

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



THE SEDUCTIVE POWER  
OF LITERATURE

Phil Harrison

**— LETTERS**  
**on LIBERTY**

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

[academyofideas.org.uk/letters](https://academyofideas.org.uk/letters)



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:  
free speech allowed.

[academyofideas.org.uk](https://academyofideas.org.uk)

## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## THE SEDUCTIVE POWER OF LITERATURE

There's an apocryphal story about Franz Kafka giving a reading of his 'dirty story', *In The Penal Colony*. It was in a Munich Gallery, about 50 people there, freezing. Kafka felt as cold as 'the empty mouth of a stove'. As he read, one of the listeners had the impression that 'a faint odour of blood was spreading' through the room. A woman fainted. Some left early, and others, when it was over, complained it had gone on too long.

Strange little things, words - little pockets of compressed air, markings on a page. Practically nothings. As the tweet has it: 'Ever realised how fucking surreal reading a book actually is? You stare at marked slices of tree for hours on end, hallucinating vividly.'<sup>i</sup>

I want to convince you of why reading is so important for our idea of freedom. Or, perhaps, not to convince but to seduce you. This is less making an argument than making a pass, and Kafka seems a good place to start. His notorious claim for literature still has vivid power. He said that 'a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us'.<sup>ii</sup> Kafka speaks to something about the condition we find ourselves in as modern human beings, possessed of a sort of negative

capability and a force which more often than not is turned against itself. For Kafka, freedom comes from this internal smashing up that ultimately can lead to release.

*Good writing refuses all these reductions, allowing us - forcing us, even - to work out a relation to ourselves, to others and to authority.*

What 'frozen sea' we need releasing from is the question at the very heart of contemporary politics (and, indeed, practically all of literature). Implied is the idea that our lives have been reduced somehow, made too small and too simple. The pressures and constraints we feel today come from every angle. The Right reduces us to factors of the market (making us consumers) and authority (obeying our family, nation, and so on); while the Left - at least in its current incarnation - constrains us according to our group identity (race, gender, sexuality).

Good writing refuses all these reductions, allowing us - forcing us, even - to work out a relation to ourselves, to others and to authority. It does this not by ignoring material reality, or by fantasising it away, but by making us aware of its contingency. Great literature makes us see how things really are (harder than it

sounds, as we shall see) and also how they might be otherwise.

Sometimes this Kafkaian axe is a turn of phrase, or a commonly held truth turned suddenly backwards. It can explode our way of thinking, or make something we know suddenly and palpably real.

*Reading can do something to us in two different ways: firstly, by reading as creation (not consumption); and secondly, by reading as encounter (not knowledge).*

Sometimes these inversions come as a shock. John Cage argued that ‘the Golden Rule’ of Christianity (of ‘do unto others as you would be done by’) was a mistake. Instead, he argued ‘we should do unto others as they would be done by’.<sup>iii</sup> Think of Richard Ford’s line in his novel *Rock Springs*, ‘a light can go out in the heart’<sup>iv</sup>, or Allen Ginsberg’s challenge that ‘suffering itself is not so bad; it’s resentment against the suffering that is the real pain’.

Revelations have their place. However, it is more often the slow, steady pressure of patiently inhabiting another person’s way of being in the world through reading that unlocks something for us - so slowly that we don’t even hear the key turn.

Reading can do something to us in two different ways: firstly, by reading as creation (not consumption); and secondly, by reading as encounter (not knowledge).

---

## Reading as creation

---

‘The hardest thing of all’, JA Baker wrote, ‘is to see what is really there’.<sup>v</sup> There is always so much going on - in the world and in our own minds - that all attempts to make meaning necessitate selection. We routinely include certain things in our understanding and exclude others. But the obviousness of the point should not disguise the danger that we tend to be seduced by these selections into thinking that what we have selected is in fact the truth. John Berger puts it beautifully:

*‘One is taught to oppose the real to the imaginary, as though the first were always at hand and the second distant, far away. This opposition is false. Events are always to hand. But the coherence of these events - which is what one means by reality - is an imaginative construction.’<sup>vi</sup>*

In other words, we are constantly creating the world as we move through it. ‘Reality’, Berger continues:



*'However, one interprets it, lies beyond a screen of clichés. Every culture produces such a screen, partly to facilitate its own practices (to establish habits) and partly to consolidate its own power.'*

What good writing can do is alert us to the things that get lost in our everyday meaning-making. It forces us to see things that we have missed, sometimes on purpose, perhaps through laziness, but often because the demands of modern life makes attention difficult.

