

Towards a Pedagogics of Epiphany

Paul Mason

Department of Literary Studies in English,
Rhodes University, South Africa

pm6308@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article begins by focusing on critiques of the ideology and practice of neoliberalism in universities, nation-wide and globally. The argument proceeds to analyse alternative or counter-neoliberal strategies of reading, writing, and teaching propounded by selected scholars. My analysis reveals that, although these scholars argue the necessity of developing and putting into practice pedagogical strategies that contest those that are driven by the neoliberal agenda, they do little more than gesture toward implementation of these. By way of redressing this lack, I present a case study that indicates specific tactics for “slipping under the neoliberal radar”. This leads to a discussion of what I consider to be a crucial academic concern – the practice, or the art, of reading, as expressed by George Steiner (1978), John Williams in his novel *Stoner* (1965), and Éammon Dunne in an analysis of this novel (2016). It is my intention to show how these texts inspired me to concoct what I call a pedagogics of epiphany. I conclude my argument by explaining what I mean by this concept, and the ways in which its implementation might reflect a simultaneously radical and circumspect orientation toward the ongoing project of “doing academia differently”.

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Introduction

This article begins by focusing attention on two trenchant critiques, written by South African scholars Ivor Baatjes (2005) and Corinne Knowles (2019), of the ideology and practice of neoliberalism in universities, nation-wide and globally. The argument proceeds to discuss alternative or counter-neoliberal strategies of reading, writing, and teaching suggested by Knowles, Baatjes, and Emrah Karakilic (2020). It will be shown that, although these three writers argue the necessity of developing and putting into practice pedagogical strategies that contest those that are driven by the neoliberal oligarchy and its bureaucratic machinery, they offer little more than gestures toward implementation of these. By way of redressing this lack, I present a case study that is drawn from a book chapter recently written by myself. The case study reveals specific tactics used by the coordinators of a Master's in Creative Writing Programme for "slipping under the neoliberal radar", as stated by one of the interviewees. This section of my argument serves as the bridge to a discussion of what I consider to be the crucial concern in academic work – the practice, or the art, of reading. In accordance with this recognition, I proceed to discuss ideas on the act of reading expressed by George Steiner (1978), John Williams in his novel *Stoner* (1965[2012]), and Éammon Dunne in an analysis of this novel (2016). It is my intention to show how Dunne's analysis, along with my own close reading of selected episodes from Williams' novel, has inspired me to concoct what I choose to call a pedagogics of epiphany. I conclude my argument by explaining what I mean by this concept, and the ways in which its implementation might reflect a simultaneously radical and circumspect orientation toward the ongoing project of "doing academia differently".

Confronting the neoliberal beast

My overriding discomfort at reading management-speak communiqués from the university at which I teach, and thinking about the world-wide neoliberal pedagogical machine into which it is plugged, reminded me of a journal article I had recently read, titled "Neoliberal fatalism and the corporatisation of higher education in South Africa" in which its author, Ivor Baatjes, states that "work audits and other surveillance strategies are increasingly being used to calculate the cost and value of academics" (2005: 7). Baatjes' use of the word surveillance brought to mind the original French title to Michel Foucault's study of prisons, *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), translated into English as *Discipline and Punish* (1977[2012]). And Foucault's *Surveiller* reminded me, in its turn, of the slogan 'Big Brother is watching you' from George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949[2008]).

In his article that reflects upon the post-apartheid government's programme of action for the transformation of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), Baatjes (2005) expresses disappointment with the disparity between the ideal and the actual. It is this feeling of disappointment that drives his critique of what he terms the "neoliberal fatalism" that pollutes academic life. He asserts:

In this era of mergers and acquisitions, [HEIs] cannot escape the onslaught of neoliberal militancy that claims to provide the revolutionary solutions to social problems in a country still heavily stained with the deeply rooted legacies of apartheid (2005:1).

