

Roanne Kantor //

I was recently giving a talk at my alma mater—a weird experience in and of itself. At the end, a senior colleague asked a rather dumbfounding question:

“What do we even want from the literary? I’m so fed up with it, but I can’t seem to quit.”

I ask you, dear reader, to imagine yourself in my place: someone recovering from fresh traumas of the academic market, trying to answer this nightmare of a question in the gaps between out-of-body flashbacks to my job talk.

“I hate you, and I hate myself, and I don’t know what we’re even doing here...do you?”

*Oh yeah, sure I do!*

But the question is valid, in a sense. I mean, in the sense that it’s the same question that the neoliberalization of the academy has forced us into answering all the time. *Justify your existence, but using only our terms, and starting from the premise that you’re useless. Prove us wrong!* A negative proof, something we all learn in first-year rhetoric is a totally losing proposition. And when I ask you, gentle friend, fellow traveler, to “imagine yourself in my place” I’m reaching for the one answer to that question, the proof of that proof, that still seems to have some purchase when we negotiate the impossible: Empathy.

When students come to me now from all different disciplines, they arrive with this curious notion that empathy is the thing I’m teaching them to have. That’s what literature does—it’s an empathy factory. Now, Andrew Godfrey has written pieces on empathy that I’ve cited before, about its limits, the possibility that anger is a stronger, more politically useful affective response. Sure, perhaps. But that doesn’t negate the underlying assumption that what literature does is *teach us to feel*, and that certain feelings are productive—of efficiency, of sociality, even of justice. That feeling or perception and justice have some necessary relationship—and *which* feeling might produce such a relationship—is a much bigger conceptual problem than this post can tackle. Indeed, there are many people already thinking it through, not least Elaine Scarry, who also has much to say on the relevant topic of pain.

But this assumption about the uses of empathy is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the “medical humanities.” Literature, as an empathy factory, is the perfect solution for what is

understood as an epidemic among doctors in training: their deadened empathy. My premed students thus come to me with two contradictory ideas about feelings and literature. The first, and the one I reached for when desperately trying to answer my colleague's question, is the idea that literary study somehow offers an escape from neoliberal logics because *it has no utility*. My students feel that because the production of feelings cannot be capitalized – *oh sweet summer children!* – it therefore opens a space for useless pleasure. And yet, in the same breath, without batting an eye, they can also say that literature, as an empathy factory, can teach them how to feel. That's an important professional skill for doctors at risk of callousness, the soul-hardening that allows them to cause pain in order to cure. We are literally counteracting the *anesthetic* of medical training with the *aesthetics* – the sensorium – of literature. Our students celebrate our uselessness and our utility all at once, without ever realizing that there is a conflict underlying their approval.

If literature is an empathy factory, what feeling is it understood to produce? Technically, any feeling at all. That's what the dictionary tells us empathy means: fellow feeling. But that's not really true, not in practice. When my students talk about empathy, especially in the medical humanities, they mean co-suffering. And, to be frank, this is the real resonance of the etymology, such as it is.

Like the eighteenth-century term "aesthetic," the twentieth-century idea of "empathy" is a neologism whose back-translation into Greek gives it ersatz patina of historical authority. As such, its etymology doesn't really help us think about historical forms of fellow feeling. But it does help us think about the term's own contemporary resonances. Here I'm inspired by Svetlan Boyim's fantastic work on "nostalgia," another eighteenth-century faux-Greek neologism, which, she suggests, we can best understand by taking seriously the underlying meanings of the greek terms *nostos* and *algia* from which it was constructed. Following that logic, we learn that *pathos* at the root of empathy technically means "feeling" – just as the *aisthesthai* at the root of aesthetic means "perception." And yet, returning again to first-year rhetoric, we also know that *pathos* has been used for centuries to cue specific feelings: of pity, of suffering. In a sense, when they use empathy to mean suffering, our students know us better than we know ourselves. And when they see us as purveyors of useful sensation, they diagnose quite accurately what ails us.

Travis Lau has written a wonderful piece critiquing the newly popular assumption that critical thinking is the natural property of the sciences, rather than of humanistic inquiry. That the risk, by extension, of our agreement to work in an interdisciplinary space like the medical humanities is that it makes it all the easier for our educational contributions to be co-opted and made redundant. This is certainly true. But it is also true that the interdisciplinary move allows other factions in the academy to displace their feelings onto us. The humanities are now the exclusive producer of feelings, and their repository. That's why, even as professionals in medical humanities are wary of our ability to speak to *actual medical ethics* or even to morality in a broader sense, the curriculum developers at my institution keep asking about how my courses fulfill the "ethical reasoning" requirement. While the humanities can justify feelings as useful, even necessary, we have a place. When they become inconvenient, we are suddenly hysterical.

