The university is a “public thing,” a necessary condition of democratic life. Public things, as Bonnie Honig argues, “are part of the ‘holding environment’ of democratic citizenship; they furnish the world of democratic life” (Honig 2017, 5). Public things are the things we build, use, and maintain collectively, that interpellate, constitute, and affect us, and without which there would be nothing to debate, constellate around, or agonistically contest. Public things also “press us into relations with others. They are sites of attachment and meaning” (Honig 2017, 6). The significance of the public university as a public thing is especially relevant in societies where only a few universities remain truly “public,” in the sense understood by Honig.

I will suggest that the university, and most eminently, the literature classroom itself, understood as a “public thing” can serve as a model for open society, the core values of which are “free minds, free politics, and free institutions” (Ignatieff 2018, 1). I shall primarily draw on Hannah Arendt’s discussions of the public realm and the place of art in it. Although it is customary to draw parallels between Karl Popper’s arguments in Open Society and Its Enemies and Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism (Ignatieff 2018, 4), this chapter will show how Arendt’s use of Immanuel Kant’s The Critique of Judgment in her essays “The Crisis in Culture” and “Truth and Politics,” and particularly her argument that political judgments should be modeled on aesthetic judgments, can be related to an idea of open society modeled in and by the literature classroom. In my understanding, the literature classroom is a public thing, both removed from and deeply engaged with the common world in which multiple perspectives can be imagined. It makes it possible to engage with uncertainty, while the plurality of unique voices can yield discussion, agonist contest as well as, perhaps, compromise. Although this model of open society offered by the small community of the classroom is not necessarily transferable to the practical world, it can certainly influence it. In fact, it is precisely by operating as an “inoperative community” (cf. Nancy 1990) that the literature classroom can become an impetus to critical and free thinking, to the initiation of new beginnings, and, therefore, a place of resistance to all kinds of authoritarian coercion.
Hannah Arendt, Literature, and the Classroom

By public, Hannah Arendt means the world common to all of us, where we appear, speaking and acting in a way relevant to the community. In The Human Condition (2018, 176), she writes: “Speech and action reveal [man’s] unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves … qua men. … A life without speech and without action … is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life.” By distinctively human life, Arendt means political life, the plurality of human uniqueness forming the public. Discussing the public, she uses the image of the “table” that both separates and connects us. “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (2018, 52). Men heaped together without a table to both separate and connect them either are too close (like the de-individualized members of mass society) or have nothing to do with each other at all; they do not share a common world. The notion of in-betweenness, which will be of utmost significance in Arendt’s later writings, emerges here via the image of the table: the distance between the people around prevents them from having one perspective only. For the public realm, as Arendt further argues, “relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. … Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (2018, 57). In other words, in this common world shared by a plurality of unique human beings, everybody speaks about the same object from different, often contesting, perspectives. This free and open debate voiced from a plurality of points of view is what Dana Villa calls the agonistic quality of the public realm (Villa 2021, 43).

What makes the literature classroom particularly apt to model this ideal of the public is that the shared object participants talk about is neither the present and contingent public world nor the separate, private world of each, but a common world represented in and by pieces of verbal art. Meanwhile, literature is also special because it singularly allows for the appearance of the private and the intimate (which would otherwise be hidden) to appear in the public realm of visibility.

For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most
current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences. (Arendt 2018, 50)

Normally, according to Arendt, the passions of the heart have no place in the public\(^1\) (“the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public”; they are not “for public display”; Arendt 1963, 96). Indeed, literature and the arts are the only way in which emotions and passions can be brought into the light of the public, and the passions of the heart can make an appearance.\(^2\) In other words, art makes it possible for the forces of intimate life (which belong to the private, nonpolitical domain) to make public appearance.

At the same time, as Arendt argues, in order to be able to properly appreciate artworks, that is, artistic transpositions of individual experiences, we must possess a certain freedom to contemplate them, that is, neither should we be bound to our own world by everyday necessities, nor should we approach the artwork too closely (becoming prone to a personal interest, or emotional investment in it). In other words, “the distance,” which separates the person who appreciates the artwork and the artwork itself, “cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and urges of our lives”; 1977, 210). What makes this possible is, on the one hand, the artist’s own distance from the world, and the dependence of the artwork itself on memory, which, making present what is absent, also bridges the distance between present and past.

