

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

Transformations of Sentimentalism in the Literature of Reform

Speakers: Margit Peterfy and Annika Elstermann
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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Margit Peterfy, who's a senior research lecturer at the English Department and whose research focus includes cultural studies, so visual arts and performance as well as literary studies and 19th century American poetry. Today, we'll be speaking about transformations of sentimentalism and the literature of reform.

People might not be familiar with the terminology 'literature of reform'. So, what is this and how does it fit into the scope of this lecture series?

Margit Peterfy: Well, this kind of literature is related to didactic literature or to literature that teaches moral uplift and virtues. And in a society where individuals take on political responsibility, whether as voters or politicians, this kind of literature addresses actually direct problems and it tries to help people, or groups of people, who are oppressed, underprivileged and who, most importantly, do not have a voice on their own.

AE: So this is a kind of literature which has a very concrete purpose in a way, which is in direct opposition to what Dieter Schulz and I discussed last week with art for art's sake and what Edgar Allan Poe had in mind with sort of poetic writing.

MP: Absolutely. So actually, Poe was very critical of the kind of didactic, moral literature that was around at the same time, but the texts I'm going to talk about today are not concerned primarily with moral questions, of course they play a role, but are actually really about a change in society by addressing this particular problem.

AE: You said something earlier, one word kind of stuck with me: 'Uplifting': Uplifting in a way already implies putting people into a different place somehow, so, this is literature which has a very direct aim or goal in the real world and addresses issues in the real world, but it's not necessarily about the direct circumstances of the real people who write or even read it, right?

MP: Well, actually the most important part of this is about other people who live in the same kind of society that you do. It's actually not about far away places or not about a different reality, like David Eisler's talk already talks about, a war scenario, which is somewhere else. No, it's around you, but it's something that, as a reader, mostly middle-class, or even upper-class reader, you're not familiar with, because these are people who are underprivileged, who suffer. And they don't have a voice on their own. And the relevance to this lecture topic—. . . Maybe I can use an example and I would like to use this poem by Emily Dickinson, it is called *There's no Frigate Like a Book*. And it's a very famous text by Emily Dickinson, almost too famous, so it is not taken seriously anymore. But it has a very pertinent point to this lecture. So, this poem by Emily Dickinson is often used for didactic purposes, namely to teach about the value of reading. So, the poem is a typical allegory, and revolves around

the metaphor that reading a book is like traveling to another place. And it goes like this:

There is no Frigate like a Book To take us Lands away Nor any Coursers like a Page Of
prancing Poetry – This Traverse may the poorest take Without oppress of Toll – How
frugal is the Chariot That bears the Human Soul –

MP: So, if you look at this poem, a frigate is a very fast, very elegant ship, representing cutting edge naval technology – something like a Tesla of its times – Dickinson refers to this type of ship because back in its heyday it was high-status and almost unattainable for most. Compared to this extravagant means of transportation, books, on the other hand, are simple, cheap, and much more accessible or democratic. So, Dickinson calls them even 'frugal'. That books and stories can take us to other places, what we called—or you called in your introduction escapism, or daydreaming – is of course a very important reason why people turn to poetry, prose, and dramatic or cinematic productions.

AE: I think this question of escapism is one we have—I think we'll tackle in almost every single one of these episodes throughout the semester. And I think also in a sense refining what exactly escapism means and so on, because the basic idea we have of escapism is this idea of Opium of the Masses, like I said in the introduction, that it almost distracts you from the real world, but this, in this case you would say, that is not what it's happening here.

MP: Exactly, so we have a different variety of literary tourism here and it doesn't take us to necessarily pleasant places, but it takes us to places where something is going on that actually needs to be corrected. These places are also real places and it's very important that they have this foundation in reality, although the stories told within these real places are fictional because they serve a very specific purpose, as I already said, to create sympathy.

So the texts I'm going to talk about today, they want to shape the world in certain ways, by taking their readers who are unfamiliar with these fictional worlds and making them feel that something is wrong. So, it's a lot about feelings and creating feelings in a reader.

