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Teaching Literature as Aberrant Science

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To be a teacher of literature at a university today is to occupy a problematic position in the production and codification of knowledge – a fact that has generated a great deal of critical comment in recent years. But it should be noted that this position in its problematic dimensions is not necessarily new. In fact there is reason to believe that the teacher of literature has always been a propagator of an aberrant science – yet a science that in its aberrations has more to do with the methodological problems of the natural sciences than is usually credited.

The purport of this paper is to feel my way toward an initial statement of what makes the study of literature aberrant in this way and, in the process, elaborate upon a central dynamic of teaching literature that draws its strength from such scientific aberrance. In the process I will move toward a statement of the role played by an aberrant science in negotiating cultural identity.

The following notes are based very much on my personal experience as a teacher of German literature, first in South Africa under the apartheid government, then under the emerging democratic government, and finally, for the past few months, in Canada. Although they are personal reflections, I present them here with some claim to generality – for reasons I hope will emerge in the course of my discussion. Let me say at the outset, however, that this very claim to generality will be thematized in the paper via a juxtaposition of two modes of enquiry that I will bring to the teaching of literature. One depends upon the moves that allow scientific observation to make abstract statements about observed phenomena with the intention of maximized predictability – the interrelation of empirical and applied knowledge. The other issues from the tension between the multiplication of discourses about literature and the activation of personal passion in the act of reading – another kind of empirical and applied knowledge.

It might make my position clearer if I start with three textual moments, one philosophical, the other two literary.

In 1802, Hegel published the first part of his essay 'The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law' in the journal he edited with Schelling, the *Kritisches Journal der*

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Philosophie. He was intent in this article on demonstrating how both the empirical and formal schools of natural law theory had explained important elements of natural law while at the same time misunderstanding the import of their achievements (see Harris, 1983: 107–8). In the opening comments of this essay, Hegel notes that the 'science of natural law' has shared the same fate as 'other sciences such as mechanics and physics', in that what he calls their 'philosophical element' has been relegated to metaphysical questions, while the special principle of the sciences remains defined by its proximity to experience (1975: 55). Consequently, Hegel claims, 'they renounce their claim to be genuine sciences' (1975: 55). Instead, they are cast in a 'middle realm between nothing and reality', and compensate for this limbo by a determinate dependence on the empirical. At the same time, Hegel complains that 'the Critical philosophy has placed the Absolute wholly within practical philosophy', where it becomes nothing more than 'dogmatic knowledge' (1975: 57).

The dialectic which Hegel hoped might free both empirical and formalizing thought from this antinomy remains, as Adorno was later to observe, caught up in the Kantian contradictions that necessarily accompany any attempt to grasp the transcendental as a knowable positivity. And, as Adorno argues, it is in the realm of the aesthetic that the vicissitudes of appearances, of *Schein*, retain their metaphysical relevance. Indeed, Adorno speaks here of the metaphysical task of the aesthetic in redeeming appearance (1966: 385–6).

Any teacher of literature knows how stubbornly the literary text resists Hegel's unifying ideals. At the same time, a detailed investigation of Hegel's method reveals that it is this very resistance that makes his ideas persistently useful. While this leads well beyond the scope of the present paper, it is interesting to note recent attempts to reclaim Hegel's achievements but also his lasting influence in this connection (see for example Barnett, 1998). However, if a shorthand approach to this Hegelian legacy be permitted here, it will allow us to retain the insights concerning how the abstracting (or formalist) moments relate to the force of empiricism in the formulation of knowledge.

These insights provide us with a way of speaking about common experiences in the teaching of literature, but experiences whose familiarity tends to be matched by the difficulty that faces any theoretical formulation of the commonplace. When it comes to negotiating cultural identity, the resistance of the literary text in the face of any attempts to derive abstract principles from the act of reading can provide a pathway from specific experiences of reading to the more general statements associated with common forms of culture. This paradoxical effect issues from the fact that culture itself is negotiated along the faultlines between specific experience and its common representations. The resistance of literary texts reveals itself most tellingly in the boredom and agitated frustrations shared by student and teacher alike, as soon as they ask themselves how the abstracting moments they derive from empirical textual work might relate to any other empirical moment outside the classroom situation.