On the other hand, it is difficult to forget our cares among the goings-on of our everyday lives. The appreciation of art therefore also requires a safe space, removed from the everyday: either a separate communal space such as the theater or a museum, or some inner silence, a separation from the world around; for instance, while we are reading a book. However, as has been mentioned, private experience, according to Arendt, does not count as political experience; that is, in itself, it is not an experience relevant for the community. So that something can have political relevance, so that it can form part of our specifically human life, which, according to Arendt, is lived in a “web of human relationships” (2018, 183), it needs to appear, to be seen and to be spoken about, discussed in the light of the public. The literature classroom can thus offer a model for the public sphere where one can discuss art in a disinterested way, free from the surrounding world of historical and political contingency: it is spatially separated from the general goings-on of our everyday life and cares while also being deeply

---

\(^1\) For the various reasons passions should remain private, according to Arendt, see Timár (2022).

\(^2\) Otherwise, in case emotions themselves become politicized and appear directly in the public realm, we witness the kind of totalitarian control that appeared first during the French Revolutionary Terror, when Robespierre wanted to tear away “the mask of hypocrisy” to get to the “heart” of the people and check the purity of their intentions. Then, it appeared in various totalitarian regimes, wishing to squeeze out, using torture, the “true emotions” driving the political person, thereby totally destroying not only personal integrity but the human person as well (the best literary example being George Orwell’s 1984). On the other hand, and perhaps in the same vein, Arendt also rejected Freudian psychoanalysis.
engaged with it. And, as will be argued in the following sections, it equally offers opportunity for the practices of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which would otherwise be characteristic of the processes of law and politics.

**Art and Taste: Bridging the Gap between Philosophy and Politics**

The artist has no place in politics understood as the public realm of speech and action formed by and in the web of human relationship; the artists work in solitude and withdraw themselves from the public world. In this sense, the artist is different from the political activist, whose acting and speaking cannot be performed without the public (1977, 217). However, artworks, the products of the artist are different: they are public and are not only entangled with but can also act upon the web of human relationships; just like words and deeds, they are phenomena of the public world. Indeed, only works of art are made for the sole purpose of appearance, so that their appearance can be contemplated. What’s more, their value may surpass that of politics because, as opposed to the transitoriness of events, deeds, and speeches, artworks are durable, and, therefore, at least from the viewpoint of durability, clearly superior. Artworks also differ from consumer goods and objects: they do not have any function and are removed from the sphere of human life necessities; they are meant to outlast mortals and the coming and going of generations. Most importantly, without artworks, we would also lose the holding environment that makes this world human, that makes this world our own: “This earthly home becomes a world … only when the totality of fabricated things is so organized that it can resist the consuming life processes of the people dwelling in it, and thus outlast them” (1977, 210).

As we have seen, both the work of art and the person appreciating it are removed from life necessities and individual interests; that is, both are free. In this sense, both artworks and the appreciation of art share with philosophy their contemplative and disinterested character. At the same time, as we will see in what follows, both the work of art and the person appreciating it are deeply engaged in and with the world, and their performance is thus also eminently political. Whereas philosophy, “the love of knowledge,” is inactive, approaching the world as a “mere spectator,” the appreciation of art as “the love of beauty” is always active: it delivers judgments. Arendt thus (rhetorically) asks, “Could it be that philosophy … – which begins in wonder and ends … in the speechless beholding of some unveiled truth – is more likely to lead to inactivity than love of beauty?” Yes, it does. Whereas philosophy may yield inactivity, the love of beauty is always active. This active love of beauty, contrasting philosophy, is called by Arendt, via Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, “taste.” As she goes on to say:

Could it be … that love of beauty remains barbarous [i.e. inactive] unless it is accompanied by … the faculty to take aim in judgment,
discernment, and discrimination, in brief, that … capacity we commonly call taste? And finally, could it be that this right love of beauty … has something to do with politics? Could it be that *taste belongs among the political abilities*? (1977, 214–215, emphasis added)

Taste as “the discriminating, discerning, judging elements of an active love of beauty” (1977, 219) thus shares something with politics too. Indeed, taste can actually serve as the missing link between philosophy and politics: taste is both disinterested, like philosophy, and active, like politics. Meanwhile, taste shares not only the active, but also the public character of politics: judgments of taste require agreement from everyone else.