AE: Which, maybe we'll come back to this later on, but which is something that we might argue that fiction can do better than non-fiction, because of course they would also write documentary style texts about the world around them but that is not what these authors are doing.

MP: No, that has something to do really with this tradition of creating sympathy and this goes back to even a specific philosophical period or philosophical conceptualization that is the whole idea of sentimentalism. And although the term 'sentimental' has a mostly negative connotation today – with some justification, I should say, but let's ignore this for a moment – when it was first coined, it was something progressive. And it is a good example for a term that has to be understood with respect to its place in history. So when we look at for example the 18th century when philosophers and writers, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury, or [Henry] Fielding, David Hume, Adam Smith, and others, when they first discussed this term, they didn't see it in contradiction to reason, for example. So, they even said that we need sentiment in order to control reason, in order to argue against too many pragmatic solutions or economic solutions or economic arguments, wholly based on numbers and technocratic conventions etc.

AE: Yeah, I think, this is something that we can also very strongly link to today, where some people

might find it tempting to look at data that you can generate and data that you could collect about people and draw conclusions from there and then find ideal solutions, which are all very ideal on paper and in numbers, but which ignore the human element.

MP: Absolutely, and the human element and what is important for humans. So taking this a bit further, if you consider the political influence of such terms, they really had a huge influence on concrete political developments and even when you look at the American Revolution – the foundation of the United States—

AE: Which is kind of the historical context for this, if you're talking about the 18th century. To contextualize this maybe for students: If you're talking about 18th century philosophical developments in America this is very closely linked to the American Revolution.

MP: Yes, because the American Revolution was about freedom and equality and liberation from restrictions that the supposedly evil mother country had written, imposed. And when you look at other political discourses or historical texts, they even talk about— for example, Andrew Burstein talks about *Sentimental Democracy* or Prof. Schloss talks about the importance of— the impact of the sentimental tradition on the literary tradition of the Early Republic.

AE: These values which you just mentioned, which are so important in this historical period are also of course very much the core of American identity in a way. Freedom especially is, I think, if you had to choose one word to associate with American values, it would probably be freedom.

MP: Yes, absolutely and equality as well. But the problem is of course, when we listen to these terms nowadays, especially nowadays, when we're very conscious of political developments or historical injustices, that the American Republic – that supposedly was so virtuous – was nevertheless guilty of, we have to see that the problem is that you excluded people from this "Sentimental Democracy". Even current revisionists' project, which is the 1619 project, they don't question the sentiment of freedom or the sentiment of equality, but they criticized the fact that people were excluded from this, so that not everybody would participate.

AE: So, I mean the early American republic is very much of the republic of equal rights for all wealthy white, male—

MP: Exactly. Which brings me actually to my first example of literature, in the sense of reform, literature of reform taking us to another place. As already mentioned, since we are talking about literature of reform, there is no significant time travel here. So it's always about the time that the author, in this case really the author – if you want to be precise with the terms of literary convention: the narrator – takes us, they are writing about their own times. In reaction to concrete social or political situations. So my first example is here Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Just in terms of, you know, 'Another Place' just look at the title: It refers to a cabin, to a domestic setting, but it's a poor domestic setting. The readers of this book will not live in cabins, they will live in houses and and the book starts with a scene on a plantation in Kentucky. So, this seems to be in the US, so it's not 'somewhere else', but it is somewhere else for the readers; It is in one of the slave-holding states of the US in 1851. Since Harriet Beecher Stowe was an abolitionist, who fighting against slavery, and she wrote this book with the explicit intention to attack slavery, she could not

travel to the South. So, abolitionists were actually not able to travel to the South as of the 1850s. They would have been arrested or even worse.

