights, as well as the rule of law, whereas the democratic logic gives prominence to equality, popular sovereignty and identification between those who rule and those who are ruled (Mouffe, 2009, pp. 2–3). She calls it a tension, because to her, the core values of liberty on the one hand, and equality on the other, are not simultaneously fully realisable. This is the democratic paradox. Liberal democracy is the result of a hegemonic struggle, in which proponents for both liberalism and democracy must depart from their respective ultimate aims.

Mouffe's critique of the current state in liberal democracies is that democracy has increasingly come to be identified with liberal values. Democracy has, as she puts it, been 'reduced to its liberal component' (2019, p. 16), as economic liberalism, with its defence of the free market, has fortified its hegemonic status. She describes the situation as post-democratic, with a 'democratic deficit' (2009, p. 4). It is insufficient, in other words, to treat democracy as a set of liberal values. What Mouffe proposes is an adversarial, agonistic understanding of democracy, in which 'liberty and equality for all' is the central motto, but in which the definitions of these key values, liberty and equality, are open for negotiation (2013a, p. 7). Central is the *adversary*, who is, in contrast to the enemy, someone who shares your allegiance to liberty and equality, but who does not necessarily share your understanding of the meaning of liberty and equality. Politics, for Mouffe, must be open to a struggle between adversaries, and the adversaries are constituted by this very struggle. Identity formation is put in the foreground in her agonism; the political is concerned with the formation of collective identities, and these identities are always formed in relation to an 'other' (2013a). A vital component in her notion of identity formation is 'passions' (2005, 2013b). It is imperative that passions are recognised as constitutive of political identities, rather than regarded as undemocratic. Political discourse must provide people with modes of identification that they find valuable—that they are passionate about—and that give them hope for the future (2005, p. 25).

Informed by Mouffe's agonistic understanding of democracy, this article explores the idea that a democratic literature classroom is a classroom that attends to opportunities for students to form identities that they find valuable, in relation to literature and literary interpretation. This is done mainly because, if it is insufficient to treat democracy as shared liberal values, then it is insufficient to treat democratic education as socialisation into a liberal value system. Above, I refer to Biesta's (2011) distinction between a socialisation conception of citizenship education, and a subjectification conception. The differing conceptions take different starting points

for their conceptualisations of the relationship between democracy and education. An important difference lies in whether we regard democracy as something we have and should *preserve* through education, or as something negotiable that could be *created* in education. Another important difference lies in whether student identity formation has an expected outcome, or an open-ended one. Biesta (2013) considers it a mistake to regard democracy as something that takes place *after* education, and to regard democratic citizenship as a product of education. That is a reasoning that is 'based on the assumption that the guarantee for democracy lies in the existence of a properly educated citizenry, so that once all citizens are properly educated, democracy will simply follow' (2013, p. 102). In consequence, the actual workings of democracy are placed outside of school, and 'freedom' becomes important only after a certain stage of development. If democratic education attends to subjectification, democracy becomes a concern for the educational situation itself. When coupled with Mouffeian agonism (2005), subjectification is not only an individualist matter, but also a matter of the formation of collective identities.

In terms of literature education, Gustav Borsgård has pointed to a risk accompanying a socialisation conception of citizenship education, namely that the democratic role of literature in education is reduced to fit the goal-oriented discourse of measurability (2021; see also Lundström et al., 2011 for a discussion on literature and measurability). In the case of Sweden, he maps out a conversion in educational policy documents, from a view of democracy as a work in progress, to a view of democracy as a finished project. The strong status of goal orientation that school has come to see, in combination with an individualist shift, turns democracy into a competence for the individual student to acquire, rather than a dynamic process. With this shift, the subjectification dimension of democratic education has been marginalised (Borsgård, 2021, p. 207). If democratic education is socialisation into a set of values, then there is a risk that the role of literature education becomes supplying students with those values. When democracy becomes a quantifiable, individual competence, and literature education is most conveniently legitimised through its ability to equip each student with this competence, then the classroom situation risks losing its own potency as a place for democratic change. This is a warning that echoes that of a liberal predominance, and a liberal democratic imbalance (Mouffe, 2009, 2019). Ultimately, democratic education is then not a matter of potential societal change, but of the preservation of a hegemonic order.

