
An Interview with Professor Deidre Lynch about “Love of Literature”¹

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Abstract: Professor Deidre Lynch from the Department of English at Harvard University published a chapter entitled “Love of Literature” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* in 2022. During the author’s visiting scholarship at the Department of English at Harvard from 2022 to 2023, an interview was conducted with Professor Lynch focusing on this chapter, exploring the role of “love of literature” in literary studies. Lynch discusses the continuity between her 2015 book *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* and her 2022 chapter in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory*, emphasizing her long-term focus on the historical evolution of literary affections, which originated from classroom interactions, particularly teaching Jane Austen. She critiques the misleading dichotomy between literary theorists and “literature lovers,” arguing that affective engagement has always been central to literary scholarship and teaching. The interview delves into the “affective turn,” “return to aesthetics,” and their connections to the “ethical turn” in Western literary theory in the 21st century, noting parallels with developments in Chinese literary theory. Lynch highlights how literary affections intersect with intersectional politics, enabling social changes through shared literary experiences. Through tracing back to the 18th-century structural transformation in reader-text relationships, which privatized literary intimacy, Lynch offers insights on the value of literary studies in contemporary education of humanities amid global challenges.

Keywords: *Love of Literature*, literary criticism, affective turn, aesthetic return, literary studies

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Luo: Professor Lynch, congratulations on your newly published chapter titled “Love of Literature” in the *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory*. I am interested in your aim of acknowledging the role that love has played in the literary discipline’s defining methods and ways of knowing, while adopting a long view on the history of literary attachments from a literary historical approach. I am impressed with your passion to explore literary affections in your

scholarship as a lover of literature. Your major book *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* was a finalist for the Oscar Kenshur Prize in 18th-Century Studies, as well as a finalist for the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Award for Literary Criticism. Could you share a little bit about the continuity in scholarship between “Love of Literature” from *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* and your previous book of *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*? Also I am wondering when did you first develop your academic interest in exploring literary attachments rigorously?

Lynch: First of all, thank you very much Dr. Luo for your interest in my scholarship and teaching.

The chapter on the “Love of Literature” that I published in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* does indeed build on the book I published in 2015, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*. That book in turn built on a number of early 21st-century books in English studies that turned to the 18th and 19th centuries to narrate the chequered history of literary criticism as a kind of knowledge-practice. It also engaged with a number of books that had sought to establish the historicity of “literature” as a category of textuality: books that had demonstrated that “literature” was something that had to be made, not found, books that had likewise established the historical contingency of the concepts of the author, the canon, and of aesthetic value that was “literature.” These earlier studies were often motivated by the argument that if the discipline of English studies knew more about its pre-history it would be better positioned to address the current crisis in its legitimacy (brought on, it was often said in the popular press, by the so-called canon wars of the late 20th century and by the importation of theory into North American classrooms). In *Loving Literature* my aim was to correct for an omission in those earlier studies: I wanted to talk about the “invention” of “literature” as an event in the history of the emotions. Literature came into being in the 18th century and Romantic period as a love object. It solicited an emotional commitment from its readers.

Though I often looked to examples from the 21st-century, the book concentrated on figures from the 18th and 19th centuries: for instance, my opening two chapters are devoted to two 18th-century figures who are often understood to be the founding architects of literary criticism (Samuel Johnson) and literary history (Thomas Warton). In the chapter for the Oxford Encyclopedia, while still insisting on the value of taking a long view of current debates, I tried to bring the story that I had told in the book up to date. I wanted to address directly—and also refute—the perception that my generation of scholar-teachers, spoiled by our exposure to theory or to identity politics or to the New Historicism—didn’t love literature.

In some ways, my interest in the literary affections began in the classroom. I often receive inspiration from my students. As you know, I regularly teach classes on the novels of Jane Austen: those are works that cross the boundary between the academy and popular culture, works that are truly loved and that are read outside the classroom, that is, even when they are not assigned. When one teaches Austen in the USA one is often re-introducing her works to students who have long loved them. As a teacher, I have regularly had to address with my classes the relationship between loving an author and studying an author. (I wrote about Austen as a figure we can use to bring that relationship into focus in the introduction to an essay collection that I edited in 2000, *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*: in some ways the work I did for that collection was the origin for the book that I published 15 years later.)

