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The Critical Edge of Learning

Jacqueline Rose

In this article, Jacqueline Rose argues that nineteenth-century literary writing, notably Mary Shelley's relatively unknown *Valperga*, published the year Birkbeck was launched, has much to say about the crisis facing the humanities in the UK and worldwide today. Shelley's text is a plea against tyranny. Birkbeck was founded, to acclaim and hostility, in order to make the pursuit of knowledge and critical thought available to the working class. Tracing her own educational experience, Rose argues that these issues have never been more urgently in need of attention than today.

Mary Shelley: literature, education, freedom

In 1823, when Birkbeck College opened, Mary Shelley's *Valperga* was published, five years after the anonymous appearance of *Frankenstein*, the work for which today she is best known. *Valperga* tells the story of the Italian conqueror Castruccio Castracani dei [degli] Antelminelli, who became captain-general of Lucca in 1316 and prince in 1320 by means of unrestrained ambition and vicious military force. Shelley portrays him as an uncorrupted youth turned monster who arrogates to himself divine, as well as earthly, power. She pitches him against Beatrice, who becomes his lover but is crushed by his spirit, and the virtuous Euthanasia who loves him, but who loves 'the very shadow of freedom' even more.[1] At the end, she goes willingly to her death after joining the conspiracy to strip Castruccio of all his perverse glory.

The novel has been described as one of the most 'relentlessly pessimistic' texts of the Romantic period.[2] Euthanasia's values are defeated. No monument remains as a public record of her principles, which are clearly supported by Shelley herself. But it is also a visionary tale, a plea for the 'female' virtues of peace, compassion, and domestic care against the tyranny of the self-aggrandizing male Romantic, 'all in all to himself', who aims for the stars, oblivious to the needs and rights of others.[3] Seen in these terms, Shelley's text can remind us how far literature plays its role in public debate, and how far the struggle between tyranny and liberty belongs at the heart of writing.

Only a few years before, in 1819, what came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre demonstrated the lengths to which the state is prepared to go in order to subdue the will of the people. Eighteen were killed and hundreds injured when cavalry charged a Manchester crowd gathered to protest against the laws of parliamentary representation. In 1821, barely two decades after the defeat of France's revolution, the suffrage campaigner Richard Carlile wrote in his 'Address to Men of Science' that Britain's revolutionary spirit had been suppressed only by the force of 'fixed bayonets and despotic laws'.[4] Mary Shelley's story was published close in the aftermath of protest. But Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'England in 1819', written when the Shelleys received news of the Peterloo Massacre in Italy, and his *Masque of Anarchy*, did not see the light till much later ('England in 1819' was published in 1839).[5] We can speculate that the

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[1] [Mary Shelley], *Valperga; or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, 3 vols (Whittaker, 1823), I, p. 187.

[2] Daniel E. White, '"The god undeified": Mary Shelley's *Valperga*, Italy, and the Aesthetic of Desire', *Romanticism on the Net*, 6 (1997), doi:10.7202/005750ar.

[3] *Valperga*, II, p. 171, quoted in White (para. 16).

[4] Quoted in Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 54.

[5] 'Note on Poems of 1819. By the Editor', in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Mrs Shelley, 4 vols (Moxon, 1839), III, pp. 205–10 (pp. 205–07).

historical and geographic distance of her tale — a medieval Italian court — might have let it slip through the wires. But by writing *Valperga*, Mary Shelley was adding her voice to political controversies that have not faded to this day. It is hard not to be struck by the modern resonances of her story: the clash between state authority and the right to protest, between military coercion and democracy, between inflated male egos strutting the globe and the demand, often from women, for justice and — most recently in the pandemic — for a fairer, more equitable, and caring world.

In the year Shelley's work was published, workers were gathering at the Crown and Anchor Tavern on the Strand for the first adult education venture in the UK. Their meetings laid the foundations for the creation of the London Mechanics' Institution, now Birkbeck. By the middle of the nineteenth century there were over six hundred such institutes in England with over one hundred thousand members.[6] From the outset it was clear that this was an initiative with the most far-reaching political implications. The project of providing education for the people was fiercely opposed by those who believed that literacy would furnish working people with '*tools* by which they would inevitably work out their own and the public ruin' (p. 3, emphasis in original). Bolstering the esteem of working people was seen to be a 'risky thing' (p. 3). In 1860 Moses Angel of the Jews' Free School worried that the institutes would convert the half-educated into politicians of distinct revolutionary or at least democratic bent (p. 7). Or, in the words of Joanna Bourke, author of a monumental study of the college's history to mark the bicentenary, British elites simply believed that higher education was 'socially, politically and economically threatening to the power of privileged people' (p. 590). As time would tell, they were not entirely mistaken.