Having pointed to these issues, a possible conclusion could of course be that literature education should not concern itself with democracy. If the answer to the question: 'What is democratic about literature education?' is not that it could foster citizenship, then perhaps the question of democratic literature education is best left aside. That is, however, not the point I am making. Recognising identity formation, particularly in collective terms, as a democratic matter (Mouffe, 2005), recognising passion and valorisation as constitutive aspects of democratic identity formation, and recognising democracy as a concept open for negotiation, I make an attempt to

conceptualise a democratic literature education that attends to subjectification (Biesta, 2011).

### 3. SCHOOL, LOVE AND BECOMING

Proposing an alternative to a socialisation conception of literature education, I fuse the concept of school as ‘free time’ (Masschelein & Simons, 2013) with an approach to literary reading as attunement (Felski, 2020). When I refer to school, it is to Masschelein and Simons’ idealistic use of the term, and not to the modern-day institution we call school. Conceptualising school as non-productive time means allowing an open-ended purpose. The purpose of school is then not to turn a student body into a workforce, or into anything else that has already been decided by external politicians and pedagogues. School is, according to this ideal, a place where a new generation is granted time to form its generation (Masschelein & Simons, 2013).

The new generation—the students—must be presented with something in relation to which they can shape their generation. Variations of the word presence are central to their reasoning. Subject matter is presented by a teacher, and presenting something, for Masschelein and Simons, is bringing this something into *the present tense*. The teacher brings subject matter into the present tense, and she brings students into the present tense, by suspending the world. Presenting subject matter is freeing it from its original use; in scholastic terms this is an act of profanation (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 38). The world is made profane in that it is freed up for novel use; it is ‘put on the table’ by a teacher, but also ‘unhanded’ (2013, p. 92), so that students can use their non-productive time together with their teacher and with the presented subject matter, as a foundation for something new.

For Arendt, newness is crucial because without it, there is only deterioration. In her essay ‘The crisis in education’ (1961), she regards education as a place to save the world from ‘that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable’ (1961, p. 196). The reason for renewing the world is love, and Arendt’s love is adopted by Masschelein and Simons. Love—for the world, for the subject, and for the students—is the staple of education (Masschelein & Simons, 2013). It is love that lies behind the teacher’s wish to present her subject to the future generation, and it is out of love that she puts her subject on the table and takes her hands off it, lets it become part of something that she cannot control.

To many literature teachers, the union of love and subject is not foreign. It was not to the teacher that I cooperated with for the study that you will be presented with shortly. This teacher and his students read a Swedish translation of the short story ‘Farangs’ by Rattawut Lapcharoensap, from the collection *Sightseeing* (2005). The story centres on a young man in Thailand, whose mother runs a beachside motel, and whose father is a long-gone American soldier. Before leaving his family, with an unfulfilled promise that he will later send for them, the father gives his son a piglet

from the food market. At the time that the story is mainly set, the son and the pig are fully grown and the pig is named Clint Eastwood. The young man repeatedly falls in love with Western women on holiday at his beach, to his mother's dismay, and they all leave him heartbroken when their holidays end. This is also the case with Lizzie, a young American who turns out to have an unpleasant and cheating boyfriend, Hunter. The mother, herself heartbroken by the disappearing father, dislikes the Clint Eastwood and threatens to cook him. The story ends with Clint being chased around the beach by Hunter and his friends, finally escaping by swimming out into the ocean, while the main character watches from a treetop and thinks to himself: 'Swim, Clint, Swim' (Lapcharoensap, 2005, p. 23). When I asked the teacher that I cooperated with here why he wanted to teach this particular story in his class, his answer was that he himself had a lovely experience reading it. He liked the directness of the writing, and in addition to that, Clint Eastwood made him think of his own young daughter and her approach to life. This made him care very much about the fate of the pig. Love is in other words often close at hand when the subject is literature.