Importantly, writing at the start of what he terms the second decade of democracy, Baatjes places the word transformation between scare quotes. The remainder of his critique offers a compelling sense of what these scare quotes signify. Higher education, he asserts, "is disintegrating into a crisis of its own that is reflected in funding cuts, student protests, mergers and the new corporate-led managerialism being forced upon academics" (2005:1). He goes on to state that many educational institutions are increasingly viewed by the policy makers and ministers of finance as "complete failures and are largely being abandoned and left to their own demise" (2005:2), and that these perceived failures and problems are regarded as perpetuating a decline in "economic productivity, unemployment, poverty, a loss of international competitiveness, crime, and so on" (2005:2). He observes that, instead of adopting a position of responsibility for the resolution of these problems, the policy makers "obscenely shirk" these responsibilities by arguing that institutions of public education need to be reinvented in order to respond more effectively to the demands of transnational corporations and that such reinvention would solve the crises. Baatjes insists that what lies behind this perception of the problems that beset public education is "an attack on egalitarian norms, values and ideals" and that both formal and non-formal education are "increasingly being packaged according to qualifications, delivered through pre-packaged curricula based on predetermined outcomes, and integrated within the economic agenda" (2005:3). He notes that an ideology and practice of merging the identities of HEIs and corporate bodies results in academics beginning to lose control and autonomy over their own work. In the parlance of the corporate sector, academics are considered to be service providers or consultants, and students, disturbingly, are regarded as clients instead of scholars and potential community workers. Seventeen years ago, Baatjes asserted that the then current national policy framework for higher education in South Africa has resulted in academics and students being "lured into becoming operatives of corporations instead of seekers of the truth" (2005:6). It is obvious that the assertion he makes has equal purchase on the current condition of the higher education sector in this country.

Echoing what she calls Ivor Baatjes' passionate critique of neoliberalism, Corinne Knowles (2019) laments the contradiction between an audit-based pedagogical consciousness and the ethico-political consciousness that supposedly underpins the commitment – expressed in a huge body of policy documents and Government Gazette – to transformation that purportedly underpins the vision and practice of tertiary level education. Unfortunately, as both authors argue, implementation of the imperative remains largely unfulfilled. There is a sense that, even within the post-apartheid period, too many cracks appear in the ground that lies between the idea and its implementation. Having noted that “the increasing inequalities in our country and universities encourage a critique of pedagogies that we currently facilitate and reward in universities and the foundation programs we devise”, Knowles expresses regret about the fact that, because these “inequalities have become increasingly exacerbated, we are not getting it” (2019:120-1). Her idea of “not getting it” confirms a sense of the shaky ground upon which educational policy-makers stand when they speak about what they have done, what they think they are doing, and what they intend to do. This shakiness in conceptualisation and intent reveals that many academics at HEIs experience the teaching they conduct as hampered by an official ‘transformation’ policy that is not grounded in a clear-cut vision – one that is capable of effecting a genuine transformation, one that properly heeds and seeks to overcome the lamentable inequalities. The sense is that a genuinely inclusive pedagogical transformation which might, in turn, generate more creative methods and styles of teaching, reading, and writing, has yet to be set in motion.

Gestures toward change

Knowles adds another dimension to her argument by shifting attention from a singular focus on the public good toward a concern with the connectedness of “mind, body and spirit” (2019:127). She argues the importance of resisting the governing notion of success, which “tends to see the student as an economically viable entity” (2019:132). This notion, she notes, “orientates our pedagogies to see students as generic intellectual beings, rather than as whole people who are structured socially and politically” (2019:132). Intrinsic to the notion of a learner as a generic intellectual being is the strategy of separating the mind from the body. When we effect this separation, whether consciously or unconsciously, Knowles reiterates that “we erase the experiences, wisdoms and ways of knowing that our students bring, in their bodies and minds, to the university” (2019:126).

