

# Education, Literature and the Emotions: A Salute to Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher*

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It is kindness, fundamentally, that makes life seem worth living . . . and everything that is against kindness is an assault on our hopes (Phillips and Taylor 116).

This article aims to draw attention to one of the ways in which both literature and literary criticism can make a valuable contribution to the twenty-first century university and to society generally by highlighting the important role that emotions have in the formation of a moral sense. Its main purpose is to make a case for texts that engage the emotions, while also exploring what recent theories aimed at understanding the emotions and the role they play in human flourishing can contribute to the reading of Australian literature. This I will attempt to do by applying a critical framework that highlights the importance of the finer emotions to an iconic work of Australian fiction from the 1930s; one that, because it happens to address an earlier failure of caring and compassion in the wider community, is especially good at revealing what is at stake in the preservation of humanities disciplines like Literary Studies.

By anyone's reckoning the emotions we associate with caring and compassion have been seriously neglected under the impact of the neoliberal economic policies that have dominated the West for the last forty years. In Higher Education the triumph of neo-liberalism has been reflected in the growing emphasis on making education an export industry, the shifting of course content from liberal values to professional values, and the shifting of university governance from a culture of collegiality to one of cost-efficiency authoritarianism and over management.<sup>1</sup>

Literary authors have not been quiet about the implications of the neoliberal 'turn' in Higher Education. The apocalyptic conditions thought to be facing the Humanities, if neo-liberalism is continued for any length of time or taken to even greater extremes, is portrayed graphically in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004). There Martha Graham, the famous American liberal arts college, encourages its students to pursue the neoliberal lifestyle to the hilt, which means they put themselves and their appetites first and moral considerations last. At Martha Graham concerns about socially corrupt behaviour and declining intellectual standards had long since disappeared, as demonstrated by the institution's lax attitude toward students plagiarising essays from the internet and the fact that no one is ever disciplined for referencing books that do not exist (Atwood, *Oryx* 229-30). The novel itself features two characters, Crake the scientist who destroys the whole of humanity, and Jimmy the liberal arts graduate into whose keeping Crake entrusts the Crakers, the new race of people named after himself which he has genetically engineered to take the place of humans. Crake represents scientific knowledge devoid of feeling, since he believes he can get by with just science and not concern himself with the arts or the kinds of knowledge aimed at understanding the human heart. The result is that he ends up 'misusing' science.

In her Kesterton lecture, Atwood made the following observation:

the arts express those dreams for which we want to use our tools . . . The arts as we have come to term them—are not a frill. They are the heart of the matter, because they are about our hearts, and our technological inventiveness is generated by our emotions, not by our minds. A society without the arts would have broken its mirror and cut out its heart. It would no longer be what we recognise as human. (Atwood, ‘Scientific Romancing’ 19)

By attributing both Jimmy’s and Crake’s moral failures to the impoverished higher education programs of the near future, Atwood communicates her concern about the social consequences of universities ceasing to foster such traits as might benefit society as a whole as distinct from the individual, and becoming mere appendages to service industries and corporations in which even the best students simply train to enter jobs and professions.

For the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the humanities are valuable precisely because they cultivate the emotions that enable what she calls human flourishing. That is to say, they provide room to reflect on and therefore promote modes of thinking and behaviour that prevent emotional crises, or produce good outcomes for people experiencing emotional crises. In *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) Nussbaum worries that mercantile values (the pursuit of wealth and unchecked economic growth) are edging out the cultivation of cosmopolitan humanism aimed at creating thoughtful global citizens:

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 2)

Here Nussbaum touches on the humanities’ role in, among other things, fostering humans’ ability to treat other life forms and the biosphere as living systems to which they themselves are intimately connected—the trait of empathy or, as Nussbaum describes it, the ability to see things from the other’s point of view. This, she says, is what the liberal arts teach.