Beyond the affective influence that literature has on some of its readers, which is explicated in the next section, I do not intend to dig deep into the constitution of the literary text as such. However, if literature education is to be a time and place for democratic moments, where there is room for negotiation, it is imperative that the literary text offers differing possibilities. For Torsten Pettersson, literary texts are 'pliable', in that they 'support equally admissible incompatibilities' (2002, p. 229). In the act of interpretation, text and interpreter(s) are both agents. The literary text offers opportunities of interpretation that are sometimes mutually exclusive. Pettersson neither locates the interpretation in the text, nor outside the text. Interpretation is not 'made', it is 'found' (2002, p. 228), but the number of possible interpretations to find is indefinable.

The ambiguity of literary interpretation is promoted by Cori Ann McKenzie and Geoff Bender (2021) as a democratic asset in education. To them, ambiguity is the 'lifeblood of literature' (2021, p. 51), and they argue that 'moments of literary ambiguity might [...] be harnessed toward the goal of developing students' democratic skills and dispositions' (2021, p. 57). Ambiguity, or pliability, is viewed as a condition for democratic moments here as well, but regarding democracy as a set of skills comes with a risk that parallels the warning above about reducing democracy and the role of literature in democracy to fit a goal-oriented discourse of measurability (Borsgård, 2021). When this becomes the case, arguments that were intended to critique a neoliberal educational discourse seek legitimation within the same discourse that they were supposed to disrupt. Jane McDonnell (2014) discusses political subjectivity in a longitudinal study on young people's engagement with the arts. In a discussion on political literacy, she argues that this must be understood 'not just as a set of knowledge, skills and dispositions, but also as a general political awareness and engagement, and perhaps even a literary practice that is experienced in aesthetic ways and has an imaginative power' (2014, p. 85). I share a scepticism

toward treating democracy as a skillset, and I think that in order to escape this line of thinking, we might also need to abandon the idea of political engagement as 'literacy'.

The attempt that I am making instead is at envisioning the literature classroom as a time and place for becoming. It correlates in some ways with explorations of performativity in open approaches to literary interpretation (Asplund, 2010; Höglund & Rørbech, 2021; Sjödin, 2019; Sønneland, 2020). Similar to what I do here, Margrethe Sønneland, for example, has taken an interest in an open-ended process of becoming in relation to literary texts (2019). This process is however not often conceived of in terms of democracy, in the manner that it is done here. What sets this study apart from other studies influenced by theories of performativity is mainly the influence from agonistic political theory. Identity formation, and particularly collective identity formation, is understood as a political act.

#### 4. ATTUNEMENT, OR COMING TO CARE FOR THE FORMERLY INSIGNIFICANT

What attunement contributes to the argument is a sense of value—a valorisation of identities formed through the ensemble of readers and text. Attunement is part of Felski's (2020) Actor Network Theory inspired elaboration on art and its way of appealing to its readers, viewers and listeners. Felski dwells on an essay by Zadie Smith (2012), in which Smith ponders on the fact that she has gone from detesting Joni Mitchell's music, to being so emotionally affected by it that she is unable to listen to it in public. She is simply too moved. This effect that some works of art have on their targets (let us from now on call them readers, as readers of literature are in focus in this article), is not easily explained. Smith finds herself unable to say what caused her final, sudden, attunement to Mitchell's music. Felski also gives the example of her own utter captivation by Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, having been appreciative but not affected by his other work, and finding this particular novel, to her surprise, more or less slated by a unanimous body of critics (2020, pp. 44–45). In both cases, attunement is enigmatic, and it has come unexpectedly.

As illustrated by Smith's case, attunement is not always immediate, far from it. There is a temporal variation, from the sudden epiphany to the slow and lengthy, sometimes strenuous process, in which attunement feels 'like an overcoming rather than an embrace' (Felski, 2020, p. 66). Over time, we are exposed to and attuned to the cultural history of our collective, it is a form of learning. But, in education, we are also exposed to things that make us rethink, re-experience and remake perceptions. Through education, we can become attuned to 'what once seemed opaque or irrelevant' and come to 'admire what once seemed unworthy of affection' (2020, p. 56). In other words, what has seemed insignificant, or impervious, or both, might become valuable, and suddenly, or at last, appear transparent.