Knowles' concern with the importance of linking the experience of education to an acknowledgement and respect for students as multi-dimensional beings or “whole people” reflects,

in a perhaps oblique but resonant manner, the notion of “idleness” that Emrah Karakilic (2020) deploys in his critique of neoliberalism and his championing of an alternative and, in his eyes, truer mode of being in the world. His commentary on our modes of being, as defined by neoliberalism, echo those of Knowles and Baatjes. For Karakilic, we function in the contexts of our social world as “inputs and outputs”, reduced to existing as “reactive selves” (2020:7) instead of as complete individuals. The implication is that this diminishment of our lives has been promulgated and sustained by the pedagogical institutions we enter as individuals and from which we emerge as graduates. Karakilic sets his argument in motion by making it clear what he means by idleness, which he also refers to as a “technology of rupture” (2020:7). He states that “idleness will not be understood as ‘acceptance of what happens’, laziness or monotony, but as the practice of [...] self-contemplation or a meditative mode of being” (2020:7). With regard to the idea of idleness as he understands it, Karakilic says:

[...] it may not only allow us to acknowledge our habitually reactive selves but also give access to the outside where new existential refrains and configurations could be found” (2020:7).

Karakilic suggests that the practice of his notion of idleness reflects a reorientation of the self toward actualisation of a “super-productivity” that arises from “a specifically non-productive (in capitalist terms) state” (2020:7). This reorientation or shift, he continues, might create the possibility for us to take note of and grasp “not only our habitual responses and reactions [...] but also new existential terrains on another vector, in which the aspects of a different mode of being could be found” (2020:7). His reflections on idleness as a micro-political act enrich the idea of the making and gaining of knowledge as a mode of living in and of itself instead of the act of being inserted into a social system that equates, and neglects to put into question, the coupling of the idea of living with that of making a living. The different, and potentially liberatory, mode of being announced by Karakilic carries with it the missionary zeal of one who is devoted to overcoming all constraints on the will to become. A similar zeal is present, as has already been seen, in the language used by Knowles and Baatjes when they assess the effects on teachers and students of the mechanisms of control whereby the academic commissars and their apparatchiks exert their own version of what constitutes a will to become.

However, what is lacking in the critiques of neoliberalism discussed above is a presentation of alternative practical alternatives for teaching, writing, and especially reading, in universities. The section to follow focuses upon a specific instance of putting into practice such strategies.

Positive naïveté and slipping under the radar

In 2021, I conducted two interviews which formed part of a case study of a South African Master's in Creative Writing (MACW) programme. This case study formed part of a book chapter I recently wrote, titled "Slipping under the radar: A polemical encounter with neoliberalism in South African universities". The interviewees speak of specific tactics – some of which grew from lack of awareness and disinterest on their part – for bypassing or avoiding the rules that govern policies such as student admission and the writing of thesis proposals. In his testimony, interviewee A who was head of the programme for its first three years, states that the admission criteria he used for the MACW programme rested solely on the portfolio of creative work that applicants were required to submit, and that the assessment of these portfolios was concerned with "neither education nor craft". Instead, the process of selection was shaped by a concern with what he terms "the unteachable dimension" which would involve seeking for answers to specific questions: "Can this person tell a story or the equivalent in poetry? And does this person have a natural ability to find in language what lies beyond language?" Interviewees A and B elected not to read the applicants' CVs prior to reading their portfolios, noting that focus on these would amount to being "encumbered with preconceptions". Interviewee A states that their selection process was "more organic than regulated and bureaucratic, in line with grids of learning; instead it was a concern with the organic thinker versus the gridded thinker", but that this leaning toward the organic often generated confusion in terms of administering the program. Interviewee B notes that whenever a difficulty was encountered with regard to admittance of a student, or any other anomaly arose in relation to the functioning within the university system, the automatic response was, as interviewee A says, "to always go under the radar, to do as little as possible to bring ourselves to the university's attention". He recalls, "I didn't attend a single faculty meeting through the five years I was head of the programme". Interviewee B recalls that the challenges that were met with regard to admission of students often reflected what is best described as a "positive naïveté".