This brings me to my next two (literary) examples. To begin with, J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, which tells the story of the fall from grace of David Lurie, a professor of literature in South Africa. Prelude to this is the bad faith generated by a teaching situation that uses his competence to generate what he sees as a mere marketable derivative of literary knowledge – communication.

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> Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other'. His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. (Coetzee, 2000: 3–4)

It is in the refusal to air these thoughts that the bad faith of the teacher lies, and he is rewarded with his own and his students' boredom. Boredom is the return of the human soul's repressed emptiness, and it marks the force that might have taken Lurie back to an institutional confrontation with the negotiation of culture. Instead it takes him away from this potential. He describes himself as a clerk in a post-religious age, propagating knowledge for a livelihood, although 'he has no respect for the material he teaches' and he 'makes no impression on his students' (4).

> He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world. The irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn learn nothing. (2000: 5)

The custodians of knowledge in the post-religious age find themselves alienated from a practice that fails to translate into a meaningful corpus of knowledge, at the same time that it promises to overcome whatever aspects of literary knowledge have become outmoded through excessive abstraction. The problem is that the attempt on the part of university administrations to reform learning according to a reductive Hegelian negation of negation– the invention of courses like Communication 101 – has failed. The teaching of communication in courses like this can never be about culture, even if communication forms the backbone of cultural interaction.

A similar failure in the teaching of literary knowledge provides the starting point for A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2001). Phineas G. Nanson sits in class, staring at the dirty window, listening to his professor cite Empedocles, and to his graduate class discussing Lacan's theory of *morcellement*.

> All the seminars . . . had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying. I thought next we will go on to the phantasmagoria of Bosch, and, in his incantatory way, Butcher obliged. I went on looking at the filthy window above his head and I thought, I must have *things*. I know a dirty window is an ancient, well-worn trope for intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness. The thing is, that the thing was also there. A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*. (Byatt, 2001: 1–2)

To express the boredom of the classroom situation in this particular form as a longing for *things* is to recognize, in the same way as the vocational reformers decried by Coetzee, that literary knowledge, the literary reading of books, has become self-consciously redundant in a world where things and their vicissitudes determine the value of discourse. But when Phineas Nanson takes the path mapped out for him in Byatt's novel, he will find himself following a Hegelian route to self-improvement, and to this extent he is the subject of a *Bildungsroman*. The path of self-improvement

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will involve negating the abstractions of literary analysis in the pursuit of things, only to find that the closer he comes to things, the more he is caught up in the same vagaries of literary language he thought he was escaping when he left the classroom. The lesson he will learn, and the lesson David Lurie is prevented from transmitting to his students, is that the things that might come alive in the negation of literary language are not there. They are there only in the sense Lurie's technical university understands them – as objects to be regulated in strictly controlled discourses of *communication*.

This line of argument, however, leads easily to a renunciation of both the teaching of literature and a certain concept of things that is literature's negation. Both Coetzee's and Byatt's protagonists turn their back on the classroom – one in pursuit of things, the other in pursuit of an ideal which literature seems no longer permitted to formulate. Nanson's pursuit of things leads him to a prolonged encounter with love and its formulations in literary language, and finally to a renunciation of this language. The novel ends with the words: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are her sturdy feet in their Ecco sandals. That is an over-the-top sentence. And Fulla is at the top, and I must stop writing and put away this notebook' (Byatt, 2001: 260). Lurie's pursuit of love in literary language leads him to a prolonged encounter with the thing-ness of life, and finally to the point where he is prepared to deny this thing-ness in the name of human dignity. Coetzee ends his novel with the words: 'Bearing him [the dog] in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up?" "Yes, I am giving him up"' (Coetzee, 2000: 220).

