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Educating (for) the blossomest of blossoms: Finitude and the temporal arc of the counterfactual

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is threefold: to offer a vision of human flourishing in the academy premised upon ‘living in truth’, embracing lived experience and being in relation; to explore counterfactual thinking across the life-course, from the period of compulsory schooling to the end of life, with the emphasis on the latter; and to critique the practice of drawing upon philosophy to provide an interpretative framework through which to address the arts, drawing upon the work of Cora Diamond. The movement towards death is explored through three vignettes, focusing on the lived experience of three ‘characters’ facing the prospect of their imminent demise: the philosopher Richard Rorty, the English television dramatist and screenwriter Dennis Potter and a consultant physician (the father of one of the authors). Drawing upon the work of the historian Timothy Snyder, the relevance of the claim made by Vaclav Havel that ‘essence precedes existence’ is explored in relation to the climate of the contemporary education system. The primacy of essence over existence is also a key feature of the vignettes of the lives of the three players that form the centrepiece of the article. These enable us to ‘think without thinking’, which is perhaps a counterfactual claim *par excellence*.

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Introduction

This article arose from a ‘convivium’ on the arts, finitude and education that took place in October 2022 at the University of Edinburgh, organised at the request of a young colleague who had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Although the gathering was tinged with sadness at the prospect of an untimely demise, it was also a celebration of finitude. We moved beyond conventional academic concerns towards a collective recognition ‘that we shall never be in touch with something greater than ourselves’ (Rorty, 2007a). There was a consensus in the group that contingency and vulnerability were dimensions that could not, and indeed should not, be suppressed in a narrative that ‘[emphasises] progress, achievement and control’ (Clack, 2020, p. 77). The ethos of the convivium was a powerful antidote to the contemporary view of death as a phenomenon that is ‘concerned only with personal survival’

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and the loss of personal identity (Clack, 2020, p. 80). The conversational, convivial mode of philosophising seemed particularly appropriate in the circumstances. For as Clack (2020, p. 81) points out

If the individual, their needs and wants, their hopes and achievements, is placed centre-stage, it is difficult *not* to see death as anything other than obscene, for it reveals the insignificance of that individual when viewed from the perspective of cosmic forces over which they have little or no control.

The performative ethics identified above play out in an environment that dictates that just as we are responsible for our lives, so we should be responsible for our deaths. Translated into educational terms and applied to the other end of the arc of life this means that just as we are considered to be responsible for ourselves, so we are responsible for our failures. In this article we shall explore counterfactual thinking, primarily in the movement towards death but also at the other end of the temporal arc, i.e. during the period of compulsory education and in relation to the aims of education, writ large. In respect of the latter, counterfactual thinking is evident in the comparison of educational outcomes with predetermined goals, and in policy rhetoric directed at addressing the 'attainment gap'. These ways of proceeding are based upon 'the premise that a uniform accountability system with national standards [will] close achievement gaps between students' (Manum, 2017, p. 248). At the level of the individual, counterfactual thinking manifests itself in ritualistic appeals to unlimited opportunities and, for example, in the 'cultivation of pupils' ability to reflect upon and assess their own performance against given goals and measures, using both retrospection and introspection' (Manum, 2017, p. 240). These processes play out against a backdrop of systematic marginalisation.

The third theme that we shall address is the legitimacy of reducing philosophy and literature to tools for discursive analysis. We maintain that literature is something to be thought about in literary terms, and that we ought to resist the practice of 'pulling out ideas and arguments as if they had been simply clothed in fictional form' (Diamond, 2003, p. 9). In our view, to engage in the latter activity is to eviscerate an art form that provides visceral knowledge; and to '[distance] ourselves from our own sense of our own bodily life and our capacity to respond to and imagine the bodily life of others' (Diamond, 2003, p. 9). We shall examine several instances of the movement towards death in order to explore whether just as for everything there is a season—a time to be born and a time to die—there is a time to embrace understanding and to refrain from interpreting. Or, at the very least, a time to resist the claim that 'interpretation is the only game in town' (Fish, 1980, p. 352) and to acknowledge that there are situations (the prospect of imminent death, for instance) that '[push] us beyond what we can think' (Diamond, 2003, p. 12).