Luo: The chapter on the “Love of Literature” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary*

Theory starts with Vincent Leitch's assertion in 2014 that "theory remained alive and well and a good thing" while theorists generally call their detractors the "I love literature crowd" with the implication of positioning theorists and literature lovers in opposed camps. It also puts into question Zadie Smith's complaint in 2003 that "There is something about love that does not sit well with the literary academy," with the implicit equation of the theorist and the killjoy as she recalled her undergraduate literary study of the 1990s at Cambridge University. You argue that—though with much evidence like ideological criticism's mistrustful downgrading of aesthetic enjoyment to support Zadie Smith's diagnosis of the loveless literary academy (constitutionally allergic to literary affections)—it is high time to reverse course and acknowledge that it is misleading to give an account of literary theory as the story of how the love of literature was repressed. Could you elaborate a bit about the imperative you feel as a scholar and Professor of English Literature to address the misleading phenomenon of positioning literary theorists and literature lovers in opposed camps?

Lynch: In the chapter from the Oxford Encyclopedia, I do indeed aim to correct the misleading impression that literary theorists occupy one camp, and the "I-love-literature crowd" that Vincent Leitch refers to occupies another. I think that this is a polarizing account and that it can hold true only if one forgets that scholars are teachers too. The affections have always been things that good teachers try to harness: we have always been teaching our students to love and care for works as well as how to interpret and contextualize them, and I would include literary theorists in that "we." Too many of our histories of literary studies ignore the everyday life of the discipline, in as much as they focus exclusively on what scholars publish vs. what and how they teach (on an ordinary day, our labor is very probably going to involve the work of teaching not the work of writing). This point, by the way, gives me the chance to recommend to you a wonderful recent book co-authored by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* that corrects for those omissions.

A very good reason to reject the polarizing account is (as Buurma and Heffernan also propose) that it is an impediment to our making common cause. At this moment, when humanities education is under attack, people in literary studies need to stick together.

Another reason to reject the narrative that holds that the love of literature was repressed by theory is that this narrative downplays misleadingly the pivotal role that emotional attachment played in the theory phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s. Figures like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes and Judith Butler were seductive; they inspired (and continue to inspire) strong feelings of attachment. As Rita Felski notes, in a passage that I quote in my chapter, theory has always had a "fannish" dimension that belies the identification of the critique theorists commend with attitudes of detachment and suspicion. (And, of course, suspicion is an affective attitude too, not only an intellectual one.) I believe, in fact, that the theoretical developments of the late 20th century actually made it easier, not more difficult, to acknowledge the emotional dimensions of our intellectual projects.

Luo: As you present evidence for putting the feeling of love—the love of literature—on theory's own agenda, you cite the canonical figures of "French Theory" including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes, whose writings often engage readers with exhilarating emotive effect as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, known both as a fundamental text for the field of affect theory and also as

paradigmatic for the methodological shift known as the “reparative turn.”

For Chinese scholars of English literary studies, we are more familiar with the influential French deconstructionists and their writings than Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the queer theorist. Does the “reparative turn” Sedgwick advocates extend beyond the queer feminist criticism? In my understanding, this paradigmatic for the methodological shift with its positive interpretative methodology, as well as its attention to love and nurture of its objects of study, is illuminating for scholars in cross-disciplinary fields of the humanities.

Lynch: Eve Sedgwick throughout her late writing made a point of insisting on the many ways in which literature had provided a resource for queer people’s survival in a hostile society. But you are absolutely correct to suggest that her account of the difference between reparative reading and paranoid reading has implications for all practitioners of the humanities, not just scholars of queer theory and/or feminism. Indeed, the essay is sometimes seen as a founding text for what is called post-criticism: the school of thought, also associated with theorists such as Sharon Marcus, Stephen Best, and Rita Felski, that has urged the discipline in general to accord more respect to ways of interacting with texts that don’t center on historicizing or demystifying or problematizing them. (Sedgwick, it should be noted, just wants the “paranoid” method to be recognized as “one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones.” She is not banning the hermeneutics of suspicion or banning dispassionate detachment. She is instead seeking to divest that set of approaches of its privileged status as the discipline’s normal operating procedure.)