So she writes about the place somewhere else, and she also needs to attack slavery, so she wants to get rid of slavery and how does she want to do that? Now you need to know a little bit about the context of American slavery to understand her strategy. This is a very sad and horrific part of American history, but I have to mention it here, because that was how it was. African slaves were considered to be not human in the way white Americans were considered to be human. So, Stowe argued essentially that African slaves were just as human as whites. And to make such an argument and how do you—I hesitate to talk about this, maybe you can notice that, I find it very difficult to talk about this, even to repeat these horrible statements about other people, but if you want to understand what was going on we need to acknowledge this part of history.

So, Stowe's most important argument in this book is that African Americans were actually not different from whites, and within this larger claim, she insisted that they shared the same feelings and sentiments with whites.

AE: Yeah, I think the fact that Harriet Beecher Stowe, as an abolitionist, argued this way, shows us, like you indicated, something about how the dehumanization in the first place was constructed and kind of what the argument was the justification for why it was supposedly okay to enslave these people. Because first you have to dehumanize these people to make that argument but when you re-humanize them, the argument doesn't really work anymore.

MP: Exactly. But how does she do that? So first of all, she had to make sure that she anchored her fiction in factual circumstances. So, although her characters were invented characters, she had to create a context that was factual. She even published a second book later, because she was attacked by slave-owners who said she was lying, where she listed all of her sources to silence her critics. It was called *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And then the second point is: She wants to teach her readers to "feel right". That's the quotation, she actually says that: "I want to teach my readers to 'feel right' ". And therefore she follows a strategy of a number of episodes of narrative turns that show that her characters, her protagonist in this book feel exactly the same feelings as her readers, which were in the North of course in the South the book was not read.

So, she very consciously created her protagonist, Uncle Tom as a virtuous, heroic character and beside Tom she introduces his family and a number of other minor characters, who all suffer under slavery and who all are clearly human, intelligent, sensitive and absolutely not inferior to whites in any way, on the contrary! So there is also this clear character constellation of evil whites, or whites with lots of mistakes and shortcomings, standing in opposition for example to virtuous Uncle Tom.

AE: Out of curiosity, quick question if you know this, did she speak to slaves in her research? Because you say she listed— she has this book with all of her sources. Do you know if she had personal contact?

MP: Well, she had personal contact, too, especially to slaves who had escaped and she also relied on slave narratives, so there is a character called Father [Josiah] Henson who wrote about his own experiences as a slave and she basically formed Uncle Tom after this character, but not the life of

this character, but the character [AE: personality] of this character, the personality of this Father Henson. And then also other sources that she had. And she knew slaves earlier, but then once she started writing this book, she wouldn't go there. So, she had contact with slaves earlier. [AE: Okay.]

So, the power of Stowe's argument depends on the strength of her storytelling. Which interestingly, in term primarily relies on sentimental strategies. And some of these are still with us today, you know, they are part and parcel of popular culture today. So the domestic idyll of the nuclear family, the pain of farewells and the bliss of reunion, deathbed scenes, undeserved suffering, reconciliations, unexpected revelations, the power of trust and faith and the pain of betrayal, etc. etc.

AE: So this is also things, like you said, that are with us today, still, and things which also we have in 16th century literature already.

MP: Exactly, so there is some criticism of Stowe nowadays and I'm sure you can criticize her for many things, but at the same time, despite of her shortcomings – for example she believed that liberated slaves should return to Africa, which sounds very harsh, when I put it like this and we can criticize her for that, I don't want to defend that – but we have to see her also compared to her contemporaries. And as a figure compared to other people at the time, she was a political progressive and in terms of literature, she was a skillful proponent of sentimental writing. So that is something that we also have to keep in mind. Of course we only read these books that are still enjoyable. I mean you can read this novel and feel with the characters, feel sympathy for the characters. So, in spite of the fact that the actual purpose of the novel doesn't exist anymore.

AE: I was wondering that you said that we still read it and that it's, I think, a novel that at least the title most people will have heard before and most people will have some idea of what it's about. What was the reception like at the time? You indicated that it was written for people in the North, it wasn't so widely read in the South, but then again of course if slave-owners criticized Stowe then in some way it must have been received in the South as well. Do you know what the reception was like at the time?