For some, the task of the institutes was therefore to pacify working-class radicalism. In fact, the institutes also served as one of the main conduits for channelling working men and women into politics. It is to Birkbeck's ongoing credit that it never tried to sequester education from civic participation, that it always saw learning and political being in the world as inseparable. In this fight to preserve independence of thought for all, the role of the humanities, including literature, has been key. Only a quarter of all people, stated former enslaver Archibald Alison in his evidence to the 1838 Select Committee on Combinations of Workmen, were capable of deriving 'serious pleasure from literary, philosophical pursuits' (p. 4). Owning slaves, on the other hand, was clearly, in his mind, no barrier to the summits of culture. Though 'decolonization' did not then exist as a concept, we can already see the ugly spectre of race shadowing

[6] Bourke, p. 2. Quotations in this and the following paragraph are from Bourke.

hostility to any form of education devoted to more expansive, critical forms of self-discovery and knowledge.

For Alison and others, such tastes and interests were outside the ballpark of the many, or they should be. Reading literature or philosophy, it was often argued, would give the uneducated ideas above their station. It would radicalize them — first by the mere process of reading, by freeing up the spaces which reading opens in the human mind, and then by the ideas such reading might provoke: for example, as in Mary Shelley's *Valperga*, the conviction that the world should be and, despite all evidence to the contrary, could be, a better place (tyranny must be opposed whatever the human price). From the outset, expanding free access to learning and pursuing the social outcomes of learning were therefore indivisible. Hence Birkbeck's 'unique mission' — 'evening education for working Londoners', that is, education intended above all for those who do not believe they have the right to any education in the first place. 'Evening' is also crucial. It meant that the students would bring into the classroom the experience of their daytime activities as workers, whatever struggles, forms of exploitation, shop-floor organization and resistance that experience might involve. At the very least, they would bring with them their links to what is often referred to, misleadingly in relation to universities, as the 'real' world (as if universities in themselves — what and how they teach — did not have a key role to play in what that world is understood and allowed to be).[7]

This does not mean of course that all Birkbeck's teachers or indeed students have been of the same political persuasion, as the often virulent debates about the meaning and value of education have continued inside the doors of the college, as part of education itself. In the 1920s William Joyce, who would become famous as the fascist sympathizer Lord Haw-Haw, qualified with a first-class honours degree in English. A member of the university's Officer Training Corps, he saw its objectives as enabling 'educated and intelligent men to discharge their military debts to the state'.[8] At the outbreak of the Second World War, he allied himself with Nazi Germany and broadcast pro-German propaganda. Meanwhile, in the 1930s, figures like historian Eric Hobsbawm and crystallographer John Bernal, described by Bourke as 'Britain's most famous communists', were surrounded by other communists and leftists drawn to Birkbeck

[7] See William Davies, 'Stay Away from Politics', *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2023, a review of Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, for a strong account of the marketization of learning and the assault on the humanities in the universities. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n18/william-davies/stay-away-from-politics> [accessed 4 August 2024].

[8] Quoted in Bourke, p. 273.

during the interwar years and after. At the time of his death in 2012, Hobsbawm was president of the college.

This radical edge to knowledge at Birkbeck, criss-crossing the disciplines, has never faltered, though it has shifted with the times. According to Bourke, by the 1970s, it was economics, history, politics, and sociology that played the predominant role in promoting radical critiques of their own disciplines, followed by the new Department of Law founded in 1992. In 2007 psychosocial studies would split from psychology after the latter attached itself more closely to the measurable disciplines of neuroscience and clinical psychology, leaving the former free to explore, often via psychoanalysis, the psychic ramifications of political identities and power. This splitting, writes Bourke, is 'an example of the role played by national politics in the production of disciplinary knowledge', of a new 'state managerialism' laying down the parameters and divisions of learning (p. 452). Ironically, she writes, it was only by detaching itself from psychology 'proper' that psychosocial studies became free to secure its own interdisciplinary nature, to study, for example, the complicity of psychoanalytic practice in Brazil with the government dictatorship of 1964–85.[9]