In short, there is a world of difference between presenting an ethical issue and presenting a position on that issue. The former draws on emotion as well as cognition, whereas the latter is primarily a cognitive exercise and any reference to the emotions is a distancing move. There is invariably an applied element, i.e. an (implicit) appeal to a pre-existing explanatory framework that is governed by larger structural forces. It is the difference between witnessing a teeming life force and trying to prise it into a probable container. Diamond (2003) illustrates very effectively the difference between presenting an ethical issue and presenting a position on that issue in her reading of the critical reception of *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999). Coetzee's text takes the form of a story in which an elderly novelist called Elizabeth Costello is invited to give an endowed lecture at Appleton College. To read the text as a treatise on animal rights, as several critics have done, is rather to miss the point. There is not scope here to reprise Diamond's analysis in detail. However, in her reading, the lectures '[present] a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves'; and what 'wounds this woman [Costello], what haunts her mind, is what we do to animals' (Diamond, 2003, p. 4). Fiction and poetry are thus not merely devices for 'putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can then be abstracted

and examined' (Diamond, 2003, p. 5). *The Lives of Animals* raises a more fundamental question generally ignored by critics heavily invested in the debate on animal rights, namely 'what kind of beings are we for whom this is an "issue"'? As Diamond (2003, p. 7) points out, Elizabeth Costello

does not want to be taken to be joining in the tradition of argumentation. She is letting us see her as what she is. She is someone immensely conscious of the limits of thinking, the limits of understanding, in the face of all that she is painfully aware of.

Costello's answer to the question of what kind of beings we are is that we are in essence wounded animals. There are times when we succumb to a range of existential pressures to disguise that that is the case (for instance, when trying to measure up to a vision of what it is to be 'good at' Theory).

Reprising the notion of the counterfactual, we refer to other 'educational' experiences that are framed by a paradoxical conception of freedom that emphasises possibility and potentiality while affirming the view that there are larger structural forces at work that play a vital (or de-vitalising) role in determining our existence and the tenor of our lives. These play a key role in normalising phenomena such as the attainment gap between children and young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Hence a paradoxical conception of freedom and the myth of potentiality cast long shadows that extend over the arc of life, from the age of compulsory education to the very end of life. As time passes, the indicative conditionals that characterise contemporary educational discourse, particularly in the phase of compulsory schooling, are eclipsed by the subjunctive version. For example, 'if you want to be a brain surgeon, you shall have every opportunity to become one' becomes 'you could have become a brain surgeon if you had wanted to' (with 'loser' as the unvoiced subtext). Or, rather closer to home, 'you might have become a professor if you had just professed a little less'. The turn from the indicative to the subjunctive mode can lead to feelings of 'sadness, self-blame, shame and perhaps anger' (see Manum, 2017, p. 239), but also to feelings of relief, satisfaction, longing and hope. The full gamut of these emotions may also be present in the movement towards death, when, in the face of diminishing possibilities, the subjunctive mode becomes increasingly dominant. These emotions are certainly present in the cases we explore below, where the themes of hauntedness and woundedness will re-emerge.

Lifting the veil on the movement towards death

We begin our exploration of the temporal arc of the counterfactual and the operations of literature by considering the cases of two prominent intellectuals who died at the height of their powers: the philosopher Richard Rorty and the television dramatist and screenwriter Dennis Potter. Both men knew how to do things with words, albeit with very different forms of expression. In the face of impending death, both were humbled by a growing appreciation of the undercurrents of life, by a sense that there were forces that resisted their habitual forms of discursive framing. It is as if they both sensed that there are forms of intelligent activity that resist interpretation. To paraphrase Diamond (2003), it is as if they understood that the mind is not able to encompass everything that it encounters; that there are points of view that are not in the language-game; and, finally, that in the very act of speaking they are faced with the 'horrible contradiction' that they are 'someone who can no longer speak within the game. Language is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat' (Diamond, 2003, p. 2). Diamond (2003, p. 6) also observes that 'so far as we keep one sort of difficulty in view we seem blocked from seeing another'. The pincer of reason may serve the examined life, where all is well and good (or at least tidy), but it does not allow us fully to apprehend the mountains of the mind or the prospect of imminent death.

The theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (2018, p. 181) observes in his reflections on the movement towards death that reason

is only an instrument, a pincer. We use it to handle a substance that is made of fire and ice: something that we experience as living and burning emotions. These are the substances of which we are made. They propel us and they drag us back, and we cloak them with fine words. And something of them always escapes from the order of our discourses, since we know that, in the end, every attempt to impose order leaves something outside the frame.

Being upon the threshold of death is a time when one both *is* and *is not*, when one is indelicately poised in an impossible balance between being and nothingness. It is a time when essence precedes existence¹, as the timeframe for fulfilling aspirations dictated by the larger structural forces that govern existence (e.g. doing what it takes to be a successful philosopher, academic or dramatist) cedes to a realisation that '*this is it*'. '*Here I am, now, in this moment*'. In his extended essay *The Power of the Powerless*, one of the seminal texts of the dissident movement in Eastern Europe, Havel (1978, p. 8) observes that

... while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfilment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity and discipline. While life ever strives to create new and improbable structures, the post-totalitarian system contrives to force life into its more probable states ... This system serves people only to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it.

In the movement towards death, a person can be left 'struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm' (Weil, 1951, p. 69). Yet, paradoxically, this is the time when our life is stripped back to its essence and the move towards plurality, diversity and independent self-constitution is at its most pronounced. The movement towards death is surely the *non plus ultra* of all counterfactual states. As in other counterfactual states, one slips between different modalities (the contingent, the actual, the possible) and different temporal dimensions (past, present and future) (see Manum, 2022, n.p.). The movement towards death is a time when discursive logic can lose its purchase and the 'subjunctive instant replay' (Hofstadter, 1979, p. 632) of counterfactual thinking is ever more present. Let us now sit with Rorty and Potter for a while, as one might with old friends. Watching these characters perform (rather than reading the secondary literature, as it were) will give us a richer insight into how the counterfactual plays out in the art of living towards death.

'The fire of life'

In 2007, shortly after the publication of 'Pragmatism and Romanticism' (Rorty, 2007b), the author was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. In 'The Fire of Life', a short essay published posthumously in *Poetry* magazine later the same year, he explained that all his previous philosophical endeavours seemed to have little bearing on his current situation (Rorty, 2007a). Was this because, like Rovelli, he sensed that reason, although precious, is only an instrument, a pincer? Perhaps he had an inkling of the idea expressed so cogently by Diamond (2003, p. 11), namely that 'an understanding of the kind of animal we are is present only in a diminished and distorted way in philosophical argumentation'. He explained that he had no quarrel with Epicurus as he agreed that it is irrational to fear death. Nor had he any beef with Heidegger. It was just that 'neither *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) nor *Sein zum Tode* (being towards death)' (Rorty, 2007a) quite seemed to cut it. Rorty was facing up to the ultimate difficulty of reality for a philosopher, namely that to attempt to think in the face of impending death is 'to feel one's thinking become unhinged' (Diamond, 2003, p. 12). Dismayed to see his father cut adrift from the anchorage of philosophy, Rorty's son asked him whether there hadn't been

anything he'd read that had been any use. 'Poetry' was the sudden and unequivocal response. Rorty (2007a) referred specifically to 'two old chestnuts' that he had recently 'dredged up from memory' and had been 'oddly cheered by'.

Rorty's response is interesting, for despite his protestations to the contrary it seems to mark a retreat from the hermeneutic universalism with which he is generally associated. Schusterman (1991, p. 103) uses the term 'hermeneutic universalism' to refer to the idea that 'interpretation constitutes the whole of understanding and meaningful experience'. There is little doubt that Rorty regarded poetry as ineliminably linguistic, and that he was initially sceptical that it provided privileged access to an emotional or cognitive state, let alone that it operated on a level that was not purely linguistic. In short, he did not 'fear having missed out on truths that are incapable of statement in prose' (Rorty, 2007a). For instance, he remained convinced that 'there is nothing about death that Swinburne and Landor knew but Epicurus and Heidegger failed to grasp' (Rorty, 2007a).