It is through this process that attunement can be understood in scholastic terms. It is the process of coming to value something formerly perceived as worthless, and in the same moment, becoming a group who value the text in front of you. Both the



temporal aspect and an openness to the unexpected are of importance here. When school is understood as free time—presence—in which a teacher and her students together found something new based on a literary text and literary interpretation, then there is space for attunement. And when attunement occurs, it is in an open process of becoming. It is not the sedimentation of preconceived student identities, it is the opportunity to come into being as subjects in relation to the presented text, the text brought into the present tense.

I want to stress that I view this as a collective process (Sørhaug, 2018). The process of identity formation is not only, not even primarily, to be understood as individual (Mouffe, 2005). The newness is brought about in a process of mediation, through the student readers, but also through a teacher. The artwork needs ‘allies’, Felski states, and attunement as a collaborative experience is no less valuable than the individual reading experience. ‘Mediation does not detract from the magic of art but creates it’, she says (2020, p. 78). I will return to the matter of collectivity, presenting the students and their talk.

Felski points out that an offer of the artwork is that it makes us pay attention. Art ‘invites us to look closely at what we might otherwise overlook’ (2020, p. 60). I view this as a decisive aspect of becoming, and claim that the teacher’s task is to aid the act of looking closely, presenting the text with questions that encourage students to do just that. In an upper secondary school context, inexperienced readers and complicated texts are not always instantly harmonising, but a teacher and her questions can make the offer more alluring.

## 5. THE STUDENTS AND THE STORY, OR FREE TIME WITH CLINT EASTWOOD

To illustrate the conceptual argument with a classroom situation, I provide an example from a group of students discussing ‘Farangs’ (Lapcharoensap, 2005). What happens in their discussion, I would like to describe as a collective moment of attunement. These four students, who are here called John, Jakob, Ludvig, and Vincent,<sup>1</sup> are in their last year of the economics programme in upper secondary school in Sweden. They are part of a class of thirty, that participated in a collaborative study in which their teacher and I worked together to design the teaching.<sup>2</sup> The backdrop of the study was agonistic democratic theory (Mouffe, 2013a); a purpose of the design of the teaching was to imagine the classroom as a site of agonistic struggle. This meant that we were concerned with opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> The names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The students were informed that the study concerned democracy in relation to literature education, and they gave their written consent to take part either in the classroom observation only, or in additional subsequent group interviews. They were informed that withdrawing from participation was allowed at any point in the study. For a more detailed account on data generation, see (Tysklind, 2024).

students' identity formation, individual and collective, in relation to the literary text and in relation to each other.

One lesson was filmed, and in this lesson, the students discussed the short story first in six smaller groups, and then together in the whole class. The basis for the discussions was three questions: 1) What is the main theme of the short story? Is it class, masculinity, power, or something else? 2) Is anyone being exploited in the story? If so, who? 3) What does the pig symbolise? Each group was asked to come up with a collective interpretation, answering the three questions, and to present their answers to the whole class. After the presentations, the teacher asked the groups whether they thought any of the other groups were off track in their interpretations. The purpose of this design was to explore elements of dissent and struggle in the classroom.

A part of the discussion—the part about the symbolic value of the pig—was particularly heated. One group of students argued that the pig symbolised the bond between father and son; the pig, they claimed, granted the main character a sense of safety that was otherwise lost when the father left. A couple of other students opposed this interpretation, claiming that it was far-fetched.<sup>3</sup> This dispute made up a considerable portion of the whole class conversation. Meanwhile, John and Jakob made an attempt to shift the discussion to revolve around their interpretation, an interpretation that we will delve into shortly. Their wish to draw attention to their own interpretation was made clear in the interviews that took place in the week after the lesson. A total of 11 students were interviewed in groups of 3–5. John, Jakob and Vincent were all interviewed in the same group together with Noah, who is quoted in the epigraph. Ludvig took part in another interview group. In the interviews, Jakob and John revealed that they felt disregarded in the whole class discussion. They wanted to highlight their interpretation; they were noticeably happy with it and argued that it was 'the best' one of the interpretations, but they experienced difficulty in making themselves heard. Other students had more power over the direction of the discussion, and John and Jakob had to fold.