*What we can believe in, what we feel is viable and good and worthwhile, is never a given - it always speaks to a capacity in us and in our imagination and desire.*

There are vested interests - exercises of power - which want the world, and what we can make of it, to remain the same. I still remember the shock and delight on encountering Berger's *Ways of Seeing*<sup>iii</sup> for the first time. I loved looking at paintings, but I had never before seen them in the way he - and the women he spoke to throughout the book - made possible. I was not wilfully blind, or at least not *only* wilfully blind. I simply did not have a language to examine and critique and enjoy the work until that moment.

‘All of us, grave or light’, writes George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, ‘get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them’.<sup>viii</sup> This is as true in the political sphere as it is in our personal lives. What we can believe in, what we feel is viable and good and worthwhile, is never a given - it always speaks to a capacity in us and in our imagination and desire. Paul Strathern paraphrased Kierkegaard when he wrote: ‘We see the world the way we do because of what we intend to do to it.’ Desire, here, is vital.

*Expanding our vocabulary - by which I don't mean learning more words, but finding better metaphors, seeing old things in new ways (including ourselves) - is a precondition for the imaginative excitement that can allow us to change.*

It's crucial for politics to take account of what people want - hence the necessity of democracy. Good writing is therefore necessary to make visible to us the way in which power embeds itself, arrogates to itself authority and works against the ability of people to determine their own lives (hence, Marx). But is it not also crucial to take account of why people want the lives they want (hence, Freud)? Our initiation into desiring happens before we have any language at all. These desires, as Freud (but not only Freud) helped us

realise, tend to track us our whole lives. Both the tyrant and the democrat are made, not born.

The language we learn is constrained first by our families, and then by as much of the outside world as we can manage to get hold of. Our language is, in one sense, always looking backwards - defensive in tying us to ways of being that we did not choose or create. But expanding our vocabulary - by which I don't mean learning more words, but finding better metaphors, seeing old things in new ways (including ourselves) - is a precondition for the imaginative excitement that can allow us to change. In doing such, we change both ourselves and our communities.

'We would like him', Marcel Proust writes about the author, 'to provide us with answers when all he is able to do is provide us with desires'.<sup>ix</sup> Reading, in this sense, is a creative act. 'The project', as the British psychotherapist Adam Phillips suggests, 'is to transform the available materials, not submit to them'.<sup>x</sup>

## Reading as encounter

---

What does this creative process look like? Let's start with what it isn't. When we think of reading, we tend to think about the acquisition of knowledge: we read to learn information that we then add to our existing information and thus expand our knowledge of the world. Certainly, there is a sense in which this is true, but it is a limited (and limiting) way of reading - it misses something much more powerful, even beautiful.

The most crucial failure of this kind of 'learning' I have already hinted at: we tend to look for confirmation of what we already know, to find facts which fit with our existing ideas and plans for the world. This is most evident in the world of political discourse and has surely been exacerbated in an age of Twitter in which complex questions are functionally reduced to simplistic, hyperbolic declarations to fit both the character count and the reactive demands of the 'readers'. The extreme of this 'knowledge acquisition' approach can be found in the surge of speed-reading apps and programmes, which promise to reduce books to the basic chunks of information that we can take in quickly and easily before moving on. Reading in this sense is a technique, a way of achieving a goal.

Instead, reading should be an encounter and, in particular, an encounter with the other. Reading at its most powerful - when the axe swings the sweetest - doesn't present us with the good as a model to follow, but instead connects us to our own badness and brokenness. The frozen sea in this reading - everything that prevents our freedom, our flourishing as individuals and societies - is rooted in a fear of otherness. Religions and political ideologies alike depend on, are constructed from, the drawing of lines between insiders and outsiders. The other (take your pick: the asylum seeker, the Brexit voter, the BLM activist, the colonialist, the murderer) is monstrous. How can they believe what they believe, or do what they do? 'I am not like them', we say.