Indeed, when we make a judgment, we have to “woo” the consent of others, in the hope of coming to an agreement. This means that taste judgments also share with political judgment their persuasive character: both political judgments and esthetic judgments *demand* the agreement of everyone present. To use Austin’s formulation, philosophic, scientific, or factual truth claims are constative, which can be falsified or verified; as a contrast, judgment as an act of persuasion is performative: it is rooted in an opinion *not* presenting itself as the only truth. “Taste judgments … share with political opinions that they are persuasive. … Persuasion ruled the intercourse of the citizens of the polis because it excluded physical violence; but the philosophers knew that it was also distinguished from another non-violent form of coercion, the coercion by truth” (1977, 222–23).

Speech and opinion as persuasion thus not only exclude physical violence but also what Arendt calls “coercion by truth,” the violence of truth claims.³ Truth claims cannot be contested; there is no dispute about them, and they close down the situation by a statement. According to Arendt, only opinions can change the world, because they change the state of things and preform something new into existence.⁴

Arendt raises the example of one of the most famous performatives of European history—“All men are created equal”—to claim that this statement, being a matter of opinion and not of truth, stands in need of agreement and consent so that it can become politically relevant (1977, 246).⁵ According to Arendt, while truths are beyond “agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (240), and are therefore coercive, “in matters of opinion … our thinking is truly discursive, running … through all kinds of conflicting views” (1977, 242). Consequently, culture and politics “belong together,” because what is at stake in both “is not

---

³ What we may just as well call, after Derrida, a performative camouflaging itself as constative (cf. Derrida 1986).

⁴ One could also evoke here Arendt’s key concept of “natality”: “The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (1998, 9).

⁵ This is also Derrida’s example of the performative camouflaging itself as constative in “Declarations of Independence.”
knowledge or truth,” but rather “judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world” (1977, 223).

**Political Judgments Modeled on Aesthetic Judgments**

It is in this essay too that Arendt makes the startling but now famous claim that “‘Critique of Esthetic Judgment,’ contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant’s political philosophy” (1977, 219). That is, she suddenly reverses the analogy she has so far established between artworks and the appreciation of art, that is, taste. Now it is not art and/or taste that is presented as being similar to politics, but political judgment and politics itself become modeled on Kant’s aesthetic judgment. Of course, we cannot speak about the aestheticization of politics. That is, it is not the object of politics, the network of human relationships, that Arendt presents as the object of an aesthetic judgment, but, instead, she finds an analogy between two kinds of judgments: political judgments and aesthetic judgments. So how can one apply the characteristics of aesthetic judgment, that is, taste, to political judgment? Where does Arendt find the analogy?

During the exercise of practical reason, that is, when man makes a moral judgment, he has to agree only with himself, with his own conscience. But aesthetic judgments require a whole different way of thinking. When we judge aesthetically, we seek the agreement of everyone, which not only means that judgments are performative but also that we have to think in the place of everybody else. And this, as she puts it via Kant, requires an “enlarged mentality.” As she argues:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind, the standpoints of those who are absent; … this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else … The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (1977, 241)

We may remember Arendt’s discussion of the public realm evoking the image of the table: people sit around the same table but view it from different perspectives. When she speaks about enlarged mentality and representative thinking, she posits the kind of person as a model who has in his or her mind the standpoints of all those who sit around the table. That is, even though for our common world no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised, we

---

6 On the way in which Kant himself establishes an analogy between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment via his famous claim that “beauty is the symbol of morality,” see Timár (2020).
have to imagine how we would feel and think in the place of all those who are present. Meanwhile, quite controversially, when we make a judgment, based on representative thinking, we do not exercise compassion. As Arendt famously puts it, as “a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics” (1963, 86–87). In fact, we should not exercise compassion, because compassion eliminates the distance necessary for persuasion, negotiation, and compromise. Nor should we become like Adolf Eichmann, who, on the other hand, had the total inability to “ever to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view” (1963: 47–48). Hence, when we make a political judgment properly modeled on Kant’s aesthetic judgment, we imagine the perspective of everyone presently involved in the singularly given situation. This is what Arendt elsewhere calls “solidarity” (1963, 88).