Recalling his and interviewee B's efforts, from the start of the program, to include all candidates who had sufficient quality in their writing portfolios, regardless of the absence of prior qualifications, interviewee A says that "it was not about getting people in to get them degrees". Instead, for him the course constituted "a way of getting writers focused and showing them new paths for development, new creative forms, by getting them to read, generally giving them a big boost to get up and go in a new direction, or the same direction with different tools". He admits that it was only a couple of years after he had taken up the position of head of the programme that he realised

“results were important for the university”. “It wasn’t that I was averse to getting degrees,” he continues, “it was just that I’d never really thought about it”. He reiterated several times in the interview that he would not have wished to run the course without being able slip under the radar. A specific instance of this took the form of interviewee A and B’s insistence, from the outset, that their students ought not to be expected to produce four-to-five-page thesis proposals, as was the requirement for the other MA courses at the university. Interviewee A recalls raising the following question with the higher degrees’ administrators: “how can you say at the start what your collection of poems or novel will do when you’re going to learn how to do it by doing it?” Accordingly, the interviewees arranged for students to write 150-word paragraphs which would serve, in the words of Interviewee A, as “a kind of open-ended abstract that they could use, probably in a modified form, at the start of the creative work they finally submitted”. Often, it proved necessary to change the abstract entirely because it bore no resemblance to the final product. The focus was, as interviewee A stated, on “writing as process instead of product”. He concluded the interview by lamenting the fact that a disturbing number of postgraduate writing students read very little. “How is it possible”, he asked, “to commit yourself to the process of writing if you do not devote yourself to the life-long art of reading?”

The art of reading

The final sentence from the section above instantly brings to mind a paragraph from an essay I first read decades ago. The paragraph appears in a book titled *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, written by George Steiner, first published in 1978. Steiner says:

If we are serious [as university teachers] about our business, *we shall have to teach reading* [...]. We shall have to learn to proceed, step by step, from the near-dyslexia of current student reading-habits to that enigmatic act of penetrative elicitation. We will, simply, have to create universities or schools for reading (1978:16) (Steiner’s emphasis).

I interpret Steiner’s comments as suggesting that reading is best regarded as a double act, a dialectic of reader and text – the reader absorbs the text, what is in it, what isn’t in it, what it does, respectfully, lovingly, finely attuned, enacting a will to penetrate (or reach or plumb if the word penetrate evinces discomfort), to the heart of the text, its *raison d’être* or, at least, one’s own sense of its heart or its *raison d’être*. Regardless of whether the reader – upon contemplating the meaning of a text – experiences her or himself as a theist, an atheist, or an agnostic, perhaps it can be said that there is a shared faith in sensitivity, or attunement; a faith that there are ways of reading that elicit instead of circumscribing and containing. Steiner’s idea of reading as “that enigmatic act of

penetrative elicitation” resonates with a number of illustrative scenes from John Williams’ novel *Stoner*, and I would like now to introduce the novel, and to focus attention upon two of these scenes or narrative episodes.

The novel revolves around the experiences of its protagonist, William Stoner, an academic in an English department, from the 1910s to the mid-1950s, through the span of the two world wars. Stoner is born into a rural life, a life lived on the land; working the land under the tutelage of a father who has no education but who affirms his son’s capacity to advance his life beyond the one into which he was born. His father pays for him to enter university as a student of agricultural science. His course requires him to take a so-called survey, or short introductory course, to English literature. In one of the English literature lectures he attends, his lecturer, named Archer Sloane, reads out aloud, and by heart, Shakespeare’s 73rd sonnet, after which he abruptly asks the students “What does the sonnet mean?” (Williams, 1965[2012]:12). The only answers he receives from the students are their coughs. He turns his “dark bright eyes” on Stoner and asks, “Mr Stoner, what does the sonnet mean?” (1965[2012]:12). In response to his lecturer’s question, Stoner swallows and tries to open his mouth, before Sloane caustically and facetiously informs him:

It is a sonnet, Mr Stoner, a poetical composition of fourteen lines, with a certain pattern I am sure you have memorized. It is written in the English language which I believe you have been speaking for some years. Its author is William Shakespeare, a poet who is dead, but who nevertheless occupies a position of some importance in the minds of a few (1965[2012]:12).