Luo: This growing concern with affections in Western literary theory in the 21st century reminds me of what has been happening in the history of our Chinese literary theory. In the field of classical Chinese literary theory there is a strong tradition of stressing literary affections, and even in the transformative era of constructing modern Chinese literary theory under the influence of Western literary theories (and even since the 1930s) there has been a persistent endeavor among Chinese scholars to combine affections and aesthetics to construct modern Chinese literary theory, despite some frustrated efforts. And since 2019 there has been a call for the reconstruction of criticism which involves the combination of aesthetics and ethics in Chinese literary theory. In Western literary theory we know there emerged an ethical turn in the 1980s, and in the early 21st century with “the affective turn,” together with “the return to aesthetics,” can we now say the contemporary concern with aesthetics and affections in Western literary theory also engages with ethical concerns (ethical return)?

Lynch: I am fascinated by what you say about the new concern in Chinese literary theory with reconstructing the practice of criticism—turning to ethics and returning to aesthetics. That parallel to Western developments is very intriguing. Yes, I do think there’s a relationship between the “affective turn” and the “ethical turn”: you yourself show us where one might locate the overlap between the two when in your question #3 you write of the reparative turn as mandating “love” and “nurture” of one’s objects of study. We model that sort of nurture, I think, whenever we find ways to make the text—which is mute without its readers—speak again to a new audience, and in a new time. I think practices of generosity should be central to literary criticism, practices that we can exemplify in the kinds of questions we ask of the books we read, as in our practices of citing other voices (giving the floor, one might say, to others).

I am reminded here of the Victorianist critic Talia Schaffer's comments on an ethics of care and her way of applying to literary studies a body of theory developed originally by philosophers and psychologists. In her essay from 2019 (published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*), "Care Communities: Ethics, Fictions, Temporalities," Professor Schaffer suggests that the care-giving relations that she traces mainly in 19th-century British writing are also relations found in the classrooms where we study that writing:

A book, a poem, a piece of music can be sources of care ... [and] our enjoyment of that care imposes a certain responsibility on us to maintain them ... we can see the complexity of a care relation: the relation between an intimately cherished poem, say, and the person who loves it requires the person to do whatever she can to make sure the poem lives on. (526)

Luo: In the section on "Intersectional Politics and the Literary Humanities: Race, Gender, Sexuality ... and Love?" you argue that intellectualism is not in opposition to affection, and concept-driven intellection always has an affective undertow, "within the humanities broadly construed, this reorientation of criticism around affective categories has been most formative for fields in which literary inquiry opens up onto social critique and political activism: in particular, feminist studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, critical race studies and queer of color critique." Can such literary criticism with active engagements with intersectional politics together with affections foment social changes? How so? Do you view this as part of the intellectual imperative in today's American culture?

Lynch: Recent work in "queer bibliography," recent histories of feminist studies, and recent histories of Black literary studies in the US ("Black Bibliography") all suggest that, yes, a love of literature can merge with politics to create social change or at least help to create it. Shared books can be the basis for new forms of collective life: we can choose to form coalitions with the people with whom we share loved books. The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed writes about this very well in her account of "companion texts."

I am not sure that as a teacher I can or should take a lead in such developments. But I can count on their happening, among the students (at Harvard I have seen this occur with, for instance, Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, which has sparked new communities who find feminism through that novel). Probably the best thing I can do is get out of the way and let these moments of community-formation happen.

Luo: You argue that though periodization and such formulae as "the reparative turn," "the affective turn," "the ethical turn," and "the return to aesthetics" simplify a much more complex situation of different schools of theories, it's hard to avoid such handy languages to describe the intellectual traditions of the discipline and still there has been a tenacity of aesthetic and affective commitments that runs through the "turns" and "returns." Nevertheless, ever since the 19th century, literary scholars paradoxically have been making a sacrifice to disavow the love of literature in order to comply with the protocols of the modern professional discipline, with an emphasis on being scientific to live up to criteria of intellectual rigor and specialization. I am wondering what the impact of the flourishing digital humanities in the 21st century is on literary scholars' struggle for professional legitimacy, particularly with regard to the price of disavowal of emotional attachments to literature.