As was mentioned above, when making these kinds of judgments, we form an opinion instead of declaring some universal truth, a truth that could not be otherwise. That is, what judgments in matters of both taste and politics lack is, precisely, the coercion proper to truth claims. At the same time, and quite conspicuously, as if in a self-contradictory fashion, Arendt herself clearly derives the objectivity, the disinterestedness proper to the truth claims made by science or history writing, from the disinterestedness of art itself, from the disinterestedness of artistic storytelling:

_The disinterested pursuit of truth_ has a long history; its origin, characteristically, precedes all our theoretical and scientific traditions, including our tradition of philosophical and political thought. I think it can be traced to the moment when Homer chose to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans, and to praise the glory of Hector, the foe and the defeated man, no less than the glory of Achilles, the hero of his kinfolk. This had happened nowhere before; no other civilization, however splendid, had been able to look with equal eyes upon friend and foe, upon success and defeat. [–] This is the root of all so-called objectivity – this curious passion … for intellectual integrity at any price. Without it no science would ever have come into being. (1977: 312–313, emphasis added)

The enlarged mentality of Homer, the storyteller, encompassed the virtues of both the judge of art and the politician: his thinking was representative, his judgment disinterested and impartial. His objectivity could therefore set a model also for those who have been in pursuit of truth itself—as if, without the disinterestedness learned from the reading of literary works, such as the _Iliad_, science could never have come into being. Meanwhile, Homer’s words do not correspond exactly to any historical reality; he does not present any propositional truth. Homer’s truth is a literary truth, and hence a performative one:
both preserving in his memory and inventing anew what happened, he could both describe and intervene into the world of human affairs.

Taking into account Arendt’s discussion of culture, one may conclude that the public character of the literature classroom, which, at the same time, is removed from the everyday world, offers the most exquisite place to enlarge students’ mentality. The discussion of literary works helps students engage in representative thinking, as well as practice persuasive and argumentative speech, through an open, agonistic exchange of opinions. Further, at another level, literary works themselves may model enlarged or representative thinking, through the multiplicity of voices and perspectives they present—or, precisely, by staging the absence of certain voices and perspectives.

**How Can the Discussion of Literary Works Contribute to the Implementation of Open Society?**

In what follows, I will show that an Arendtian approach to the discussion of literature has more potential to pave the way for the implementation of open society than other possible approaches, which place more emphasis on literature’s capacity to generate compassion for the marginalized and the dispossessed. In fact, thinkers as different as Lynn Hunt, the historian,7 or Martha Nussbaum, the moral philosopher,8 agree that literature can transform us into better citizens precisely by enlarging our sympathetic imagination. In the same vein does Richard Rorty argue that “sad and sentimental stories,” alert us to others’ suffering, and these “suggestions of sentiment” are much more effective than the commands of reason in building a culture of human rights based on solidarity (quoted in Phillips 2015, 49). As a contrast, as we have seen, Arendt dismisses the politically benevolent effects of empathy and argues against the exercise of compassion in the public sphere, while her understanding of “solidarity” as a “dispassionate” and “deliberate” “community of interest” is almost the opposite of Rorty’s. To clarify what I mean by an Arendtian approach to the discussion of literature in the literature classroom, let’s see an example of the way in which attention to uniqueness, disinterestedness, representative thinking, and open discussion can be taught to students through the teaching of literature.

This demonstrative example will be a familiar one—a short passage from *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. *Robinson Crusoe* was canonized as the first English novel and was published in 1719. It is the fictional autobiography of a sailor, called Robinson Crusoe, who suffers shipwreck and ends up on a desert island, where he grows plants, hunts animals, and survives. The narrator of the story is Robinson himself; we can only hear his voice and can only get to know

---

7 Hunt (2007) claims that it was eighteenth-century sentimental literature that paved the way for the emergence of the idea of universal human rights.

8 Nussbaum (1997) argues that judges should read novels, especially novels by Charles Dickens, to learn how to empathize with people in need.
his perspective, throughout the book. This is one of the many reasons why readers have tended to identify with him all through the centuries. Near the end of the novel, Robinson comes upon footprints in the sand, and it turns out that there is a cannibal feast nearby. He rescues the would-be victim from imminent death. The story, written in first-person singular, reads as follows:

At last he [the man he saved] lays his Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head … to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he liv’d; I understood him in many Things, and let him know, I was very well pleas’d with him; in a little Time I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his Name should be Friday, which was the Day I sav’d his Life; I call’d him so for the Memory of the Time; I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know, that was to be my Name; I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar that ever was; … I [also] began to instruct him in the knowledge of the true God.