There is something intriguing about his counterfactual admission that he wished he had spent more of his life with verse. There is also something interesting about the wistful claim that he would have lived more fully had he been able to rattle off more old chestnuts, just as he would have if he had made more close friends. 'Old chestnuts' is a mildly pejorative reference to the most-quoted lines of Swinburne's 'Garden of Prosperine' and Landor's 'On his Seventy-Fifth Birthday'. The latter title is particularly poignant, given that Rorty died in his seventy-sixth year. He tells his readers that he found comfort in 'those slow meanders and those stuttering embers'; and that he suspected that '*no comparable effect could have been produced by prose*' (Rorty, 2007a, our emphasis). Musing on the concluding lines of Landor's poem², Rorty (2007a) observes that 'in lines such as these, all three conspire to produce a degree of compression, and thus of impact, that only verse can achieve', concluding that 'compared to the shaped charges contrived by versifiers, even the best prose is scattershot' (Rorty, 2007a). What he seems to be suggesting here is that poetry conveys something that touches our essence (as well as shedding light on factors that govern our existence), and that it is not bound solely by discursive logic. Rather, it *compresses* the immediate, rendering it still more vivid. We suggest that it also *exceeds* it by summoning up experiences that lie beyond it, gesturing towards the unsayable, the unnameable, the eternal.

The paradox of poetry is that, like music, it is a direct and immediate experience that does not require reflection or a conscious choice on our part. It has a transcendent quality, allowing us to bridge the gap between reality and an ideal state, however fleetingly. In *An die Musik* D547 (Op. 88/4) (1818) Franz Schubert and the lyricist Franz von Schober suggest that, in our greyest hours, music kindles love in our hearts and transports us to a better world. Poetry also gestures beyond itself, and yet it points back to itself, partly through its sonic and rhythmic qualities, partly through its self-conscious use of language. Poetry is thus both verbal *and* non-verbal: it is a counterfactual art form *par excellence*.

The events that precede Rorty's rattling off of the old chestnuts are very revealing. By committing to memory some of the verses that had cheered him he allowed himself to be penetrated by the object. He was exposing himself to the ineffable magic of rhyme and rhythm in a way that made him more fully human by foregrounding essence over existence. It seems that in facing up to the difficulty of reality Rorty sensed the limits of discursive language. In the face of impending death, he cedes to the 'preverbal, physiological, rhythmic, motoric ground that precedes language and informs it' (Hustvedt, 2016, p. 55). As Hustvedt (2016, pp. 389-390) explains,

The aesthetic frame opens the reader to varieties of human experience that without it would be unprotected and unsafe. The aesthetic frame may be precisely what allows feelings of grief and fear to be weirdly pleasurable and grand, rather than purely miserable.

Now let us go and warm our hands before the fire of life with Dennis Potter.

The 'blossomest of blossoms'

The dramatist and screenwriter Dennis Potter died of pancreatic cancer in 1994. He was 59. In a television interview recorded two months before his death, he confided to the journalist Melvyn Bragg between sips of champagne, drags on a cigarette and the occasional swig of liquid morphine that he had been working 'flat out' in the month since his diagnosis.³ He worked in the early morning because he was 'done in' by the evening. Listening to that marvellous, life-enhancing interview one might conclude that Potter was working 'to earth his heart'. This phrase is borrowed from the poet and philosopher Denise Riley, who in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* has written with scintillating exactitude on 'that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow' after the sudden death of a loved one (Riley, 2019, p. 13).

If Riley's theme was the experience of living in arrested time following the sudden death of her adult son, Potter's theme is the apparent inability of the living to dwell in the present moment. 'We're the one animal that knows we're going to die', he tells Bragg, 'and yet we carry on paying our mortgages, doing our jobs, moving about, behaving as though there's eternity in a sense. And we ... tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense; it is *is*, and it is now only'. Demonstrating his awareness of the counterfactual, he points out that while we 'would like to call back yesterday and indeed yearn to, and ache to sometimes, we can't'. Potter draws attention to the fact that however predictable our lives are—and for many people they are all too predictable—there's always an element of the 'you don't know'. He describes looking out at a plum tree in blossom in the garden of his home in Ross-on-Wye. He tells us that what he sees instead of the usual 'nice blossom' is '*the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be*'. This is a sublime example of the 'nowness of everything', the undoubtedness of beauty, and the realisation of one's very essence as a human being as the forces that govern one's existence pale into insignificance.