The interpretation that John, Jakob, Ludvig and Vincent presented in the classroom, is that the pig symbolises the main character's relationship with Westerners. Their conclusion is that when Clint Eastwood swims out to sea at the end, and the young man indicates that he thinks he should keep swimming, it is a sign that he has finally let go of his 'addiction to<sup>4</sup> Westerners', as Jakob puts it. This

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<sup>3</sup> See Tysklind et al. (2024) for an analysis of conflictual and emotional aspects of the discussion.

<sup>4</sup> All transcripts are translated from the Swedish original. In Swedish, what Jakob says is that the main character has let go of his 'beroende av' Westerners. This is a phrase that means and incorporates both 'addiction to' and 'dependence on'. I have chosen 'addiction to' because I think it best mirrors the discussion, but the wider meaning should be acknowledged.

is a conclusion that they arrive at after some initial ideas about other possible symbolic interpretations of the pig. Vincent starts with the pig as a symbol for love, while John moves on to an interpretation of the pig as a symbol for the different steps of the story. Ludvig suggests that the pig has something to do with the main character's relation to Westerners, and Jakob adds that the pig is a symbol for toxic relationships. After some discussion, John seems to suddenly have an epiphany. He raises his voice slightly, indicating to the others that he has an idea that he wants them to listen to.

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|---------|--|
| John    | Hang on a sec! Think about it, he's constantly hanging on to this idea of his dad, Westerners are good, blah blah blah.  |
| Ludvig  | Mhm.   |
| John    | She [the mother] dislikes them and she's always been like, no we, we'll give up the pig blah blah blah, and then at the end when he's starting to realise that okay well, I, I'll give up Westerners, then the pig swims out to sea. |
| Ludvig  | And that's when he says [flips through pages] erm—   |
| Jakob   | It might be a sign that he fi—   |
| Ludvig  | 'Swim Clint, Swim.'  |
| Vincent | Yeah.  |
| Jakob   | It might be a sign that he finally like—   |
| John    | He has let go!   |
| Ludvig  | I think—   |
| Jakob   | Yeah he lets go of his addiction to Westerners.  |
| Ludvig  | He gets, he gets his mom's view.   |
| Vincent | Yeah he agr—   |
| Ludvig  | That—  |
| John    | That's not too bad, [smiles when he speaks] that's quite—  |

John's idea, which the rest of the group instantly take on as their collective idea, is that the ending of the story, in which the pig swims out to sea, represents the main character's decision that he does not need Westerners. This entails, as Ludvig points out, coming to understand his mother's aversion toward Westerners. John's idea is built on earlier ideas from the group, of the pig as a symbol for relationships.

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*Transcription key:*

*= immediate continuation;*

*– cut-off or self-interruption;*

*[ ] analyst description or comment*

In terms of attunement, several things in this excerpt are of interest. First of all, the tone of engagement in John's voice when asking for the others' attention signals that he has something important to say. The fact that Ludvig immediately turns to the physical copy of the text in front of him, to continue John's argument through tying it to the final line of the story, indicates his engagement. Jakob is also immediately on board with the others, likening the actions of the main character to letting go of an addiction. The smile with which John says that this interpretation that they have come up with is 'not too bad', indicates that he is content, and proud of their work—he finds that it has value.

Having tied the symbolic value of the pig to the ending of the story, the group continue with a discussion on whether or not they liked the ending. The upcoming excerpt shows a shift, from a consensus, at least among Ludvig, Jakob and John, that the story had a bad ending, to an appreciation for the ending, induced by their shared interpretation.