Today, the critical edge of learning, in which Birkbeck has excelled, is being threatened — by the collapse of provision for part-time degrees; equally, if not more, by a government-led vision of higher education in terms of calculable outcomes, aimed at teaching students how to showcase 'their ability to negotiate market competitiveness'.[10] Any degree that fails to do so was classified by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in his brief premiership of 2022–24 as a 'lower value' degree, a dismissal of learning with no immediate market value that has predominated in Conservative governments, and to some extent in Labour administrations, for many years. We could not be further from the very principle of learning at the core of Birkbeck, intended to help students 'think, judge, and develop a better understanding of themselves and the world'.[11]

Sussex and Birkbeck: fighting for humanities in the UK

From long before I joined Birkbeck in 2015, this story has tracked my teaching life. It has been my good fortune to teach first at Sussex, credited with creating the first interdisciplinary model of teaching in the UK, a third of whose students were mature students returning to education; then at Queen Mary whose location on the Mile End Road in East London guaranteed a significant intake of ethnic minority students (the

[9] See, for example, Aline Rubin, Belinda Mandelbaum, and Stephen Frosh, '"No memory, no desire": Psychoanalysis in Brazil during Repressive Times', *Psychoanalysis and History*, 18.1 (2016), pp. 93–118, doi:10.3366/pah.2016.0179.

[10] Bourke, p. 587.

[11] Bourke, p. 589.

historian Bill Fishman prided himself on taking new faculty on a tour of the area's radical cultural history including Toynbee Hall, which, in the words of its website, has worked since 1884 alongside 'people facing poverty and injustice to build a fairer and happier East London'; and Fournier Street, today home to a mosque that had been a synagogue and before that a Huguenot church); and now at Birkbeck, whose progressive educational aims were inscribed into its project from the start.[12]

Shortly after I was employed at Sussex University, government hostility to non-vocational education received ironic confirmation during the mass unemployment of the 1973–75 UK recession, when the Conservative education secretary, Norman Tebbit, issued a run of government-financed 'New Blood' posts to the university sector. The aim was to counter the drastic impact of his own policy of austerity on the age range of university faculty. Early retirement and the rule of no new or refilling of vacant posts left departments crammed with staff between their early thirties and late fifties. Of the 200 junior posts released to correct the imbalance, 170 were allocated to science and vocational subjects, 30 to the arts and humanities. When some of us half-joked that this just showed that there was nothing so dreaded by a reactionary Conservative government as an educated, critically thinking population of the unemployed, ready to challenge the status quo, I don't think we realized just how right we were.

Today, after nearly a decade at Birkbeck, I never cease to be impressed by the extraordinary range of students I have had the privilege of teaching. For example: the leading activist in the campaign against the UK policy of indefinite detention of migrants, a policy shared by no other country in Europe; the woman working with mental health provision on the plight of Irish refugees, another offering them therapy, funded by the Irish government; the banker who introduced himself as guilty at the money he had made, and who was now seeking a way to make amends; the teacher of special needs children; the performance artist who also worked to support the needs of disabled university students; the dancers, artists, theatre directors, and one professional singer; the worker with adolescent mental health trauma; the human rights NGO activist involved in uncovering the ongoing legacy of Guantanamo Bay; the private equity lawyer; the textile designer, jeweller, and engineer; the young author writing a history of protest for children; the journalist who had been in the profession for twenty-five years; the PE teacher whose dedication to the seminar seemed to me wondrously demonstrated by the fact that he rushed from school to the seminar room without pausing to change out of his shorts, as temperatures plummeted below zero in the middle of January. What they have invariably shared is their unswerving belief in

[12] Toynbee Hall <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/> [accessed 4 August 2024].

the right to think, alongside a conviction that education and social engagement are one and the same thing. Significantly, the course they chose to study was called 'Freud in the World', which explored what psychoanalysis might have to say about a world that felt, and feels to so many today, increasingly violent and imperilled.

In fact, as Joanna Bourke describes, Freud has his place right at the heart of the debates about the proper limits of education. He had seen that the future of psychoanalysis relied on its ability to exceed its own disciplinary boundaries. In one of the strongest and perhaps earliest defences of interdisciplinarity, he publicly opposed the idea that only doctors should be allowed to practise psychoanalysis (if anything, he argued, no other training equipped them so poorly for the task). If the unconscious constitutes the specific and non-negotiable terrain of psychoanalysis, it is also the case that psychoanalysis cannot fulfil its aims without appealing outside the walls of the clinic. Psychoanalysis, he wrote, may have already become 'indispensable to all the sciences which are concerned with the evolution of human civilisation and its major institutions, such as art, religion and the social order', but this is nothing 'compared with what might be achieved if historians, psychologists of religion, philologists and so on, would agree themselves to handle the new instruments at their disposal'.[13] The ideal training institution — 'an ideal no doubt but also an ideal that can and must be realised' — 'must include elements from the mental sciences, from psychology, from the history of civilisation, from sociology, as well as from anatomy, biology and the study of evolution' (XX, p. 252). Freud, as he made explicit in a 1919 essay on teaching psychoanalysis in universities, was proposing nothing less than a '*universitas literarum*' situated somewhere between 'medical science and the branches of learning which lie within the sphere of philosophy and the arts' (exactly the domains which Archibald Alison described in 1838 as beyond the purview of the working class).[14] Such an institution would be dedicated to mental freedom. 'The things that really matter, the possibilities in psychoanalysis for internal development,' he concludes, 'can never be affected by regulations and prohibitions' (XX, p. 250).