There is a degree of counterfactual thinking that is evident in Potter's poignant account of the movement towards death. There is also an implicit tension between dwelling in the 'nowness of everything' and the drive to work 'flat out'. The particular difficulty of reality that Potter was experiencing resides in 'the apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary mode of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking' (Diamond, 2003, p. 12). It is as if he sensed that he was indeed being shouldered out of how he thought, how he was supposed to think, and how he expected (and was expected) to act. His reference to the 'whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be' glimpsed in the face of the torment of reality is especially poignant. That a writer of his calibre only had recourse to superlatives is perhaps an indication of 'the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach' (Diamond, 2003, p. 12). Paradoxically, the power of this expression lies in the fact that it vests itself with powerlessness, a further example of the counterfactual at work.

Working 'flat out' might be construed as denial of death, as 'behaving as though there's eternity in a sense'. Yet it is the intensity of this apparently counterfactual action that signals the claim of essence, of 'I am', in the face of impending death. Watching the interview, one has no sense of being in the presence of a man who is concerned with reputation or posterity, let alone fulfilling contractual obligations. This is a wounded man stripped down to his essence who is simply doing what he does (however complex that process is) until he can no more. This is a haunted man living inside a contradiction. He is alive—and never more alive to the world—and yet he has embodied knowledge that he will soon be dead. To work flat out, to work to earth one's heart, to do what one does with renewed intensity, is one way to live with such a profound sense of exposure.

Exposure is the moment that brings the third and final character to our makeshift stage. In this case it is a celluloid exposure that the first author shows the second author. (This is also an act of exposure, albeit it in a minor key.) The photograph is of the first author and her father, pictured on a snowy winter's day in Baltimore, Maryland. They are both perched on a

sledge, the child leaning back against her father, apparently fascinated by the white woollen gloves she is wearing. The father's pale hands are bare. His left hand is resting on his knee, the right is draped over his daughter's shoulder. He is looking over his left shoulder towards a small, brown spaniel that seems to have appeared out of nowhere and is intent on forward motion. This photograph is an example of what Diamond (2003, p. 22) refers to as the 'shuddering awareness of death and life together'. The father is dead. The child, in her blossomest of blossoms, is no longer present either, although it cannot be said that she is dead.

'I look at this picture of my father and me, both of us impossibly alive', says the child within the woman to her friend and co-author. She gives no indication that there might be a contradiction involved. 'We all have such moments', a philosopher reassures her, 'and the knowledge we then have is not abstract but embodied' (Diamond, 2003, p. 22). 'Tell me more about your father', says the second author.

In a bleak mid-winter

For individuals, the biggest 'you-don't-know' is probably the time of their own passing, although as we saw above, there may be powerful intimations that the time is drawing near. The first author's father, who died of lung cancer at the age of 57, turned out to be remarkably prescient about when he would die. (The fact that he was a doctor largely explains this.) What follows is the first author's account of the final months of her father's life, drawing upon his obituary (BMJ, 1982) and as recounted verbatim to her friends and colleagues at the convivium.

According to my mother, dad looked at his chest X-ray sometime in a bleak December and pronounced with some certainty that he 'would not live to see the daffodils'. As an experienced medical practitioner at the height of his career, he did not say such things lightly. He died some two months later, on February 25.th I was six months into my brief and inglorious career as a secondary school teacher. In retrospect, there was one really important thing I learned from my father. Or rather, it was something he helped me to face up to, as this was not something I could learn. How can we engage with life when our futures are finite? Most of us do not have such a refined sense of our own finitude as my father had, but the question remains valid. I learned from his example – from the one thing he certainly did not set out to teach me – that it is only through engaging with our mortality that we can make sense of what is meaningful and what is not.