Understandably, Stoner doesn’t reply, and Sloane recites the poem again, by heart. Stoner is struck by the way in which he reads: “his voice deepened and softened, as if the words and sounds and rhythms have for a moment become himself” (1965[2012]:13). The opening four lines of the sonnet resonate with what happens later in the consciousness of Stoner: “That time of year thou mayst in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none or few, do hang/ Upon those boughs which shake against the cold” (1965[2012]:13). Sloane follows his reading of the sonnet by addressing Stoner once again: “Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; do you hear him? What does he say to you, Mr Stoner, what does his sonnet mean?” (1965[2012]:13). By way of reply, Stoner’s eyes lift slowly and reluctantly, with a small movement he raises his hands up toward the air, and he feels his eyes glaze over as they seek the figure of Sloane. Stoner says to his lecturer, “it means, it means”, and he cannot finish what he has begun to say. Sloane casts a curious gaze at Stoner, nods abruptly and says, “Class is dismissed” (1965[2012]:13). As his fellow students depart, Stoner sits unmoving for several minutes, staring out before him, prior to rising from his chair and moving slowly out of the room. The final paragraph of this narrative sequence, which resonates, as noted earlier, with the

opening lines to Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet, asks to be quoted in full because it reflects the fact that something profoundly formative has taken place. For Stoner it marks the point of no return:

The thin chill of the late fall day cut through his clothing. He looked around him, at the bare gnarled branches of the trees that curled and twisted against the pale sky. Students, hurrying across the campus to their classes, brushed against him, he heard the mutter of their voices and the click of their heels upon the stone paths, and saw their faces, flushed by the cold, bent downward against a slight breeze. He looked at them curiously, as if he had not seen them before, and felt very distant from them and very close to them. He held the feeling to him as he hurried to his next class and held it through the lecture by his professor in soil chemistry, against the droning voice that recited things to be written in notebooks and remembered by a process of drudgery that even now was becoming unfamiliar to him.

In the second semester of that school year, William Stoner drops his basic science courses and interrupts his Agricultural School sequence; he takes introductory courses in philosophy and ancient history and two courses in English literature. In the summer, he returns again to his parents' farm and helps his father with the crops and does not mention his work at the university (1965[2012]:14).

Several pages later we find Stoner working as a tutor in the English department, and he reflects back on that day in which he had met Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet:

He found his release and fulfilment in the classes in which he himself was a student. There he was able to recapture the sense of discovery he had felt on that first day, when Archer Sloane had spoken to him in class and he had, in an instant, become something other than who he had been. As his mind engaged itself with its subject, as it grappled with the power of the literature he studied and tried to understand its nature, he was aware of a constant change within himself; and as he was aware of that, he moved outward from himself into the world which contained him, so that he knew that the poem of Milton's that he read or the essay of Bacon's or the drama of Ben Jonson's changed the world which was its subject, and changed it because of its dependence upon it. He seldom spoke in class, and his papers rarely satisfied him. Like his lectures to his young students, they did not betray what he most profoundly knew (1965[2012]:26).

In such passages, and others in the novel, a sense of enigma or mystery is created, a sense of magic or enchantment. Stoner experiences what can be described as an epiphany, and the wordlessness of it confirms instead of compromises its status as such. His decision to set aside a course in agricultural science in favour of literary studies marks the advent of an intellectual journey that brims with a sense of self-knowing and destiny. But, and of course, it is not simply a matter of heeding his being's law and embarking upon the only path that promises the life-long practice of that law. The reality of being inside the department of literary studies secures and sustains the soul of Stoner's intellect, while at the same time circumscribing, containing, and constraining that soul and its potential for free play; laying down the tracks for his journey as a passenger inside a vehicle that runs on the fuel