MP: Yeah. I mean they—. . . They didn't read it much. They didn't finish, they didn't read it— I mean they, maybe they started it and some people had read it and then wrote reviews but it was rejected completely. I mean, she was really attacked and there was also a whole branch of literature called Anti-Tom literature, where writers in the South wrote novels about either idyllic plantation life, or about slaves, how stupid they were, or. . . So, there was this counter-discourse, which nobody reads anymore except for historical reasons. And the other interesting fact was that it was an international success. Which might question the categorization as reform literature, because, you know, what is the point of reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the German translation, I mean there is nothing you can do about the situation of the slaves as a German reader.

AE: Yeah. So Stowe's novel is one example of this, and I think this illustrates a lot of different points, but this is part of, like, a larger strand of literature, this reform literature as you mentioned. So then maybe, what are some other differences and aspects of this?

MP: So, when you talk about something that you want to change in society, or you want to improve, then there are other problems that – now, I'm talking about US American society, I'm still in the

19th century – and then one of the major problems was alcoholism. Which had a really damaging impact on society and on individuals. And in reaction to this so-called temperance societies were established – that is: societies that fought alcoholism. And one of the most famous ones was the Washingtonians. And even somebody like Walt Whitman wrote a novel against alcoholism, or for temperance, a novel called *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate* and in this novel he tells the story of his protagonist's drunken past and conversion to being a sober man.

Now, this is a novel, but what is interesting about this phenomenon is that it existed also in the performative forms. And these performances were not just theatre performances but kind of, like, variety shows, where various people told their stories.

AE: Is this something that we can picture a bit like Alcoholics Anonymous or is it—

MP: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Except that—

AE: It wasn't anonymous.

MP: It wasn't anonymous, no, and it was public. You know you could go and watch and be affected by these stories. So, the performances of such conversions were open to the public and then observers, you know, newspaper article journalists wrote about this and they wrote about the audiences who were in tears about the stories told. And one newspaper report, I'll just quote verbatim, because I just thought it was so interesting:

We believe more tears were never shed by an audience in one evening than flowed last night. . . . Old gray haired men sobbed like children, and the noble and the honorable bowed their heads and wept.

AE: Okay. Very dramatic.

MP: Yes. You can imagine that, you know. So, everybody was dissolved in tears.

AE: And the newspaper found it report-worthy. This—

MP: Absolutely, and successful in terms of, you know, it proved the effect of the performance, of the stories, of the skill and also of the structure of the story told. Now it seems that these listeners were literally "carried away" – another metaphor, you know, coming back to Emily Dickinson, an imaginary transport into a different place – and they were carried away even directly into the shoes of a different person. Maybe this could be a definition of sympathy. And the most elaborate of such performances were then the so-called manifestations of the temperance drama, and the most famous one of those was *The Drunkard* by [W. H.] Smith. So *The Drunkard* is about the fundamentally kind, but weak protagonist, who is being seduced into alcoholism by a greedy villain, who is after the protagonist's money and young wife, of course. So, and it is only by a hair's breadth that everything turns out well, and the young man is reunited with his loving family.

AE: This is interesting, this is almost a bit reminiscent of morality plays from very early modern England or late medieval England.

MP: Yeah, very good. I mean, I think that it is a really important connection, or a very interesting

connection and it would be interesting to see how these forms transform in a different political context like democracy for example.

AE: But both of them definitely are— have very similar goals and also in a way kind of simplify what they are portraying.

MP: Yes, of course because we never hear the stories of those alcoholics who die a horrible lonely death. You know, their stories are not told. But they, they would not help the reform either, because there would have been no model.

So, this kind of reform – cloaked in entertainment, because in some ways, this was also entertainment – was directed towards self-improvement, and it was seemingly a private, personal event, but as you already mentioned, it was also highly public movement. And it was organized around the experience of this emotional performance. While listening to the narrative of another man's journey through the hell and addiction, and of course to the rise from this hell, the listener vicariously lived through the feelings of the protagonist.