*We are Rodion Raskolnikov, we are Humbert Humbert, we are Hazel Motes. We are monstrous, capable of great selfishness, arrogance and cruelty.*

The good liberal would have us read to learn that the other is not really monstrous. Instead, they would have us learn that the other is just like us, lovely and good and truthful. We overcome our antipathy to the other, and therefore able to have more interesting relationships and build more interesting political

allegiances and commitments, when we realise that we are all the same.

But this doesn't work, and the reasons it doesn't work are that (a) we are not all the same; and (b) we are not all lovely and good and truthful. Those parts of us that we can't accept - the mean, the selfish, the needy, the self-righteous, the cruel - become (*ta da!*) the very things that 'the other' is like, whoever the 'other' is for us. We create the other out of those parts of ourselves which we cannot bear. Jacques Lacan famously claimed that Christ must surely have been being ironic when he advocated for people to 'love thy neighbour as thyself',<sup>xi</sup> as most people hate themselves.

*This is the failure of identitarianism - not that there aren't groups to which we might belong, or choose to belong, but that these groups are in many ways the least interesting part of us.*

This awareness - this revelation - is always present in good writing. And, I believe, particularly in good fiction. Theory is vital, but something else can happen when these questions are dramatised in stories of flesh and blood. A different sort of identification becomes possible. We are drawn into the excess, violence, fear, hatred, humour and lust and we see ourselves in it -

we feel ourselves in it. We are Rodion Raskolnikov, we are Humbert Humbert, we are Hazel Motes. We are monstrous, capable of great selfishness, arrogance and cruelty. Great writing drags us into the hell of our own mind, our own creatureliness, and brings us face to face with what is most unique about us: not our talents or skills, but the extraordinary ways in which we deal with our own hauntedness and trauma.

*Throwing labels around, or indeed, retreating behind labels ourselves, will only drive people to bunker down deeper into their defensive positions.*

The variation is wild. We are different and will respond, empathise and become enraged from our own individual position. This is the failure of identitarianism - not that there aren't groups to which we might belong, or choose to belong, but that these groups are in many ways the least interesting part of us. Only when we see past the other's labels and names (all, in a sense, stories reduced to slogans) can we genuinely find and engage with one another. To really encounter the other is to encounter them in their 'monstrosity', which only becomes possible when we can see ourselves in our own.

Great writing seduces us to lower our defences sufficiently to see ourselves in the stark, unpretty

truth. We do not necessarily become better, or more moral, but in bearing the otherness in ourselves we become less fearful of encountering the otherness in someone else. As James Baldwin puts it in *Nobody Knows My Name*. ‘One can only face in others what one can face in oneself.’<sup>xiii</sup>

The freedom this brings is personal, but there is also a political dimension to understanding the context in which people exist. This is not wishy-washy, pacifist hoo-ha. Racism, sexism and homophobia are all born out of the inability to face the otherness in oneself. Throwing labels around, or indeed, retreating behind labels ourselves, will only drive people to hunker down deeper into their defensive positions. As a result, we become less likely to experience the sort of confrontations (seductions) that are necessary to allow people to change.

*Without breaking down our internal barriers, we are likely to replicate old ways of thinking and being.*

Lawyer and teacher Michelle Kuo gives a fascinating account of helping a young prisoner called Patrick in America’s Deep South learn to read, using authors like Frederick Douglass, CS Lewis, Marilynne Robinson, James Baldwin and WS Merwin:



*It was through reading Baldwin with Patrick that something clicked in me. This was why I loved Baldwin: He talked openly about the struggle to feel warmth towards oneself. He'd written that questions of race operated to hide the graver question of the self. It wasn't that he denied the existence of racial inequality. But the harder task was to figure out who one was because and in spite of it.*<sup>xiii</sup>

Freedom requires smashing the frozen sea within. It is easier, certainly, to view freedom in instrumental terms - as a product of political systems or democratic arrangements. I am certainly committed to this way of thinking about freedom, too. But without breaking down our internal barriers, we are likely to replicate old ways of thinking and being. As Friedrich Nietzsche warns, we are always tempted to pick up old laws and call them new. 'Our freedom', Adam Phillips says, 'may be merely a new version of our old confinement'. We can leave the EU, one might say, but what do you do about the EU within?