It is important in both these books – but particularly in Byatt's – that the moment when the story ends and we close the book is the moment when the problem of literary language's propagation, the teaching of literature, is formulated as the negation of a negation. We are asked to confront the question of literary knowledge by asking ourselves what happens when the pursuit of its opposite fails. This question might remain cast in the very same esoteric realms that both books problematize and that both books negate – were it not for two essential dimensions of literary language's negation and subsequent re-formulation. For Coetzee this is the political – the realm of communicative action in which literary language becomes a matter of life and death, because it is capable of holding human dignity in sight, even in the face of a monstrous fall from grace. For Byatt it is the passions, the question what it is a book can effect in the personal lives of readers, and how the move from literary language to life can be effected without losing sight of the passion invested in literary language.

In the vision of Coetzee and Byatt, passion and the political redeem literary language through the Hegelian move of negation's negation. And yet, the aesthetic itself carries this redemption whenever it does what Adorno asks of it – it refuses any simple synthesis that might be promised in the Hegelian movement of negation. To say that this issue extends beyond the classroom discourse that is so problematic in both novels is to recognize that even in the world of instrumental reason, literary language continues to promise a redemption of passion and the political in ways that are meaningful outside the ritualistic discourses of literary analysis. This returns us to the question of teaching literature.

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If those of us who teach literature are to understand our own and our students' boredom in the face of literary language's remove from Coetzee's ideals of love and Byatt's world of things, we must begin by recognizing the sustained force that literary language has in a world split sharply between discourses of passion and discourses of things. Before it can be spoken about in the classroom, literary language has already circulated as a public discourse intent on healing this split by redeeming the passions and the political – but as it promises to heal, it continues to circulate within a fetishistic economy intent on retaining the gap it promises to heal. And the energy of literary discourse that sustains the object of its redemption derives from the passion of things and the thingness of passion.

This dialectic around an ontology of passion is generally referred to as the commodification of culture. I am insisting on approaching it in more opaque terms, via a Hegelian reading of Coetzee and Byatt, because this will, I hope, allow an approach to literature that escapes the cultural pessimism usually (and not always correctly) appended to the name Adorno. The commodification of literary culture today bears within it the dialectic of passionate ontology and ontological passion I have tried to describe above. This might become clearer if we consider the forms of literature mediated by television. Let us consider two such instances, one from Germany, one from the USA.

Over many years, one of the most popular cultural programs on German television has been the 'Literary Quartet', which was broadcast for the last time on 14 December 2001, and in which the remarkable critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, together with Hellmut Karasek and Sigrid Loeffler (editor of the literary journal *Literaturen*), hosted a guest in a programme devoted to readings of recent appearances in the literary marketplace. The dynamic that drives the show is Ranicki's passionate and wilful exposés on the quality of books – a category that seems strangely anachronistic in the age of mass culture. And yet, the viewers know that it is not anachronistic in the emotional lives of readers. The good book is the one that allows a reader to speak as Reich-Ranicki does – as an individual consumer within a mass market, individualized by the passion awakened by a commodity.

This is equally evident in Oprah's book club, where the encounter with a book and its author promise readers a way into the emotional life of a writer. This promise is at the same time like a monetary promise, a promissory note – it can be redeemed (liquefied) in a carefully regulated process that will convert the reader's passion into the ontological certainties surrounding an author's experience. This is at the same time the promise that it is possible to encounter the reality of one's own life – a secular epiphany.