It is not my goal to analyse what I call the top down forces currently driving Higher Education in Australia and how these are likely to impact on the teaching of Australian literature over the next decade or so. Rather, my interest lies in exploring both literature’s and literary criticism’s on-going capacity to shape passions and attitudes in the present educational environment. At the heart of this capacity are these elusive, mysterious things we call the emotions. I say ‘elusive’ because even today the ultimate robot and the one that all scientists and robotic engineers are still trying to build is one that, besides being able to think logically, evinces emotions. I say ‘mysterious’ because, despite emotions forming the pivotal ingredient of what Plato has called the human soul, there continues to be disagreement over what they are, how they arise, and how valuable they are for people’s social development. On the other hand, it not just emotions *per se* that interest me, but a very special category or group of emotions. It seems to me to be more than a coincidence that at a time when disciplines like Philosophy and English are under attack for not being sufficiently ‘relevant’ (codeword for career-oriented), there has been a sudden reawakening of scholarly interest in

the very emotions that neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on economic rationalism and individualism, has tended to suppress. I am referring especially to the emotions that we associate with caring and which consequently enable us to form sympathetic bonds with our fellow human beings.<sup>2</sup> These same emotions form the basis for the systems of ethics and values that make us community-minded creatures.

Before I begin my reading, however, I want to return for a moment to Nussbaum and in particular her controversial and compelling claim, made in her *Upheavals of Thought: The intelligence of emotions* (2004) that emotions are thoughts. What exactly does it mean to say that emotions are thoughts, and how might this impact on the way we read important works of Australian literature? It is Nussbaum's view that emotions don't necessarily comprise the non-thinking movements we usually associate with emotion, such as fluttering hands or a rise in heart and pulse rate, although some obviously do. She further remarks that, 'If we really were to think of emotions as like bodily tugs or stabs or flashes, then we would precisely leave out what is most disturbing about them'. And she adds, 'How simple life would be, if grief were only a pain in the leg, or jealousy but a very bad backache. Jealousy and grief torment us mentally; it is the thoughts we have about objects that are the source of agony—and, in other cases, delight' (Nussbaum, 'Précis' 449). Importantly Nussbaum is not saying that emotions are not of the body, but that in so far as the mind is of the body, then they too involve the body. This not only ties emotions to thoughts in an inextricable way, but it infers that emotions are 'intentional perceptions . . . and beliefs'. Emotion-cognitions, as she calls them, are ways of seeing an object as invested with value and importance (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 27, 30). Thus she can say, 'Emotions are always about something, and they are always directed at something and in this sense they always involve and or indeed are "judgements".' To this she adds the observation that emotions are 'forms of evaluative appraisals that ascribe high importance to things and people that lie outside the agent's own sphere of control' and they do this because those things are recognised as being of 'great importance for the person's own flourishing' (Nussbaum, 'Précis' 443). In summary, she says, 'Emotions are thus, in effect, acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency' (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 22). This is not to imply that every time one feels an emotion, one is literally in need of something. But it is to suggest that our capacity to experience emotion arises out of our knowledge of (or memory of the fact) that there was once a time when we were vulnerable and largely dependent on others for our well being. It is also to hint at the moral element in the emotions that includes knowledge of the fact that as social creatures we have a duty to care for others, not just ourselves; and that the most pleasurable experiences in life do not always come from helping ourselves but other people, including the very vulnerable.

Nussbaum is not the first American philosopher to claim that the emotions involve the body and the mind. William James, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, came to a similar conclusion based on what little was then known of human psychology, although he differs from Nussbaum in arguing that the emotions are primarily bodily sensations—whereas she sees them as accompanying both rational and irrational activities and therefore thoughts based on judgments. On the other hand, it is as well to note that he focuses on the base passions, whereas her target is the finer or higher emotions that spring in part from reason. Thus in his famous chapter on the emotions in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), James wrote:

Our natural way of thinking about [the] coarser emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that

this later state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that *the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion.* (James, quoted in Matthiessen 374)