of instrumental modes of reasoning; threatening always to scupper his base-line sense of who and what he is, and what he must do. The novel charts his victories and his disappointments, his rises and falls. But his persistence, his incapacity to resign even in the face of a seemingly insurmountable conflict with the head of his department, suggests that he is holding on to his faith. The novel pays careful attention to Stoner's alienated marriage, its poverty of the levels of heart and mind. It also pays careful attention to his love affair with a highly talented postgraduate student, an affair that creates a space, a refuge, all the more compelling and enchanting for its secrecy. It is a deeply intellectual intimacy, previously unknown to him. The result of the affair is that it transforms his life from that of a functional academic to an impassioned intellectual. It returns him to his classes as a devotee, instead of as a servant to a gridded, tabulated and outcomes-based consciousness that diverts and hijacks the Life of his Mind. His classes occur on a level far higher than he has known before, and they are also more popular with the students. But his late middle-aged pedagogical honeymoon does not last. His love affair ends, and although his life of the mind continues, it does so more jadedly. Nevertheless, he devises strategies for surviving the politics of his department, strategies whereby he might resurrect that enigmatic instant of looking out of the window in the face of Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet.

Epiphany is, for me, an apt word for capturing what happens to Stoner when he meets Archer Sloane and Shakespeare in the lecture theatre. Éamonn Dunne echoes and expands upon this sentiment in his article, "Event, Weak Pedagogy and Shattered Love in John Williams' *Stoner*" (2016):

If you really think about what happens in a classroom when you teach literature it's never really about learning outcomes, trajectories, subject planning, goals, or objectives or, however ludicrously, even understanding or knowledge (2016:76).

Dunne goes on to assert:

If you really think about it what becomes important in literature classes is not knowing the learning outcome, not knowing where you're headed, not knowing why or how what you're reading, or teaching is important. Not knowing the importance, in point of fact, is what's important – the inutility of it all, the in-essential [...] If we knew where reading and teaching a specific text would lead us, then it wouldn't be worth the trek. Or, in the words of Jim Caputo, 'to learn is to unlearn what we think we know and expose ourselves to the unknowable. Teaching and learning alike are a matter of allowing ourselves to be spooked' (2016:79).

Radicalising pedagogics

Echoing ideas that have been expressed in articles discussed thus far, Dunne (2016) insists on the urgency of a “productive rethinking of present circumstances in pedagogical theory and practice” (2016:76). He identifies the source of this sense of urgency:

[...] current neoliberal agendas have given rise to an unprecedented managerialism in the guise of benchmarking, research frameworks, hyperstructuring and targeted outcomes within our schools and universities (2016:76).

Dunne suggests that a powerful response to the negative impact of neoliberalism on university teaching is – following the ideas of Jim Caputo and Jacques Derrida – to conceive of teaching as an event. Conceived as such, teaching can be understood as reflecting “a desire beyond desire, a desire we don’t fully understand, haunted by a future we cannot plan and that it is this nonknowledge that scares teachers the most” (2016:77). Arising from Dunne’s comments, it is valid to suggest that the markers or margins of disciplines are simultaneously enabling and confining. They exercise constraints and/or invite opportunities. University teachers conduct tours of their research terrains, but the tours are not free from detours, and on occasions (too rarely), it is the detours that carry the depths and charms of the route. For this reason, the route can be better described as the journey, and the journey contains the possibility, actualised or not, for epiphany. Intellectually fertile spaces are available, if not easily accessible. Dunne (2016:78) provides a specific angle on the idea of possibility instead of difficulty, by citing the following words from Jim Caputo:

[...] there can be a new metapedagogics of failure and nonknowing to springboard effective, alternative, radically underexplored kinds of learning [...] The teacher must figure out how to be a weak force, how the middle voice works, how to be an agent without agency, a provocateur who is not an agent (Caputo 2012:27).

Dunne affirms Caputo’s wisdoms:

If the teacher is not a master, then what is she? Caputo’s argument is that good teachers are conjurers, magicians, and people with the uncanny ability to let thinking happen, to let events take place (2016:78).