AE: I would also be curious to hear, I mean the review of the newspaper mentioned that "gray haired men sobbed like children". So we know gray haired men sat in the audience. But the temperance movement was one which was also very strongly driven by women, right? Do you have any hypothesis or even do you maybe know who the audiences of these performances were?

MP: You're right, women were very important, but this period, this is the 1840s and this is still something also defined by men very much. And this is actually an interesting point: The question of masculinity and temperance movement and also the question of masculinity and sentimentalism. So, from our perspective sentimentalism is something that has developed into a female form and the expression of female personality, whatever that might be. But when you look at the origins of sentimentality, with the philosophers I already mentioned or the writers, or there was a novel called *The Man of Feeling* by [Henry] Mackenzie, so it was a different definition of masculinity. And even Walt Whitman with his novel, he defines— he would certainly define himself as a masculine writer. So that's also a point to think about how gender is being formed in literature and by certain types of logical frameworks.

AE: So, you mentioned in the beginning that part of this literature of reform, part of what it did was that it gave a voice to people who wouldn't otherwise have a voice. So we've had now, I mean obviously when we talk about enslaved people, they didn't have much of a voice at the time. Not one that was being received by a broad public anyways and in this case here the temperance movement, one of the reasons why it was driven so much by women was that women were of course among the people who suffered from the men who were alcoholics. Now another point, I think you want to get to is another group of people: children, right?

MP: Yeah, absolutely And I have an example for this, which was also quite well-known: Mrs Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "The Cry of the Children". And she wrote this poem in reaction against child labour. As in the case of Stowe, Browning uses the rhetorical strategies of sentimentalism to take her middle-class readers, or even upper-class readers, to the unknown territories of factories, mines, farms, where poor children had to work. I'll just quote the first stanza:

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, —
And that cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows ;
The young birds are chirping in the nest ;
The young fawns are playing with the shadows ;
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly !
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

MP: So, the remaining thirteen stanzas continue in this vein, emphasizing the sufferings of the children. And Browning saw herself as a poet with a social responsibility. She wanted to convince her readers to share her moral sentiments – by showing them the consequences of child labor.

AE: Do you, again – Sorry, if this is almost exactly the same question as before – But do you know what her experience with this was? Did she // live in the city where she saw a lot of children were in factories, or did she have children herself?

MP: She read about this and there were of course protest movements against child labour already. I mean, she is not the first one. So, she was influenced also by political activists at that time. And what she does, basically, is she takes up the topic and she turns it into literature. Again, what you said before, earlier that some of these topics seems to be more convincing, or seemed to induce more sympathy, when they are phrased in a certain way, when they use a certain rhetoric.

AE: And this rhetoric – I think is a very subjective thing: To us, today, maybe this might seem a bit heavy-handed. [**MP:** Oh yeah.] Or a bit much of this sort of imagery with the young lambs and the young birds chirping and the young fawns and so on, and the poor weeping children. But of course this isn't, again, it's, I think it seems to us heavy-handed, not because we can't understand it, but because we can maybe understand it too well, because this imagery has been used so often.

MP: Well, yes absolutely and when you take the cultural reworkings of this poem, the fight against child labour continued for a long time and in 1912, there was a silent movie called *The Cry of Children* (which you can watch on YouTube, it's not very long), but it's, it uses Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem and the story is also, is highly sentimental in the sense that it talks about the death of a young child. So you remember when you heard Prof. Schulz last week talking about the most beautiful topic in literature is the death of a young— a beautiful young woman, for sentimental literature: It's a child.

AE: A cynic would now— I don't want to be cynical, that's why I'm saying what a cynic would now say at this point: If Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes this in the 19th century and then there's a silent movie in 1912 about the same topic which picks up the same themes again. . . You could say the literature of reform isn't particularly effective, because of course the problem still persists at the time. In the US we might be returning to that problem with labour laws extending towards now 14 year-olds, 12 year-olds and so on. But of course – and a cynic would say this, because I think there's

also a good argument against this – that no literary text is going to change the world in an instant and at once. And I don't think this would be what sentimentalists would even argue, right?