There is a sense in which books have always been caught between these two moments, the promise of converting commodities to passions, and passions to commodities. This position of books is evident in German literature in numerous moments, at least since the 18th century. Consider Herder writing on his journey from Riga to Nantes in the year 1769, speculating on the power and the deception of books:

> God knows I would never have become an author – and how much time would I not have gained? How many daring and diverse activities would I not have found? How much false

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> honour, ambition, sensitivity, false love of science would I not have avoided, how many numbed hours sunk in thought, how much nonsense to read, write and think? . . . I could have enjoyed my years, come to know real and thorough science, and to apply what I had learned. I would not have become an inkpot of learned scribbling, not a dictionary of arts and sciences that I had not seen and did not understand, I would not have become a repository of paper and books whose only place is in the study. (Herder, 1935: 123)

To say that the only place for books is in the study is to set them up as the antithesis of any passion that drives learning. And yet, at the same time, Herder sees books as the necessary objects that enable learning. Herder had many reasons for embarking on his sudden journey from Riga (he was not certain what his destination would be), but one of these was the conviction that his growth as a scholar was impeded by the inadequacies of the library there. There were not enough books to foster his career, and yet the books that he needed inhibited his passions.

Or consider Friedrich Schiller's play *Kabale und Liebe* (Love and Intrigue), first performed in 1784 when the poet was 24 years of age. It was, in Erich Auerbach's description (1953: 409), a stormy, fast-moving melodrama which told the story of a fated love between Luise Miller, a young girl from the middle classes, and Ferdinand von Walter, the son of the president at court in a small duchy in contemporary Germany. Here books appear very briefly, and marginally, only as the mediated expression of the love between Ferdinand and Louise. But they appear as a key instrument in the struggle that a simple middle-class morality wages with the corruption of the ruling classes for the soul of an innocent young girl. Louise makes her first stage entrance reading one of the devotional books Ferdinand gave her. The audience sees her engaged in an act of passion, whereas her father sees her wasting time. Granted, his immediate response is a positive one – he praises her for thinking of her creator with such engagement. But the real problem for Miller is his suspicion that the books Ferdinand brings her are products of his idealistic commitment to a world order that is far removed from the realities of middle-class life. The play opens with Miller and his wife discussing their daughter's relationship. Frau Miller defends Ferdinand's sincerity on three counts: the 'wonderful letters' he writes, the money he gives her, and the books he has brought into the house. Miller's response to this is telling:

> *Wife*. Just look at the magnificent books that the major has brought into our house. Your daughter always prays from them.
>
> *Miller* [whistles]. Well, well! Prays! You've lost your mind. The raw fare of nature is too tough for His Grace's delicate stomach. He first has to boil it up in the infernal pestilential kitchen of fine literature. Throw that junk in the fire. I've got to watch the girl just absorb all this lofty nonsense – and who knows to what end. It will course through her veins like Spanish flies, destroying the handful of Christianity that her father only just managed to preserve. Into the fire I tell you. The girl will get all this devilish stuff in her head, and with all her mooning about in never-never-land she won't find her way home any more . . . . (act 1 scene 1, transl. JKN)

It is interesting that the same other-worldly idealism that renders Ferdinand incapable of understanding the practicalities facing a middle-class family also makes

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him an outsider in his father's court. In a conversation between Ferdinand's well-meaning but corrupt father and the court president's scheming servant, it becomes clear that the problem with books is also a problem with institutional learning.

> *Wurm*. No foolishness is too daring for a strained passion. You tell me the Major has always shaken his head in the face of your government. I never did understand the principles he brought home from the academies.What's the good of all the fantastic dreams of great souls and personal nobility at a court where the greatest wisdom is to be great and small by measures, each at the right time, and with cunning. (act 3 scene 1, transl. JKN)

Books are a very real source of passion, in that they reveal the secular form of a love whose divine object is beyond reach of everyday life, and yet they are already a source of disturbance in the machinations of everyday life, since they interfere not only with the common patterns of leisure and work, but with the necessary illusions of governance. This interference is carried by both reading and the institutional learning that was just beginning to make a mark on public life at the time Schiller wrote this play. Reading no longer fulfils this function, and yet it continues to express the same ambivalent dynamic.