Crucially, for the history I have been charting in relation to Birkbeck, the mere act of pushing the limits of knowledge in this way brings the issue of access, or money, trailing alongside. The time was approaching, Freud insisted, when 'the conscience of society will awake and remind it that the poor man should have just as much right to

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[13] 'The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (Hogarth Press, 1953–74), XX: *An Autobiographical Study; Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety; The Question of Lay Anxiety; and Other Works* (1959), pp. 177–258 (p. 248).

[14] 'On the Teaching of Psycho-Analysis in Universities', in *Standard Edition*, XVII: *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (1955), pp. 169–73 (p. 173).

assistance for his mind as he now has to the life-saving help offered by surgery' (a confidence in public health provision which can only sound outdated and/or enviable today). Institutions or outpatient clinics would tend to the needs of alcoholic men; they would care for women 'who have nearly succumbed to their burden of privations'; for children whose only choice in life seemed to be between neurosis and running, all of whom 'may be made capable, by analysis, of resistance, and of efficient work'. 'Such institutions', he stated, 'would be free.' 'Somehow or other, it must come to this.'[15] In response to Freud's statement, delivered at the Psycho-Analytic Congress held in Budapest on 28 and 29 September 1918, shortly before the end of the First World War, Anton von Freund, patron of the psychoanalytic movement, offered to put at his disposal a large sum of money to create a psychoanalytic institute in Budapest 'in which analysis was to be practised, taught, and made accessible to the people'.[16] But massive post-war inflation swallowed the funds, and the institution set up by psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi was brought to an end by the Hungarian counter-revolution.

Keeping thought alive

To end on a more upbeat note. On 23 January 2020, at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting at Davos in Switzerland, the philanthropist George Soros announced the launch of the Open Society University Network (OSUN) 'to prepare students for current and future global challenges'. It would consist of an international network of institutions that 'integrates learning across boundaries, promotes civic engagement, and expands access to higher education'.[17] The proximity of these principles to Birkbeck's founding and ongoing vision was confirmed when Soros named Birkbeck as a 'project partner' in this new educational endeavour. Coincidentally or not, this moment circles back to Budapest, where Freud's wartime vision of a more progressive analytic profession was dreamt of and then crushed. The idea of a global university had arisen after the Central European University, founded by Soros in 1991, had to be pulled out of Budapest following the 2010 election victory of Viktor Orbán, and the rise in open antisemitic attacks that followed and have continued to this day. As I am writing, Elon Musk has suggested that the Soros foundation wants nothing less than 'the destruction of Western civilisation'. He was responding to a post on Twitter — now rebranded as X

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15 'Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy', in *Standard Edition*, XVII, pp. 157–68 (p. 167).

16 'Dr Anton von Freund', in *Standard Edition*, XVIII: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle; Group Psychology; and Other Works* (1955), pp. 267–68 (p. 268).

17 'George Soros Launches Global Network to Transform Higher Education', Open Society Foundations, 23 January 2020 <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/newsroom/george-soros-launches-global-network-to-transform-higher-education> [accessed 4 August 2024]; 'Open Society University Network' <https://opensocietyuniversitynetwork.org/> [accessed 4 August 2024].

— sharing footage of migrants arriving on the island of Lampedusa from North Africa, which referred to a 'George Soros invasion of Europe'.[18] It is just one of the ugliest features of this version of the 'white replacement' theory that the one held accountable for this racial 'disaster' is a Jew.