- Ludvig            Well it was kind of a bad ending.
- Jakob            Like— Yeah
- John             Yeah I think it was very imp, well like yeah=
- Ludvig            Compact.
- John             =it's like they tightened the straps on, yeah well on=
- Ludvig            On the sack.
- John             =the rucksack, yeah on the sack, at the end.
- Jakob            Yeah but, but the bag was still filling up=
- John             Yeah well it, yeah=
- Jakob            =it wasn't fully filled.
- John             =it happened a little fast but you can also see it as quite, well, it wasn't that bad.
- Vincent          No.
- Ludvig            No.
- John             Do you know what I mean, it wasn't that bad.
- Ludvig            Although you really have to see like the whole picture to like think that, Cli, well swi—
- Jakob            Yeah at first, like—
- John             If you read this, you won't get it all=
- Ludvig            No.
- John             =it's just like, if you read the last page then—
- Jakob            Like now, now that we're discussing I get, well the ending but like when I read it I was just annoyed that you=

- [Laughter]
- Jakob =never get to know how anything ended, like, just so tired of that.
- [Laughter]
- Jakob Yeah well, right, here we have another frickin open ending where it's like=
- [Laughter]
- Jakob =oh right swim Clint, you're just like what the hell.

The process of attunement is continuing in this passage. The feature of the text that their discussion circles around—the open ending—is central. The passage begins with Ludvig's simple statement that the ending was bad, with which John and Jakob agree. John has however been swayed in their discussion, and he starts convincing the others. Vincent and Ludvig first cautiously agree, then Jakob elaborates on John's statement that 'it wasn't that bad'. The students are, as Jakob states, annoyed that they are not presented with an ending. For Jakob, open endings are commonplace—it is a storytelling technique that he is tired of. When they interpret the ending together, however, they end up with an interpretation that ties the pig's and the young man's last actions to the rest of the story, and they collectively warm up to the story.

Jakob describes the process in terms of understanding. In the discussion, he gets the ending. From the angle of Pettersson's (2002) pliability, the process is better described as bending. Using the analytical question presented by the teacher as a tool, the students actively bend the text in a direction that fills up the rucksack, to use their own metaphor. This act, a harmonising act in which the ensemble of student voices work with the text to create something that they like the sound of, is attunement. It is not a matter of tuning the students to the text, in a process that alters one part but not the other. It is not, to draw on Biesta (2011), a matter of socialising students into appreciating the text. Rather, it can be understood as a subjectification process, in which students and text negotiate, and something becomes that was not pre-scripted. Students and text become something, together. Part of the process of becoming is that these students come to value what they are doing. The text is presented and unhanded (Masschelein & Simons, 2013), and the process in which the students collectively interpret it, is also a process in which they become a group who value their own interpretation. In the following, concluding section, this is discussed in relation to democracy.

## 6. A SPACE FOR DEMOCRATIC MOMENTS

I have here explored a possible relationship between literature education and democracy. Masschelein and Simons (2013) warn that if school is politicised, that is, if the outcome of school is predetermined by politicians or pedagogues, then school itself loses its democratic potential. To put it bluntly—if democratic education is

perceived as the cultivation of democrats, in a pre-established, fixed sense, then the classroom is not a room for political negotiation. Democratic education is then in fact stripped of its political potency.

I have argued above, that if literature education is to be considered democratic, we must look beyond a perception of democracy as principally a matter of values. Though we must not, as literature teachers, relinquish ideas of narrative imagination and empathy from our awareness, we must also not mistake the cultivation of empathy for a democratic situation. This would be maintaining a democratic deficit (Mouffe, 2009), by reducing democracy ‘to its liberal component’ (Mouffe, 2019, p. 16). Attempting to shrink the deficit, we must look at other ways to conceive of the relation between literature education and democracy.