Writing several years before Freud, James complained about the merely descriptive character of most scientific writings on the emotions, which were about as instructive as reading ‘verbal descriptions of the shapes of rocks on a New Hampshire Farm’ since ‘one learned nothing from them about the root causes of emotions’ (James, Vol 2, 448). Nussbaum also seeks to encompass the root causes, but unlike James she does so by treating emotions as originating in infancy and as having a narrative structure that parallels those events of infancy that first excite emotions and that contribute to their subsequent development. She summarises this by saying, ‘they are conditioned on the interest one invests in the people and things that favourably or adversely affect one’s well-being’ (Deigh 466). Strangely enough, neither philosopher attempts to explain how far and to what extent emotional responses are culturally or biologically determined, although the very fact that James grounds them in bodily sensations suggests that he was more inclined to the biological explanation, while Nussbaum, by claiming that the shaping of the emotions should be an integral part of education, implies that the higher emotions at least are largely determined by culture.

As for the kinds of literary texts and critical methods needed to help foster empathy, Nussbaum emphasises texts that have the capacity not to be erudite but ‘to move the heart’ (Deigh 433), and reading methods that ‘cultivate the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings’ (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 426). Her examples include Greek drama, Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, and Joyce’s *Ulysees*. It is her belief that a contemporary child can learn from these same ‘mythic’ stories or their modern equivalents as long as they approach these texts in a manner that encourages ‘the spectator to become intensely concerned for the fate of the tragic hero’ and sees ‘the hero as a worthy person whose distress does not stem from his own deliberate wickedness’. Thus, she writes, ‘The drama sets up compassion; an attentive spectator will, in apprehending it, have that emotion’ (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 428-29). Key to the critical method she is advancing is knowledge of what constitutes ‘the good’, where good means the kind of conditions that enable maximum flourishing. Nussbaum’s list of what constitutes ‘the good’ includes the qualities that enable every one in a community to have all their ‘reasonable’ needs met, whether by those around them or by the state, where ‘reasonable’ ensures a healthy balance between excessive neediness and dependency and self-reliance. At the top of her list are qualities like being ‘supportive of general social compassion, reciprocity and respect for individuality’ (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 481).

Nussbaum distinguishes literary works that endure from those that are powerful at a specific time and in relation to a specific problem, arguing that the latter still have an important part to play in a curriculum that teaches what she calls ‘rationality in emotion’ (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 433). I would add that certain individual literary works may take on new kinds of significance at different historical periods, especially if certain social tendencies, like the unfettered growth of capitalism or the paranoia and hatred felt towards certain social groups, show a pattern of recurrence. The text I have chosen for analysis is precisely of this kind. The type of society that Eleanor Dark’s 1934 novel *Prelude to Christopher* opposes may not be identical to the neoliberal one that Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* criticises, but in its privileging of the self at the expense of others, and autocratic forms of governance and economic

efficiency to the detriment of any vestige of human compassion, the effect that it has on the human rights of ordinary and vulnerable citizens and their capacity to live emotionally satisfying lives and to flourish is effectively the same.

Arguably, part of the emotive power of *Prelude to Christopher* stems from the fact that it contains autobiographical elements; indeed, some critics maintain that it was based on a dark family secret. Barbara Brooks, for example, has written that Dark's mother had committed suicide while confined to a mental asylum for depression (Brooks 113), while Helen O'Reilly has recently claimed that the novel's sexual politics was informed by Dark's knowledge of letters that her aunt, the famous social reformer Marion Piddington, wrote accusing her brother (Dark's father) of causing his wife's mental breakdown by acting like a sexual predator and tyrant towards her and other young women and belittling her at every opportunity (O'Reilly 89-91). Dark, it seems, had for some time remained sufficiently haunted by her mother's death that she decided to write about it. However, the novel she produced was aimed less at condemning her father than the patterns of social behaviour that had been developing in Australia between the wars and which were consequently powerful at the time of her writing the novel, values which she herself did not approve of and which can be summed up by the phrases 'social hygiene' and 'economic efficiency'. *Prelude to Christopher* was Dark's second major novel and the only one where she examined the close connection between Australia's mounting fascination with and growing acceptance of the non liberal, authoritarian culture of eugenics and the psychological well-being of its more vulnerable citizens.