My father's obituary was written at a time when it was more important to be *good* than to be *good at* something. We are told what he was *interested in* (iron metabolism and experimental haemolytic anaemias, atherosclerosis and lipid metabolism). But we learn nothing about his achievements in these areas. Reading the obituary, it soon becomes clear that it was *how he lived with what he knew* that made my father a good man rather than merely an accomplished physician. 'He was an excellent teacher who taught by example rather than precept', his obituary informs us (BMJ, 1982, p. 1203). 'His deep humanity, common sense, and breadth of experience were a source of inspiration to his students, registrars and residents. His opinion as a consultant was valued by his peers and family doctor colleagues, who relied on his sound judgement and ready assistance. His patients greatly appreciated his caring attitude and natural feeling of empathy' (BMJ, 1982, p. 1203). The reference to a 'natural feeling of empathy' is revealing, as it suggests that essence does indeed precede existence and that empathy cannot be taught (or if it can, then only through example). But empathy can be learned. It can only be learned by spending time with people, in the here and now, rather than prioritising existence and stretching uneasily towards a better possible self (someone who is good at something) in a future that will never come.

I've told you about my dad because I loved him. 'It's not so simple. It is that simple', to paraphrase Raymond Carver (2003).

The striking feature of the obituary is that it foregrounds essence over existence. The emphasis is on a character performing various roles (clinician, teacher, colleague, researcher), day after day, not in the superficial sense of 'going through the motions' but simply by being there, with and for other people. It is clear that the first author's father lived in truth, to borrow a phrase from Havel and Snyder, and that he did not have an eye on the larger forces that structure

contemporary achievements (the accolades, awards, grants, etc). He was there for people, his patients, his colleagues and his family. He was there for them because *he did not have a choice*. This is in itself a counterfactual claim, as choice is generally assumed to involve weighing several options and making an 'informed' selection between several options. Yet being free can put you in a situation where there is something you *have* to do, like being there for your colleagues, or, in the case of Volodymyr Zelens'kyi, not escaping when your country has been invaded. Being free is sometimes not being able to do otherwise, just as Potter could do no other than write. Snyder (2022) argues that people 'come into being' through a series of moral choices made across time, with and for other people. The free person can't always run, whereas the unfree person always has the option to escape. The relational dimension is systematically underplayed in educational discourse, which construes choice as having a range of options (even if some of these turn out to be illusory) and focuses on individual achievement and attainment to the detriment of the relational element. ('Well, you can leave school at 16 without any qualifications. It's your choice.') Educational discourse downplays the fact that there are other people involved in making us the people we become. 'I love my dad because I am the way I am', said the first author to the second author.

Essence precedes existence

As we run up against a buffer of language (i.e. the limitations of word count for a journal article) and thereby confront the pale shadow of the great interruption, we offer the following reflections. Drawing on our observations on counterfactual thinking, we suggest that formalised education systems privilege existence over essence, i.e conformity to pre-determined structural expectations that are treated as inevitable (being good at) rather than the promotion of human flourishing (being good), and that this has deleterious consequences for the individual and society. Moreover, contemporary western education systems also seem singularly ill-equipped to address the essential fragility and ephemerality of human life and the precarity of our rootedness to the earth. 'Lifelong learning' and 'education for sustainability' are blithely discussed as if we were going to live for ever, in a world where finite resources can be stretched *ad infinitum*. Perhaps it is the current emphasis on being good *at* something rather than simply being *good* that foregrounds individual agency and pitches us into a headlong rush towards an unimaginable future, stretching us towards our impossible selves. Our choices are far more constrained than we can ever possibly imagine. One can all too readily imagine an educator uttering the following words: 'you can leave school at 16 without any qualifications, but you'll end up on the scrapheap.'