What are the alternatives, then? First of all, the classroom, in itself, must be recognised as a place for negotiation, rather than as a place where certain values are cultivated. Negotiation entails concrete acts like collective interpretation, and for this the pliability of the literary text is crucial (Pettersson, 2002). But negotiation also entails the matter of identity (Höglund & Rørbech, 2021). Based on agonistic political theory and on scholastic theory, I posit that attending to the possibility of identity formation in relation to subject matter could be a way to recognise the classroom as a space for democratic moments. This means that the classroom must be a place in which students have the opportunity to form an idea of themselves that they can valorise (Mouffe, 2005), and that this is done in relation to subject matter (Masschelein & Simons, 2013), together with others. Because literature and literary interpretation is the subject matter of interest here, I have explored attunement as a way to experience the ensemble of text and readers as valuable.

There are of course limits to this study, and it is to be regarded as an initial step toward an agonistic conceptualisation of literature education as a space for democratic moments. In further studies, one could look empirically closer at the teacher’s role and the role of the specific text in processes of attunement in school. Here, I have only touched briefly on affective aspects of the teacher’s choice of text. Studying the role of the questions asked, one could say more about how they aid attunement. In this example, the pliability of the text in combination with the open question about the symbolic value of the pig might have aided the act of looking closely, in the words of Felski (2020). Within the scope of this conceptual study, it is not possible to say why this moment occurred, only that it did. I argue, however, that for those moments to have the chance to occur at all, school should provide free time (Masschelein & Simons, 2013)—non-productive time—that does not merely aim to prepare students for their later work life.

The epigraph is an excerpt from the same interview that John, Jakob and Vincent took part in. They discussed the purpose of school together with Noah, and they were all initially in agreement that preparing students for the possibility to have a job later in life was the main purpose of school. This meant that courses in business administration and management were considered the most meaningful. When coming to talk about subjects such as Swedish, Maths and History, the discussion

shifted, because although they did not find these subjects unimportant, they could not as easily fit them into their original idea of the purpose of school. Noah's conclusion that some subjects are for work life, whereas some subjects are for life, highlights the importance of freeing school from the narrow task of work life preparation. Freeing school from such a narrow task, one must act carefully, so as not to impose on it a task that is different but equally narrow. In other words, arguments for democratic education must not be confined to the ambition to socialise students into a predetermined notion of the democratic subject. Freedom cannot, to paraphrase Biesta (2013), be a concern only for the adult citizen.

In the scheme of things, it might seem like a small and insignificant moment, what happens in the talk between John, Jakob, Ludvig, and Vincent. They collaboratively interpret the text and they are content with their interpretation. This interpretation changes their attitude toward the text. What they first agreed was a 'bad ending' suddenly 'wasn't that bad'. It is not insignificant. As stated above, John and Jakob signalled in the interview that their interpretation was important to them and that they tried to draw their classmates' attention to it. They thought their interpretation was 'the best one'. They failed at drawing attention to it, because other students had more power over the direction of the discussion. But they tried. And I would argue that important moments in education, which are often overlooked in political debates about school, currently mostly centred on doing well in international large-scale testing (e.g. Pehrson et al., 2023), are moments in which students care about subject matter, and about their own relation to it. I especially think that we should take more interest in situations in which students care about subject matter *together*. Taking an interest in the future cannot only be taking an interest in knowledge acquisition. It must also be taking an interest in different aspects of becoming (Arendt, 1961; Biesta, 2011).

Lastly, subjectification is often understood in individual terms. When put in relation to democracy, I suggest that it is conceived in collective terms. Attunement is by definition a process that involves more than one actor. It can occur in a meeting between a reader and a text, but for the purpose of this article its relevance comes from its allusion to a vocal ensemble collectively putting their piece together. Mouffe's agonistic theory accentuates the struggle between political adversaries, and the role that this struggle plays in identity formation. However, construing agonism as a theory that solely encourages conflict is a mistake. Mouffe (2005) also stresses that political collectives need to offer modes of identification that are of value to people. If we are to let agonism inform our idea of the relation between literature education and democracy, this is an aspect to take as a starting point. Harmonies can then illustrate the joint experience of interpreting, and appreciating the sound of the tune that one becomes part of.

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