In the early 1930s the social hygiene movement known as eugenics was effectively part of mainstream culture. Initially regarded as an eccentric creed, it had rapidly become a fashionable mantra among Australia's ambitious, race conscious, middle classes. Assisting this trend was the emphasis placed on national health from the mid to late 1920s (Carson 4), a development that spread to a medical fraternity bent on imitating European scientific theories about the tight regulation of public health, hygiene and fitness. Concerns about racial decline and the proliferation of the working class poor dictated eugenic policy between the wars, but social medicine and disease control were also important, consisting as they did of persuading people to marry only those with healthy family backgrounds and to undertake physical exercises aimed at bodily perfection (Carson 127). Australian eugenicists followed British German and American eugenicists in accepting Malthus's idea that social welfare, far from strengthening nations, weakens them; that the physically and mentally weak classes of society, instead of being assisted, should be allowed to dwindle and disappear since they are a drain on the nation's resources (Malthus 29). They also subscribed to the purely instrumentalist view that only the most genetically fit people deserved the benefits provided by the state in the form of sovereign freedoms and monetary assistance since natural selection had anointed them the winners in the struggle for survival.

In Dark's novel we meet a female protagonist who is accused of carrying the gene for a mental disease that will eventually impel her to assault and murder people. Linda Hendon is married to a medical doctor who has espoused the religion of eugenics and who consequently regards her, and all those carrying the sorts of genetic taints that threaten society's cohesiveness, vitality and safety, as expendable. To the reader, however, Linda appears unusually sane despite her eccentric looks and behaviour (if anything, her 'queer, cold manner' and 'outré beauty' are seen for what they are—both a defensive strategy against a world that has already turned its back on her) and a sophisticated bohemianism that is out of place in the remote country town of Victoria in which her husband has set up his private

practice. When the novel opens, Linda's husband Nigel is in hospital recovering from a car accident. Unable to move because of a broken femur, his fevered mind flits back to the things that are haunting him because they are sources of regret. One is the eugenic colony of Hy-Brazil that he had founded ten years earlier but which had collapsed due to the outbreak of war and because some of the participants thought his beliefs too extreme. The other is his marriage to Linda. Needing to escape the uncle who had sexually molested her while raising her, Linda had not told Nigel about the family 'disease' until after they were married. When he found out Nigel had vowed to protect her like the proverbial white knight who sacrifices himself to what he knows is a hopeless cause, even allowing her to reside with him in the eugenic colony. On the other hand, the one thing that he believes he did get right was his blank refusal to give her the child she so desperately wanted because it would carry the disease into the next generation.

The narrative is compressed into four days and told from several people's points of view, a technique that allows the reader to make moral judgements about each of the characters and to observe the differences between what they think and what they say and do. Linda we discover is one of the few people who acts on her beliefs and principles to the point of appearing awkward and out of kilter with the people around her. Having access to her thoughts, dark though they are, encourages the reader to think that her increasingly bizarre behaviour is less the result of incipient disease than of the way she is being treated by these people. It also highlights the extent to which, in the super rational society that eugenicists campaigned for, not just men, but women also, were required to suppress their feelings. Nowhere is the constraint on emotional expression so marked as in the realm of motherhood, the one social role in which, according to Phillips and Taylor, the kind of demonstrative outpourings of love and affection that have their basis in kindness have remained acceptable (41). However, in societies where it doesn't pay to let personal feelings get in the way of sensible choices—and a society shaped according to eugenics principles is one such instance—even mothers were expected to exercise restraint. In Australia this idea was replicated in the burgeoning of state-managed marriage guidance counselling and birth clinics which were erected to ensure both planned marriages and planned births. It was further replicated in the emphasis being placed on the institution of motherhood not as a provider of love and nurturing so much as a means whereby the efficient nation could produce more children of the highest genetic calibre. Nigel's mother is of an older generation, but even she feels obliged to repress her involuntary repugnance towards the whole eugenic philosophy that her son has fallen prey to. Everything about it she believes goes against human nature, and yet nothing of this, she feels, can be uttered because in the current climate of social efficiency it is not the place of mothers to advise their sons—rather, their role is to produce healthy babies who will contribute to the economic good of the nation and then having done that, quietly and gracefully disappear:

She could have told him before he began, human nature had proved itself too strong for his theories. Pick them and test them as you will, she had cried to him silently, in any community the strong will go to the top and the weak will hate them for it! Never! Never could you rule out jealousy and competition. Never could you tell a man in love that for the good of posterity he must marry elsewhere! Never could you convince a woman that she must bear the children of a husband allotted to her by some scientific formula! (Dark 108)

Mrs Hendon recalls that she had shivered with revulsion when told that Nigel demanded the destruction of what would have been her grandchild because it was a descendent of the

Hamlins. She even felt stirrings of compassion for Linda for being robbed of her motherhood; but, conservative to the core, she fails to act on her feelings, preferring to live out her role as the ‘mother, who had no brains but whose wisdom was the wisdom of a sex bound irrevocably to common sense’ (Dark 39). Marlow, the young doctor attending Nigel, is no better. Irresistibly attracted to other people’s unconventionalities and similarly repelled by the cold element in Nigel’s eugenics writings, he senses something compelling in Linda. He even had the ‘feeling that if he didn’t do something, something dreadful would happen’ (Dark 122). And sure enough, with Linda’s suicide it does. Yet he does nothing. In the same way that Nigel’s mother’s heart had hardened when she learned that Linda’s child was not her son’s, Marlow, compelled by the need to protect his reputation and conform to the mainstream, withdraws his sympathy and concern for Linda’s welfare.

Dark was clearly critical of the pervasive culture of conservatism and cowardliness which accompanied the rise of eugenics, but she was also critical of the way the philosophy in its most callous form devastated people’s lives. As envisioned by Nigel, the ideal eugenic society would be peopled by only the healthiest of human specimens; yet to achieve this meant robbing large numbers of people of their capacity to reproduce, as well as the freedom to marry the ones they loved. Most of all, it meant robbing people of their humanity—for under such a system a person’s worth is determined by the genetic contribution they can make to their society and should this contribution be poor, then their life is expendable. In the countries where the more hardline practice of eugenics had been embraced enthusiastically, the most common methods of doing away with genetically unfit people like Linda were physical isolation and segregation, forced sterilization, and involuntary euthanasia. In Australia, unlike in America and Germany, and despite several attempts by eugenics supporters, legislation for this was never passed; but this didn’t prevent people from experiencing social isolation and discrimination because of their family history. Linda both constantly reflects on and rebels against this inhumane reducing of people to a bland set of hereditary calculations. Faced with the prospect of isolation in an institution for the insane and with no hope of bearing a child, she judges suicide as infinitely preferable.

Nigel’s nurse, Kay, is among the people convinced that Linda represents a danger to society and needs to be locked up. Kay has fallen in love with Nigel while nursing him and as the title of the novel suggests she will eventually become the mother of his only son Christopher. Kay hates Linda with a passion that is truly frightening, based as it is on her perception that the older woman is completely undeserving of Nigel’s affections given her foul ‘rude’ behaviour and the inferior genes she is rumoured to be carrying. Her dehumanising treatment of Linda reaches a fever pitch in the scene towards the end of the novel where she finds the latter verbally assaulting Mrs Hendon: ‘There rose in her a veritable fury of hatred and contempt. This—*this*—to stand between her and Nigel. This between Nigel—and Chistopher! She felt her own young body grow tense; her own hands opened and shut once, eagerly, joyously. She stepped into the room’ (Dark 174). The vision of madness that Kay projects onto Linda when in this moment she strides toward Linda and strikes her hard on the face is the catalyst that finally propels the latter to end her life by throwing herself under a train: she feels defeated by the younger woman’s healthy mind and her strong healthy body and the fact she herself has no future. As she explains:

That was what soundness meant—soundness of body and brain and spirit, so that when life gashed at you you didn’t bleed to death. You resisted; the future called to you, demanding: ‘*Keep going, I need you!*’ The past rallied to your aid: ‘*Come on, he’s up against it!*’

No such allies for her! Her battle cry had been solitary; fighting a hostile future, a malevolent past. Fighting with a body drained and weakened, a spirit mad with sudden loneliness, a mind divided against itself... (Dark 151)

Kay's cruelty toward Linda echoes the hardline eugenicist treatment of the people judged to be socially unfit because of some sort of genetic mutation or inherited disease that will one day render them an economic burden on the state. To the modern reader attuned to the more humanistic culture that emerged from the Second World War, such heartlessness might seem shocking; but as Dark knew in the increasingly medicalised culture of the 1930s it was all too common.

Underlining the extent of Dark's investment in the finer emotions, especially the human capacity for compassion and empathy and the ability to hit back at the ideal of rational efficiency, is the novel's non-realist style. The multiple viewpoints, interior monologue, and compressed timescale are all typical of modernism; but Dark's novel veers closer to Expressionism in those passages where she tries to portray Linda's feelings about her condition and society's treatment of the people they have deemed unfit. Expressionism, unlike British modernist writing, was aimed toward the communication of the individual's subjective emotions and responses using the techniques of distortion and exaggeration. Beauty and harmony were less important than achieving an effect of intensity. Ironically the novel itself references the Expressionist movement in the form of the portrait of Linda painted by the colony's artist D'Aubert. Not only does this painting exhibit classical Expressionist qualities, such as intense colour and agitated brushstrokes, but like the novel it also describes a powerfully disjointed and distorted sense of time and space. Above all, the painting captures Linda's paranoia together with her terrifying fear of insanity; and the fact that due to this fear, she can only crouch like a lonely beast in the shadows looking out enviously at the lighted, happy world:

There like a part of the shade itself she stood; the dim whiteness of her face and hands seemed only other gleams of half-vanished light. Something that might be a tree-trunk partially obscured her so that behind the rioting foreground of crude joy and colour she looked incredibly furtive and apart. Never in his life had anything given him so strong a conception of evil, not as an active malevolence but as an outcast uncleanness. There it stood, such a masterpiece of camouflage that it might have passed, five times out of six, unnoticed; it had bitter, hungry, restless eyes, staring from the dark at the abundance, the gusto, the noise and colour of life. . . (Dark 106)

The speaker here is Marlow and what is noticeable is the way he projects his own highly subjective viewpoint onto D'Aubert's painting. This is a viewpoint that fears the contaminating force of madness and consequently fails to perceive the even greater fear lurking behind Linda's gaze. While he thinks he sees a look of evil on her pale 'mask-like' face, we see the cracks in her ego and consequently her mental fragility. Nor is this the only time that we as readers are cajoled into sharing one of the main characters' thoughts and feelings. Dark several times uses the first person narrative point of view to compel the reader into seeing things from Linda's perspective. And what a terrifying, nightmarish world it is that Linda inhabits, with its tortuous, dark shadows and psychological distortions and the constant threat of madness threatening to break through. By plunging us into this world the reader is forced to empathize with Linda. Not only does her anger become our anger, but her

pain becomes our pain, albeit at one remove since unlike her we have the luxury of being able to escape.

Like Nussbaum and Atwood, Dark was writing in an era when traits like democracy, empathy and kindness were being sacrificed to the goals of autocracy and efficiency. They were also increasingly being removed from the realm of the private. Dark herself, however, seems to have rejected eugenic philosophy in favour of a political philosophy that was less biologically determined and more humane. This is clear from the way the reader is made to sympathise with Linda's desire to have a baby. Indeed, the moral imperative to have children and the sense of hope that is part of this is portrayed in the novel as much more powerful than the purely rational mind-set of eugenics: 'So much, Uncle Hamlin, for your scientific training. So much, Nigel, for the austerities of your idealism. You were right, and all your rightness failed before a child's mystical superstition and a biological need' (Dark 120). Dark's message, then, is that it is not just morally wrong for one social group to deprive another social group of the capacity for reproduction, it is also morally reprehensible to put economic considerations ahead of people's feelings when it comes to welfare and social planning.