Caputo’s and Dunne’s assertions generate a sense of hope that the established orthodoxy of neoliberal education can be dismantled, instead of merely reconstructed or reconfigured. The prerequisite for the practice of a meaningfully alternative pedagogy is surely to overhaul the neoliberal system that governs tertiary level education. Or, stated differently, to create the actual conditions of possibility for the arrival of a pedagogics of epiphany and its allies that bear names such as “weak pedagogy”, “idleness as micro ethico-political action”, “metapedagogics of failure and

nonknowing”; as well as practical strategies for “slipping under the neoliberal radar” such as those shared by interviewee A in the case study discussed earlier.

The case study and the critiques of neoliberalism discussed in this article indicate that there is the possibility, within institutions of tertiary learning, for the exercise of a transformative pedagogical ethic via creative practices of reading, writing, and thinking. This suggests the presence of some ground for hope, however unstable that ground might be. Indeed, answers provided by the scholars this article has focused upon do contain a common thread or undercurrent of optimism.

Unfortunately, however, a spirit of optimism is difficult to sustain inside a context of learning that is governed by the neoliberal political economy, with all the constraints it imposes on the Life of the Mind. In this context, the dice remain loaded against transformation of the ideal into the real. The mission to counteract these ills has been addressed with a sense of urgency by South African scholars such as Vivienne Bozalek (2017; 2022) and Jean du Toit and Petro du Preez (du Preez and du Toit, 2022) who are currently putting into practice alternative pedagogical strategies within the contexts of reading groups and writer retreats. Although the contributions made by these scholars go some way toward actualising radical transformation or rebirthing, instead of a tame reworking, of the system as it stands, it appears to me that a good deal more work is required to accomplish the goal of this mission.

Conclusion

Stoner (1965) and the articles I have focused upon express, to differing degrees, a commitment to reviving the relationship of reader to text. There is a sense that these authors are contemplating modes of reading and writing that resist the urge (or the academic’s occupational hazard), to read and speak texts to their premature deaths. Perhaps it is fruitful to imagine the act of reading as a way of regaining an innocence of sorts – one that enables a return to instants of discovery, arrival, even epiphany. My analysis of episodes from *Stoner* reveals that Williams’ novel celebrates a ubiquitous instant in which its protagonist meets Shakespeare’s 73rd sonnet, and finds himself, profoundly though ineffably, transformed by a sense of something indistinct that demands being heeded and realised; an experience of knowing half-knowingly, but unambiguously, what exactly it is that he has to do with the remainder of his one and only years on this earth; standing at the edge of the enigma, fuelled by a blessedly god-free faith that he might come to know the unknown, or at least recognise the part of it that contains the seeds for his journey. The novel reveals that a meeting of mind and text can be charged with enchantment.

In the best of all possible pedagogical worlds, a student's or teachers outpourings might be kept to themselves, or read by intellectuals of a kindred bent, or avoided, or left at the edge of all words, teetering, plunging, or sitting dead still in the lotus position, gazing dispassionately, sullenly, or ecstatically into the void. Options are available. To conclude, and to re-iterate the shaded pessimism expressed earlier, I would like to end with words, drawn and adapted from an interview with Graham Ellis (2022), that stand as open-ended questions as much as statements. The words reflect some of the insights offered by authors whose ideas I have discussed, at the same time as expressing a strongly felt, though circumspect, sense of a path onward:

If there is an art to pedagogy, it must include – essentially – the art of conveying and cultivating the crucial capacity of concentration, the capacity to read carefully, closely, slowly, and, by implication, passionately. There are, of course, many matters of detail. But this is the crux. Providing inspiration can help students, although certainly not all of them, to choose a crux to carry that they might call their own. If this is a part of the art of pedagogy, it ought to be welcomed. But to think that one can write down the strategies required to achieve this end – be they orthodox or anti-orthodox – is highly debatable or, arguably, ridiculous (Interview with author, 30 August 2022).

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