This is evident in a book which was selected for Oprah's book club: Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*. Schlink tells the story of a law student and later professor of law, Michael Berg, who was seduced by an older woman, Hannah Schmidt, when he was still a teenager in the 1950s. An integral part of their relationship consisted in Michael reading regularly to Hannah. Later, he encounters her on trial for the role she played in Nazi Germany as warden of a concentration camp. As the trial unfolds, it becomes clear to him that she had wanted concealed from him the fact that she was illiterate. And her illiteracy continues to play a key role in the trial as a possible mitigating factor – and yet it is never revealed. She is sentenced to life imprisonment. After many years, Michael begins to read to her on tape, sending the tapes to her in prison. She uses them to teach herself to read. However, on the day before she is to be released early for good conduct, she hangs herself in her cell. In *The Reader*, the book is the place where passion is mediated, and it is also the place where life skills and career skills are tried out and developed – skills which, as Schlink's story proceeds, will literally preside over life and death. The fact that Hannah learns to use books at too late a stage in her life does not detract from the force these books have in governing the course of their affair. On the contrary, the fatal flaw of the affair – its unequal power base – is closely related to the fact that she and Michael use books unevenly. While for Michael they are a path to his career (here he is following in his father's footsteps), for Hannah they are an expression of her abandonment to a world where she is not required to exercise control over others. For her, this looks like love.

What does it mean to try to teach literature between these two moments? And what does it mean to think of teaching books in the same terms that students increasingly think of learning – as a moment in an uncertain trajectory that places their lives both on a personal path of development and on a training track to a career? Virtually all debates about the place of teaching literature in the curriculum reflect these questions in one way or another.

I wish now, in conclusion, to make a few observations about the teaching of literature as a multi-dimensional activity, in which the literary text comes alive through

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its engagement with several epistemological dynamics, or cycles, or imperatives, and in doing so serves a central function in the negotiation of cultural identity. This conception of literary knowledge is important not only in terms of the uncertain expectations that students bring to their studies, it is also essential for an understanding of the role literary knowledge has to play in the contemporary world. Literature may provide an important formative impulse within a technically oriented curriculum; it may broaden the scope of an individual's cultural and humanist background. But its real potential lies elsewhere.

First and foremost, literary knowledge is important as a vehicle of diversity in what is increasingly tending toward a monoculture of knowledge. The epistemological monoculture, like the various other monocultures that dominate the world today, understands viability in terms of demonstrable links to productivity and profit. This is why the struggle for literary studies as a non-vocational element within universities is not irrelevant. And it is why foreign-language departments, in weighing up the relative merits of literary studies and language pedagogy, are forced to think through the role of teachers in an epistemological monoculture. What students experience as boredom is often nothing more than their own and their professors' inability to articulate the discrepancies between various forms of literary expression and the dominant cultural modes that render these forms of expression seemingly irrelevant. What I would argue is that, far from irrelevant, literary knowledge promises some of the epistemological force described for example by Deleuze and Guattari in their plea for a rhyzomatic mode of thought. In their defence of multiplicity and its forms of thought, they set up a model of writing against what they call the 'root-book' – the 'classical book, as noble, signifying, and the subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two. How could the law of the book reside in nature, when it is what presides over the very division between world and book, nature and art?' (1987: 5).

In the rhyzomatic alternative to this monocultural structure of the book, literature and the teaching of literature can be conceived as occupying an important place in the cycle of useless information (which, because it is useless, ceases to be information), where ideas become worth talking about simply because they are not viable, or they cannot be cashed in as utilities. Something of this idea clings to the aesthetic moment proper, from Kant and Schiller right through to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. It also adhered to philosophy, as evidenced in Adorno's remarkable statements at the beginning of the *Negative Dialectic*, where he observes:

> Philosophy, which once appeared to be outmoded, remains alive because it missed its chance to realize what it promised . . .