MP: Yes, they wouldn't and also especially we have to consider that at that time, the mid-19th century women did not have a public position except Queen Victoria. But – They didn't have a vote, they could not vote, they could agitate, they could be activists, they could write poetry, and then of course they just fought in different ways, but this was one way of expressing concern. This situation they found unacceptable in their societies.

AE: Okay, you're also already kind of, in terms of chronology, drifting towards the end of the 19th century here, with silent movies and so on. Where does this go, kind of around the turn of the century?

MP: Yes, the rhetoric of sentimentalism changes, in the sense that maybe the rhetoric doesn't change but the times change. And also, it's quite interesting that the course of literature is characterized by certain inner developments that have something to do with literary structure, so for example if certain types of texts become too repetitive, they become too familiar they might be exhausted, as we might say so we—

AE: Yeah, so how we kind of roll our eyes a bit.

MP: Exactly. They don't work anymore and I have a good example for this actually happening with a novel written in 1900 by Upton Sinclair, the novel was called *The Jungle*. And *The Jungle* is a description of the fate of a Lithuanian immigrant family in Chicago. And this family is literally destroyed by the exploitative working conditions in Chicago's meat industry around 1900. So, the family is a victim of greedy businessmen and factory owners who refuse to pay proper wages, or provide any other social benefits.

So, Sinclair was a socialist, and his intention was to raise political consciousness for his cause: He wanted to help these poor working class people. So he actually wrote this book with a very specific intention and he said it himself. He said about his novel: "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach." [AE laughs.] What is the background to this saying? I mean, this is something that he wrote after the reception of the novel. So he aimed at the public's heart, and the term 'heart' should already ring a bell; When people talk about 'heart' they talk about things like sympathy, empathy, sentimental strategies are at play. So he talks about the suffering of a young, weak, once beautiful woman who dies in childbirth, so we have these parts of sentimental strategy. And it is very upsetting when you read it and you feel very sorry for these people, but then there's another part of the book that kind of outweighs all this. And this is the description of the meat factories and the meat industry.

Sinclair takes us everywhere, you know when we talk about 'Another Place'. He takes the readers to the dilapidated houses, to the dirty streets, the horrible workplaces, but then he describes the meat production, and that was so realistic and so disgusting that people paid more attention to this aspect than to the sentimental— or to the working class people. So he wanted to create sympathy with the working class people but his novel actually for once had an effect. But not on the working conditions, but on the legislation with respect to, you know, the production of food.

AE: Oh, I see, so it had an effect on legislation, but it wasn't that the working conditions of the people were improved, but like hygienics and so on in the workplace? **[MP: Yes.]** Oh, that's so interesting.

MP: So if the working conditions had been improved that was sort of as a side effect of improving the conditions of meat production. This is of course something that we just mentioned five minutes ago is that sometimes in literature we have a phenomenon where certain forms and expressions become exhausted, people get bored with them. We have the phenomenon of the Petrarchan Sonnet then Shakespeare re-writing it, re-inventing it as a Shakespearean sonnet—

AE: But today, you can't really have a non-ironic sonnet anymore. Because a sonnet is in a way also depleted, now.

MP: Right, exactly. The question is now: How did this happen for example with the term "sentimental"? So how did this happen? How did it lose its power? And I think you can describe a certain phenomenon that people suddenly realize, well not suddenly, but people realized that as you mentioned earlier it wasn't as effective as people intended it to be. And I just want to quote an example that is in William James' (the American philosopher and psychologist), he wrote an essay called *Habit* and here he describes a certain situation – and I quote:

The habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line. The weeping of the [...] lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside, is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale.

MP: So what James here says is that a formula in aesthetic texts, readers can get "used" to certain strategies, and while they still react to them in the expected manner, for example by shedding tears, the reaction remains confined to the aesthetic experience. So, sentimentalism becomes empty, or self-referential, doesn't have an effect on the outside world anymore.