In *The Master of Petersburg*, JM Coetzee<sup>xiv</sup> imagines Dostoevsky dealing with the tragic, suspicious death of his son Pavel. In real life, Pavel outlived his father - but Coetzee's own son died tragically, in a similar manner. In the novel, Coetzee has Dostoevsky address Maximov, the judicial investigator:

## THE SEDUCTIVE POWER OF LITERATURE

*'What is it that frightens you, Councillor Maximov?... when Karamzin's skull is cracked open like an egg, what is the truth: do you suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don't answer? Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering.'*

Are you seduced?

## References

- i @KatieOldham, Twitter, 9 December 2014
- ii Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, Shocken Books, 1990
- iii Nelson, Maggie, *The Art of Cruelty*, WW Norton & Company, 2011
- iv Ford, Richard, *Rock Springs*, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2006
- v Baker, JA, Cocker, Mark, *The Peregrine*, Collins, 2010
- vi Berger, John, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2005
- vii Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC, 1972
- viii Eliot, George, *Middlemarch*, William Blackwood and Sons, 1871
- ix de Botton, Alain, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Picador, 2006
- x Phillips, Adam, *Unforbidden Pleasures*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016
- xi Phillips, Adam, 'Against Self-Criticism', *London Review of Books*, Vol 37 No 5, 5 March 2015
- xii Baldwin, James, *Nobody Knows My Name: more notes of a native son*, Dial Press, 1961
- xiii Kuo, Michelle, *Reading With Patrick: a teacher, a student and the life-changing power of books*, Pan Macmillan, 2017
- xiv Coetzee, JM, *The Master of Petersburg*, Secker & Warburg, 1994

# LETTERS on LIBERTY

*Letters on Liberty* publishes regularly. If you want to ensure you don't miss a single one, you can now subscribe and get the next five bundles for just £25 by heading to [www.academyofideas.org.uk/letters](http://www.academyofideas.org.uk/letters)

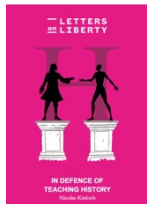


## LIBERTY IN A NARCISSISTIC AGE

Roslyn Fuller examines the contemporary problem of narcissism, and why an individualistic outlook on life is a barrier to progress.

## IN DEFENCE OF TEACHING HISTORY

Nicolas Kinloch looks at the ways in which today's approach to history is often more concerned with modern activism than an appreciation of the past.





## **UNSHACKLING INTIMACY**

Ralph Leonard champions sexual freedom, arguing that while taboos around sex and intimacy have shifted over time, prejudices still abound.

## **UNFUCKWITHABLE MONEY**

Jeremy Hildreth argues that those resistant to Bitcoin should remember how much technology has grown in the last 20 years – and how letting go of old ways can be painful, but necessary for progress.



## **FOLK AND THE ENGLISH RADICAL TRADITION**

Brian Denny reminds us of how the working-class history of radical folk and rebellion can build a democratic and freedom-loving future.

## **GREENS: THE NEW NEO-COLONIALISTS**

Austin Williams argues that the contemporary environmentalist obsession with stopping development is a bigger threat to society than climate change.





### *Author*

Phil Harrison is an author and filmmaker based in Belfast.

His debut novel, *The First Day*, was published internationally in 2017. He has just completed his second. Previously, he

wrote and directed a number of award-winning short films, including *Even Gods* (2011) and *On Going Home* (2015), and a narrative feature drama (*The Good Man*, 2012), which screened internationally and was released by Soda Pictures in 2014.



### *Illustrations*

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at [janbow.com](http://janbow.com)

### *Letters on Liberty identity*

Alex Dale

### *Pamphlet and website design*

Martyn Perks

# — LETTERS on LIBERTY

[academyofideas.org.uk/letters](http://academyofideas.org.uk/letters)



ISBN 978-1-9196001-6-1



9 781919 600161 >