As the links between OSUN and Birkbeck multiplied across the college, one of the strongest, I like to think, was between OSUN and the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, founded by Costas Douzinas in the School of Law in 2004, which I co-direct with Esther Leslie. Its flagship annual event is the London Critical Theory Summer School which, to meet its costs, has been fee-paying since its inception. Our immediate priority, therefore, was to expand our diversity and reach, ideally to include potential applicants from the Global South who would not be able to attend without financial support. Thanks to the generous provision of international bursaries from OSUN, we have been able to do so. Since 2020 we have welcomed participants, either in person or virtually, from institutions in Syria, Azerbaijan, Greece, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, the Philippines, Tunisia, Romania, Russia, China, Czech Republic, Bangladesh, United States, Nigeria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Germany, South Africa, Colombia, Brazil, Palestine, Austria, Hungary, Ukraine, the Netherlands, Italy, Egypt, Uganda, Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Nepal, Portugal, and Turkey. While OSUN will cease its activities from the end of the 2024–25 academic year, OSF (Open Society Foundations) — George Soros's founding academic forum — has generously agreed to take over the funding of this unique opportunity for 2025–27.

Many of these students are living under oppressive regimes. One had been airlifted to Germany from Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban; a student from Brazil was involved in creating a public memory bank on the streets to record the mostly unspoken legacy of dictatorship; another, from Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan was seeking a way to respond to the persecution of the Rohingya refugees which she had witnessed at first hand; another from the Roma community in the Czech Republic wanted to use the opportunity to understand more fully the rise of populism which was increasing discrimination against them; an African student from Tunisia was asking himself what it meant to be a citizen in a 'decolonized' country; another, from Turkey, came in search of an educational setting where, as she wrote in her application, she would find 'the space to think'. Several of them, from Turkey, Hungary, India, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan,

[18] Hibaq Farah, 'Musk Suggests Soros Foundation Seeking to "destroy civilisation"', *Guardian*, 19 September 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/18/elon-musk-accuses-george-soros-foundation-of-wanting-to-destroy-western-civilisation> [accessed 5 September 2024]. See also, Jonathan Weisman and Andrew Higgins, 'George Soros is a Familiar Villain for the Right-Wing in Trump's Indictment', *New York Times*, 4 April 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/04/us/politics/george-soros-bragg-trump.html> [accessed 5 September 2024].

and more, felt that, in their countries of origin, the educational possibilities for critical thinking were being quashed. One, from Ukraine, was stopped at the Polish border on her first attempt at UK entry, then failed the following year when the UK immigration authorities refused her visa, but made it on her third brilliant attempt in 2024, which was all the more vital to her as she had made the decision that she would return to the scene of the war in Ukraine after the Summer School has ended.

Our banner motto for the whole programme is taken from the famous words of Rosa Luxemburg: 'Freedom is the freedom to think otherwise', written in response to what she saw as the increasingly autocratic control of the party over the destiny of the Russian Revolution. Critical theory, we say in our introductory statement, is 'engaged theory':

> That is, its aim is to show how theory, and the necessity of sustained reflection which it demands and enacts, can contribute to progressive, dissident thought and being in the modern world. In short, at a time when the idea of resistance has become more pressing, the role of critical theory in elaborating a more just future has never felt more necessary.[19]

Over an intensive two weeks, the participants are introduced to intellectual figures from across the world who will help them to focus on the quandaries and injustices of our times. In the 2023 Summer School, for example, they had the opportunity to consider the global politics of water provision, the role forensic investigation can play in uncovering the hidden truths of political conflict over land and sea, trauma in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, what happens when death in a time of pandemic spreads into the innermost reaches of the human mind, how the war in Ukraine is afflicting citizens' dreams, what the British Commonwealth has meant and still means in relation to ongoing racial and class inequality, the role of art in a time of revolution, and the political, legal, and ethical issues raised by the treatment of refugees. Needless to say, the disciplines drawn on — architecture, law, literary writing, visual arts, philosophy, history, and psychoanalysis, among others — are as diverse as the countries and histories which the participants bring to the Summer School.

During these past years, at a time of diminishing political hope for so many, we have been able to watch with growing admiration how the commitment of our participants has intensified as they search for a deeper and more effective understanding of what it means to be an engaged citizen in the modern world. We are a far cry from the

[19] 'Introduction from the Co-Directors', Birkbeck London Critical Theory Summer School <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/annual-events/london-critical-theory-summer-school/about-us> [accessed 4 August 2024].

gatherings in the Crown and Anchor Tavern on the Strand in 1823, although not as far as we might like to think from Mary Shelley's literary plea for democracy in the face of tyranny, for compassion as the antidote to war. Neither outdated nor diminished in importance, Birkbeck's founding vision of free education for working people and for emancipatory learning now stretches to the very edge of the globe and feels more urgent than ever before.