The above quotation suggests that Dark placed great value on the concepts of individual free will and agency. Her protagonist Linda reinforces this idea in her choice to voluntarily end her life; this being identified as the very last freedom available to those rendered worthless by the implacable eugenic system that Nigel subscribes to. *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, the book in which Giorgio Agamben first began to explore the ethical basis of the modern biopolitics emerging both during and after the National Socialist Reich, argues that every society sets limits to what they regard as sacred life and consequently the life that can afford to be sacrificed to the good of the body politic, where sacrifice refers to what can be legally defined as 'not murder' (Agamben 139). Agamben also explains that whereas the Declaration of Rights had invested Life itself with the principle of sovereignty, Life has now become the provenance of an impersonal sovereign [ruler] who decides on the value or non-value of each life as such. The National Socialist Reich, he argues, was crucial to the deconsecration process because it integrated politics and medicine in a way that allowed the physician to become invested with the powers of the Sovereign. (Agamben 143). Like Dark, Agamben equates the collapse of ethics with the loss of the personal, declaring, 'The more the citizens of the metropolis have lost intimacy with one another, the more they have become incapable of looking each other in the eye' (Agamben 53). Implied is the idea that 'looking each other in the eye' forces us to acknowledge to the inviolateness of the life that one perceives there. Agamben also refers to the pleasure we take in being recognised by a machine, but adds that this is but a fleeting and illusory pleasure because what it gives us is an 'identity without the person' (Agamben 53). He suggests that if we want to resist the biopolitical imperative we must be prepared to search beyond the initially pleasurable but ultimately dissatisfying world of the impersonal for that new figure of the human. Agamben admits that we still do not see this figure, but we do have a presentiment of it in our feelings of 'bewilderment, as in our dreams, in our unconsciousness, as in our lucidity' (Agamben 54).

Until recently it was Dark's later novels, the ones dealing with postcolonial subjects like the history of European settlement, national identity and race, that attracted most critical acclaim. How then can we explain the recent awakening of interest among Australian critics in *Prelude to Christopher*? Not long before he died, Michel Foucault proclaimed that we are

already embarked upon a second eugenic phase, arguing that human capital was already being judged in terms of genetics. For example, he wrote:

[I]f you want a child whose human capital, understood simply in terms of innate and hereditary elements, is high, you can see that you will have to make an investment, that is to say, you will have to have worked enough, to have sufficient income, and to have a social status such that it will enable you to take for a spouse or co-producer of this human capital, someone who has significant human capital themselves. I am not saying this as a joke; it is simply a form of thought or a form of problematic that is currently being elaborated (Foucault 228).

While this might be one reason for the reawakening of interest in Dark's novel, I wonder also if it is because in an era equally obsessed by economic rationalism and social efficiency, albeit this time in the interests of preserving the power and capital of a small minority, we are overdue for a return to works that engage the higher emotions, or what Agamben refers to 'our lucidity', and a style of reading that upholds the importance of human dignity. Such a model of humanities education, like Atwood's and Nussbaum's, would help ensure that Australia's future culture, instead of being one of autocracy, selfishness and unkindness, will be one of greater individual freedom, thoughtfulness and care.

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<sup>1</sup> In Europe the neoliberal turn has given rise to the Bologna model of education with its ambivalent impact on the teaching of national literatures. In the USA it has resulted in an increasing emphasis on market driven education policies that have seen the decline of liberal arts programs. Australian universities, have drawn on elements of both the Bologna model and the Harvard system with the result that the emphasis has fallen on training people for professions.

<sup>2</sup> The recent emergence of books like Phillips' and Taylor's *On Kindness* is testimony to this development as is the work of literary critics like Lauren Berlant. See her 'Introduction: Compassion and Withholding' (2004), which treats of the subject of compassion in a neoliberal era dominated by the decline of welfare.