Literary works often generate readerly compassion with the main character, especially when the main character is also the narrator. Whenever we read the first-person account of the sufferings and struggles of an individual, we tend to take on his perspective. Readers of Robinson Crusoe’s story identified with him and accepted his authority through centuries. This resulted in readings that unwittingly endorsed or became accomplices in perpetuating the colonialist ideology proper to Robinson himself. However, as Arendt warns us, one has to keep a certain distance from both everyday events and works of art. This distance helps us to form judgment and also prevents us from falling into the trap of compassion, which actually eliminates all distance between people. Indeed, an Arendtian reading of Robinson Crusoe would suggest that instead of empathizing/identifying with the narrator, as we generally do when we read autobiographies, we should start to engage in “representative thinking.” In this case, we may also “present to [our] mind the standpoints of those who are absent” (1977: 241) to realize that both the perspective and the voice of “Friday” are lacking from Crusoe’s narrative. This disinterested reading would also make us ask: Why is it absent? Does this absence have a meaning? This 1719 novel was typically written from a colonizer’s perspective, and this colonizer, Robinson Crusoe, is presented as the only, and, therefore, authoritative locus of voice, vision, and meaning. Of course, good books are not necessarily like Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe; ideally, they themselves present a plurality of voices and perspectives, or reflect on their absence, thereby representing what Arendt calls enlarged mentality. For example, Foe, the twentieth-century re-writing of Robinson Crusoe, by the Nobel Prize–winning J. M. Coetzee is a case in point: Coetzee has a female narrator,
and the book presents the absence of Friday’s voice and perspective as the unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, enigma of the story (see also Timár 2021).

At the same time, Arendt would disagree with those who consider literature as a mere tool to advance the cause of “identity politics,” that is, with readings that would concentrate solely on the ways in which Defoe erases, while Coetzee wishes to give voice to, the “likes” of Friday. She famously opposes the subsumption of human uniqueness and plurality under the homogenizing rule of the same: her ironic take on the “woman question” and the challenges she poses to the concept of “Jewishness” all indicate that the sacrifice of human uniqueness and plurality is in close kinship with totalitarian thinking. Indeed, storytelling is especially relevant in this context, since it has the potential to resist any ideology based on the rule of the same: as Arendt famously puts it, “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (Arendt 1968, 109). Storytelling can reveal “who” somebody is (their human uniqueness as disclosed in speech and action) in contradistinction to “what” he is (i.e., “his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings”): as Arendt puts it, “who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero” (1998, 179, 186; see also Meretoja 2017: 80–81).

Conclusion

Following Arendt, one may conclude that the literature classroom as a space of solidarity allows for the open, plurivocal, and critical discussion of the various perspectives represented or, on the contrary, left unrepresented in the literary work; in other words, it allows for a critical reflection on both monologic and dialogic, both homophonic and polyphonic texts. At the same time, slowing down the reading process, it also permits close attention to the singularity of literary texts, which attention can in itself offer a resistance to totalizing ideologies. For apart from the critical reflection on literary devices (such as the narrative techniques discussed above), the literature classroom can equally disclose and make students reflect upon the workings of language per se, thus fostering the development of a critical awareness of the ways in which language can or cannot be put to ideological use. The free, open discussion of aesthetic and political opinions formed about literary works, and the exercise of critical thinking, predicated on both critical distance and imaginative engagement, can thus offer some essential contributions to the implementation of the idea of open

---

9 The twentieth-century literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin presents something very akin to what Arendt calls “enlarged mentality,” when he speaks about the “dialogical,” “polyphonic” character of Dostoyevsky’s novels. As he puts it, “not a single one of the ideas of the heroes—neither of ‘negative’ nor ‘positive’ heroes—becomes a principle of authorial representation, and none constitute the novelistic world in its entirety.” For “One should learn not from Raskolnikov or Sonya, not from Ivan Karamazov or Zosima, ripping their voices out of the polyphonic whole of the novels (and by that act alone distorting them)—one should learn from Dostoevsky himself as the creator of the polyphonic novel” (Bakhtin 1984, 25, 36.)
society. Differently put, rather than discussing what open society is, the literature classroom allows for students to experience the workings of a model of open society. For a variety of reasons, the small community of a classroom cannot stand for, or be representative of, a larger political community, and its practices cannot be unproblematically transferred to and implemented in the practical world. However, the literature classroom can certainly show up the ideal of a space of solidarity in which multiple perspectives can be imagined and in which the plurality of singular voices can yield discussion, argument, agonistic contest as well as, perhaps, compromise. Indeed, it is by showing up a perhaps utopian ideal of solidarity, in the sense understood by Arendt, that it can serve as a place of resistance to authoritarian regimes.

Bibliography