Lynch: Your question about the digital humanities is such a good one. It's not my field, but my impression is that in the early days of the field this sub-discipline presented itself—sometimes quite polemically—as the means by which to produce a dispassionate, objective account of the literary field. (And, of course, this sub-discipline dispensed with reading: Franco Moretti imagined “distant reading,” as he called it, as an activity that one would delegate to computers.) In those early days, practitioners of digital humanities also presented themselves as having found a way to bestow on literary studies some of the prestige that is monopolized by science and technology subjects. And by doing so, they were perhaps unwittingly, without meaning to, repeating moves made by (for example) philologists and other 19th-century reformers who, as English studies became part of the curriculum at colleges and universities, needed to find out ways in which literature could become an “examinable subject”—a discipline whose students could be required to take tests and required to give the “right” answers.

Now, I think, the situation has changed, and these scholars are more modest in their self-presentation. They are likely to see digital humanities methods as part of a tool-kit that includes many ways of reading, both distant and intimate.

Luo: Then you sketch a historical retrospect back to “the age of sensibility” in the late 18th-century and early 19th centuries to reveal how the history of the discipline of literature intersects with the history of emotion to manifest how the love question has hovered persistently around literature. In “the age of sensibility” for the first time the term literature in English lost its association with Latin literacy and designated valuable, imaginative vernacular works, while feeling—formally devalued—was newly found to have social benefits as virtue was relocated to an intimate sphere. Thus literature, served as a privileged venue of affective expressions to cultivate humane sensibility. British Romanticism played a formative role in the disciplinary formation of English Studies and by Wordsworth's day achieved sensibility was identified as the object of aesthetic education. You stress that “This episode of disciplinary formation unfolded as well as a structural transformation of the relation between work and reader: the aesthetic relation became a privileged domain for the affective intimacies of private life.”

Could you elaborate a bit about this structural transformation in the 18th century and what's the significance of this transformation in the intellectual tradition in relation to the cultivation of readers' sensibility through literature?

Lynch: In this question, you're referring to a claim that I make much more fully—and with evidence to support it—in my 2015 book. There, tracing how literature was reinvented in the 18th century as a category of especially valuable, exclusively imaginative works, I trace at the same time a transformation in the relationship between the reader and the work of literature. That transformation occurs in the period when 18th-century moral philosophers such as David Hume started to present the small “delicacies” of love and friendship in newly positive terms. They began to bestow on these once minor—also feminized—virtues as much importance and value as they had done on the public virtues that had previously been central in philosophical discussion. Relationships between readers and authors and between readers and texts begin in the 18th century to enter this new, value-charged terrain of intimate life, and it gradually comes to be taken for granted that one relates to literature as a private person rather than as a citizen or public figure. Books get pulled into the orbit of readers' most private lives, their most intimate selves. (It might

help to know that, at one point, I was thinking of titling the book "At Home with English"—in order to emphasize how these changes work to make literary study, even when practiced by professionals, something quite domestic in its orientation.)

All this suggests why the kind of activist communities formed around shared reading that you mention in your fifth question are quite rare—those communities can be tricky to establish and sustain because our understanding of what it means to be a literary reader is so very individualistic and privatized. We bring intimacy expectations to our reading; students bring those same expectations into literature classrooms. Anyhow, all this, I maintained in the book, was, and remains, a legacy of 18th-century shifts in the Western culture of emotion.

Luo: In China since 2020, scholars have been engaging in heated discussion about the construction of disciplines of New Liberal Arts which encourages interdisciplinary research and pedagogy with both an international horizon and Chinese scholars' stances within and beyond humanities and the social sciences in the 21st century. This is in response to the fast development of science and technology compared with the declining situation of Arts and Humanities in the contemporary era. What advice would you give to Chinese scholars and students who engage in English literary studies in the context of the construction and development of New Liberal Arts in China's higher education institutions?

Lynch: It would be very presumptuous of me to offer advice to Chinese students and scholars of English-language literature when I know so little about the situation in your country. I will say to you, as I would say to North American colleagues, that we should always insist—and remind our students that—education is not just a means to obtain a job. At its best, education prepares one to lead a happy and emotionally fulfilled life for decades after one's graduation. The intimate encounters with the lives of others that works of literature facilitate and those works' capacity to move us seem ever more important to me as in the real world the borders dividing one nation from another get more difficult to traverse. We can continue to move in imagination. I think that literature will prove essential to human beings' survival as a species.

Note

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