In several respects, contemporary education systems share certain features with what Havel (1978, p. 8) describes as 'the post-totalitarian system'. The relentless focus on accountability and compliance adds further force to Snyder's argument that we are still living in the 1970s, in a period of protracted 'normalisation' where larger structural forces determine the key features of existence. The myth of choice evaporates in the face of the realisation that some children are left behind (as the persistence of the 'attainment gap' so clearly demonstrates). Like post-totalitarian regimes, contemporary education systems seem to be driven by 'a kind of blind automatism'. They demand 'conformity, uniformity and discipline' and contrive to 'force life into its most probable states' (Havel, 1978, p. 8), thereby demonstrating a 'formal monopoly on utopian counterfactuals' (Manum, 2017, p. 260). ('You could be a brain surgeon if you work hard enough', lest we need to be reminded of the potential damage wrought by a utopian counterfactual.) This works as long as things are working out for you, but if they aren't, then 'not only are you not free, in the superficial sense, you are *deeply* unfree, because you've never developed the habits of noticing what the larger forces are, of working against the larger forces, of making the larger forces work for you' (Snyder, 2022, n.p.). The focus on

idealised potentiality excludes the possibility of 'living within the truth' (Havel, 1978, p. 20), the 'natural point of departure for all activities that work against the automatism of the system' (Havel, 1978, p. 24) by prioritising existence over essence. Ideology, Havel (1978, p. 9) observes,

[creates] a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life. It pretends that the requirements of the system derive from the requirements of life. It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.

In some respects, the above exploration of the movement towards death, the beating heart of the article in three acts, demonstrates the power of the powerless in so far as it suggests that, paradoxically, we may be at our most free, most quintessentially ourselves, when the fire of life is fading.

We remain wary about using the arts as devices for exploring a range of ethical issues, regarding this practice as a form of anaesthesia rather than as something that quickens and enlivens. Rather, we argue that a more fruitful way of proceeding would be to adopt a mode of thinking that privileges essence over existence, and that literature (instead of literary criticism or other theoretically-informed approaches) is an ideal means to fulfil this goal. In sum, counterfactual thinking helps us to delve further into the relationship between art and ethics by exploring how art may motivate us to live a life as it is and could possibly be, rather than life as it is required to be.

Throughout, from the initial description of the ethos of the convivium onwards, we have attempted to restate the case for essence preceding existence, and for performance (in the sense of simply 'being there') by privileging literature over theory, on the grounds that 'our thought and reality might fail to meet' (Diamond, 2003, p. 25). We have also tried to make our readers *see* literature (while stopping short of the claim that we are writing literature) by considering these issues in literary terms rather than relying primarily on argumentation grounded in theory. To do otherwise would be to run the risk of '[making] unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal' (Diamond, 2003, p. 8).

In his scintillating lecture on freedom and truth, Timothy Snyder (2022) reasserts the primacy of the arts (e.g. literature) over theoretical approaches by drawing attention to the immediacy of the former and the mediated nature of literary criticism (for example). He points out that 'as soon as someone gives you the literature, you think "I prefer the literature" and you're not sure why... but something has happened and you have to try to figure out why it's so special.' He suggests that

literature does all the work of literary criticism [and, by extension, philosophy], everything that is in literary criticism has to come from literature in the first place, that is the nature of criticism ... You can find the same things in the plot of a novel, but with *characters*, characters who have roles. (Snyder, 2022, n.p.)

We have tried to make clear the *labour of love* involved in the performances of Richard Rorty, Dennis Potter and Robert Pirrie, and to note the startling absence of 'performativity' in their conduct. Perhaps the main contribution of the three players is that they have enabled us to think without thinking. That might just be a counterfactual statement *par excellence*.

Notes

1. This is an expression used by the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel in his appearance before the Joint Session of Congress in 1990. See Timothy Snyder 3 October 2022, 'Thinking Truth and Freedom with Zelens'kyi and Havel!' According to Snyder, a clear example of essence preceding existence was Zelens'kyi's decision to remain in Ukraine in February 2022. 'If everything were only about existence, if everything were about the larger forces' Snyder explains, 'then of course he should have fled.' <https://bit.ly/3T04up4>

2. 'Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.'
3. For the full transcript of the interview with Dennis Potter, see <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/sep/12/greatinterviews>. The full interview is available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpnyPI8-ZcQ>

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Kari Manum entered academia after many years as a professional musician and former member of the Oslo Philharmonic and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic orchestras, among others. She continues to play the viola, which informs her work as an academic. She is currently completing her PhD on music and counterfactual meaning-making at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. She has recently taken up a position as assistant professor in the Department of Jazz, Dance and Music Production in the Faculty of Performing Arts at the University of Stavanger.

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