AE: So, essentially you have a formulaic depiction of a thing that is supposed to evoke a certain feeling and then you have I think what we could call a formulaic response to this. You have the tear-jerker, you know 'I'm supposed to cry now,' so you cry and—

MP: Yeah. And I think, you know, subjective reactions are always important, but what I think is interesting that they still work, so you can watch something, you can have a 'good cry' as you say, and then you just, you know, forget about it.

AE: That's also kind of the concept of catharsis in a way. You have a cry about something and then this urge to express this feeling is gone. It's also, it's an interesting parallel to what Dieter Schulz said last week: This idea of poles of brevity of the experience being confined to the duration of the reading of the poem or of the short story or whatever medium you are receiving and I think this would be similar in this case, the criticism that the experience of sympathy and of emotion and so on is confined to the duration of the aesthetic experience.

MP: Yes and this is why I think – I mean it's interesting to talk about Poe again here, because this was what, when Poe was thinking about literature, Poe being a very, very – how can I put this – very, theoretical-minded person as well, in spite of his, you know, stories that might look very fantastic.

But he was very philosophical about the question, you know, what is literature? What is art? What is that thing? And for him it's clearly related also to, . . . It has its own rules. You cannot equate from a point of view of literary theory, you cannot equate sentimentalism with reform, but historically it was used for reform.

AE: The, I mean, since you just mentioned, the connection to historical developments of literary periods and so on, this idea of depletion doesn't only reply to sentimentalism, but it's also something which generally, I mean just at the turn of the century, into the 20th century and moving forward from there, especially then with the enormous shifts in the western world that the World Wars brought on and so on and part of modernism is this 'Everything has been exhausted in a way and now what do we do,' right?

MP: Yeah, and I would say this is going on even before, before the World Wars. It's something that's happening also with Upton Sinclair, the description of the down-trodden, working class people doesn't really have an effect as intended and the gigantic watershed that modernism represents is also related to the end of sentimentalism and the belief that this kind of rhetorical strategies actually are useful in creating social good. So, modernist artists rejected this kind of sentimentalism, also this kind of moralism or didacticism, just like Poe did, I mean he was very influential for, you know, the modernist poets like Boudelaire or Valerie. And although sentimentalism works, just remember when you last cried over a book or a film. It does not have to work in a way as they intended it, the literature of reform.

And a good example for this, is a book that was written for the purpose of taking the reader somewhere else, so it requires— it fulfills the requirements of this lecture series, it takes you somewhere else, and this is the book called *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee, who was the writer, the author, and in this book we also find photographs by Walker Evans. And you might have seen some of these photographs by Walker Evans, they're extremely famous, black-and-white photographs of poor farmers in the south of the US in the Great Depression, but James Agee wrote the text accompanying these photographs and it's quite a long report. And by the time James Agee wrote this, he was considered a serious writer, so he had very specific expectations: People had expectations of him, he had expectations of himself—

AE: Was he a fiction writer or a journalist?

MP: He was both, he was a fiction writer and also journalist and when— During the Great Depression, where we have deprivation poverty in the south and not just in the Dust Bowl but everywhere else. He moves in with a number of families, or at least two or three and he lives with them and he tries to describe the situation, he tries to write about their hardships in life. But he was also very much aware of the difficulty of this task, so whereas he wanted to help these people, he knew somehow that it wouldn't be so easy. He wanted to avoid two things: he did not want to write Art (with a capital A) and he wanted to avoid the empty formulae of sentimentalism.

AE: So exactly what we were just talking about, this. . . That it doesn't have an effect beyond kind of aesthetic moment?

MP: Right, and he says this repeatedly in the book. But he still wanted to take the readers to this

other place. I mean you could have said 'Okay, I'm not going to write anything, I don't want to write about this like this.' But he said he still felt that it was necessary to take his readers to this place where he was. He has a very interesting and very peculiar instruction to his readers so some kind of instruction manual how to read this book and he says: 'Imagine you sit very close to a loudspeaker and then turn it all the way up and then listen to the music.' Now I quote:

Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it. [...] Is that what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? or acceptable in polite or any other society?