. . . and later

> The introverted architect of thought dwells behind the same moon that the extroverted technologists have taken charge of. (1966: 15)

To retain the life of thought from that place on the far side of the moon (Adorno's

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German can also mean that place way behind the times) is one of the driving impulses of literary expression. And the teaching of literature will not be able to avoid negotiating the art of dwelling in another place, outside the discourses of technological utility, far behind the times. In this respect, there is a sense in which Nietzsche's aestheticist standpoint remains pertinent, where (in *Human all-too Human* 1879) he sees grammar as the marker of free thought.

This is not to say that the teaching of literature is only about useless information. The importance of a rhyzomatics, an epistemodiversity in a world governed by monocultures of knowledge, is no different from the importance of any other form of bio- and cultural diversity. It serves as a constant corrective in monoculture, and it acts (paradoxically, perhaps) as a store of potentially useful knowledge that enhances the viability of monocultures – for monocultures by their very nature are never far from the threat of sudden extinction.

Thus literary knowledge, like some of the other more exotic forms of knowledge taught at institutions of higher learning, can serve as unrealized models for unfound problems. This is where it begins to make sense to speak of epistemodiversity in knowledge propagation in the same terms that ecologists speak of biodiversity. Take myrmacology, for instance. Who would have thought some 90 years ago when Eugene Marais was conducting pioneering work in the South African desert that he was working on a science that would be useful in providing technical models for fields as diverse as transportation logistics and nanotechnology? This serves as a good example for unforeseen applications of useless knowledge. But the applicability of useless knowledge extends beyond practical technologies. Perhaps the greatest importance of useless knowledge lies in its continuing resistance to technical applications. Even the myrmacology example should show that the value of a thought model lies not simply in direct translation into technology, but in the discrepancies between the model and its application.

This becomes apparent for the teacher of literature in oppressive societies. Many of my colleagues who taught literature in university programmes in apartheid South Africa found time and again that they were investigating coded models for unarticulated problems. In fact, at times literary knowledge in apartheid South Africa began to look like a means not only of providing models, but first and foremost of articulating the unsolved problems. As a teacher of German literature at the University of Cape Town, I found my students responding to the dramas of Büchner and Brecht or the poems of Enzensberger in completely unexpected ways. These literary works allowed students to draw on their own experiences of life in an oppressive regime, and use the text as a way of formulating what these experiences meant to them.

This personal observation is intended to have more than purely anecdotal value. The classroom dynamics that made the teaching of German literature pedagogically effective in the formulation of alternative identities in apartheid South Africa are an inherent part of teaching any national literature. Some (Bill Readings for example) might call the national literature departments an anachronistic institutional structure that seeks to perpetuate an outmoded structure of citizenship. And yet – as the example of Schiller's play showed – even at the time when this institutional structure was being forged, its purportedly nationalist function was up for debate. And today,

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in confronting the fiction of national identity within these structures, students and teachers alike perform what can only be called cultural work. And this cultural work is well suited to the university environment. As Asha Varadharajan observes, commenting on Readings's book: 'If one shifts the emphasis from the legitimate subjects of culture and nation to those clamoring for such legitimacy, I see no desire on their part to abandon the concept of the University as the place where citizens are molded and as the model for equitable social relations' (1997: 629). The pedagogical project of teaching a national literature in another place (and it could be argued that national literatures are always taught in another place) raises the central questions that must be negotiated anew each time culture and cultural identity are at stake: what is culture, whose culture is propagated in institutions of learning, how does a person fit into a culture in another place, and how does culture become mobile, how is it transported from one place to another? And together with these questions come those that can be termed proper to the institution – how does the institution continue to function in the manner it purportedly did in its liberal heyday – as an inauguration of imaginary neutral places where our own culture can be talked about as if it were another culture. Or where another culture can be used to talk about our own culture. This is an invention of culture, and it is also an invention of self, but it invents culture as a dialectic of the human – of nature and history, of group and individual.

The dynamics of useless knowledge, unrealized models and coded problems all feed into the central cultural work that adheres to the teaching of literature. This is the aberrance that remains scientifically valuable and worthy of defence in the university today.

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