MP: The answer is, of course, no; anything perceived at such close proximity has to dispense with enjoyment, aesthetic or otherwise. It will hurt to listen to music that loud, it will probably damage your ears, too. But this is how he wants his readers to feel when reading the book: not having a "good cry", but feeling pain.

AE: I think that's a point very well made, because with a lot of what we've been discussing today from the examples, they are well-intended, they want to change something they want to reform society in a way that will make things better for the people who are suffering? But of course they can be and probably often are consumed as entertainment and consuming the suffering of other people turns them into an object in a way.

MP: Exactly. And this is exactly what Agee has to avoid and wants to avoid at all price. So he constantly writes about his doubts and is really definitely tormented by his failure to render this other place correctly. So, and I quote another passage from the book:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

MP: So what you can see here, first of all, he's very critical of his own ability to write about this, then he's also quite critical with his audience – he says 'Many of you will find it curious, interesting' but as you said earlier, this is not what he wants, he wants them to feel pain. And, then he continues, because exactly, it should not be a parlor game it should not be entertainment, quote:

As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live.

AE: I think this torment that he seems to feel very clearly communicates here, also marks an interesting general literary shift from the beginning we've been discussing 18th century, 19th century literature into modernism and also onward into postmodernism. Because of course the people who are writing reform literature in the 19th century— if Stowe says she wants her audience to (quote) "feel right", then she indicates that she knows what it is that should be felt, she knows what is right. Whereas Agee now seems to be much more hesitant to take on this authority, this moral authority of saying this is good, this is bad, he only sees the things as they are horrible and painful and so on, but he

doesn't seem to be or even to be able to be this authority, the authoritative voice who is able to give the voice to these voiceless people, right?

MP: Right, I think that's true but I also think that there are two different aspects here. You can call Stowe naive and also, you know, in some sense limited, so she is limited in her perspective. But for us, to get something out of a reading of such a book or of the knowledge of her we must put her into historical context because it was imperative for Stowe to know what was proper, because otherwise she wouldn't have written that book. So she— Her very simple starting point was: Slaves are human, slaves are like us. So this kind of authority she had to take, otherwise she wouldn't have written that book. Whereas for Agee, you know for the beginning of the 18th century the task at hand to write about other people and their thoughts, their sufferings, and knowing people read these books as entertainment or might not take them seriously – that was a serious conflict for Agee. He did not want that.

AE: I think, also that it is something that has shifted our view of the world and also of our acceptance as individual authorities and so on has also changed and like in the passage that you quoted earlier, Agee says that "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here." and then what he lists are tangible, real elements of the world that he had experienced. Which to me implies that he would rather people experience this world directly than filtered through his words into a sort of consumable narrative in a way.

MP: I agree. And this is something that he says repeatedly in this book. He says he privileges photographs but that's— When you read the entire description, the entire work, then you must as a reader also actually realize that there is some kind of paradox or there is some, maybe there's a tragedy even, I don't know, for a writer, you know, a writer writes, but. . . What else? What else does a writer do? So in some sense, what Agee does, whatever it is that he does: It's writing. And what we can learn from him I think is that literature allows us to escape, but not just in a "soma"-like way, but to places where we can develop ideas, imagine alternative words, work out solutions for new social cooperation, etc. etc. If we take literature (or fiction in general, including films, video games, etc.) to be a "guide" into these worlds, it is interesting to observe that relationships between "guide" and "tourist" might change over time; sometimes there is no connection whatsoever. But this does never stop writers trying to be guides, trying to imagine other places, other people other times, and for readers to see if they want to follow them there.

AE: I think these are excellent closing words. So thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

MP: You are very welcome. It was a pleasure.

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week, I'll be speaking with Christian Schneider about urban fantasy fiction and we'll pick up some similar themes as today but in a very different light.