

BOOK REVIEW

The Generous Writer

Sophie Eager

Jürgen Pieters, *On Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Six years after the article presenting his initial thoughts for ‘a book-in-(very-slow)-progress’ in this journal, Jürgen Pieters’ latest work on literature and consolation, and how these two terms have co-evolved, has been published.¹ And it was worth the wait. In a year where many have needed the comfort reading fiction can bring, Pieters’ exposition of the contemporary interest in bibliotherapy, which he grounds in detailed historical analysis from Homer to the present day, offers a warm and persuasive argument for the power of literary texts to console. Mention of Barthes features only relatively late in the text – *A Lover’s Discourse* is one of Pieters’ chosen examples in his final chapter – but an appreciation of the indirect way Barthes’ texts offer comfort without coddling the reader runs throughout Pieters’ discussion. This indirect means of offering comfort is made possible through literature given the distance between our own experience and that represented in the text. Pieters repeats the oft-cited idea that finding comfort in reading involves a sense of recognition, but he also stresses that it is a combination of both similarity to and difference from the text that allows the reader to come to a new understanding of their own situation. We find comfort when we are able to see our experience through the lens of the other; through ‘a distance, as it were, the distance provided by someone else’s perspective’.²

While Pieters’ analysis is largely historical, spanning Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Woolf, and Proust, it is continuously geared towards the present. He therefore refers throughout to well-chosen contemporary

works that offer examples of how the author has been comforted through literature at moments of intense pain or personal loss. These examples, including Katharine Smyth's *All the Lives we Ever Lived* (2019), which recounts the author's engagement with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a way to address her grief following her father's death, serve as case studies in proof of Pieters' central concern. This way of presenting the argument does not claim that literature has this power for all readers, or that certain books can be 'prescribed' as remedies for different experiences, but acknowledges the strength of the idea that literature can comfort without presenting this idea as an objective truth. Pieters is therefore prudent, in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Reasoning from the examples of the other writers he cites who have found solace in literature, he bolsters the central claim of his argument – that literary texts can and do offer us comfort – without forcing it upon us. His is an argument made from the bottom up. Look, he seems to be saying, here are individuals for whom literature has this power, who have been helped at crucial junctures in their lives through the experience of reading certain texts. Maybe the same could be said for you, too.

What struck me most in reading this text was the warmth of Pieters' writing, which reminded me of Barthes' own ideas about the generosity of the writer, and what I call, following Barthes, a 'loving distance' between text and reader.³ In the opening pages, we join Pieters at his writing desk, contemplating the stack of books he has collected that relate to this project. These texts, he tells us, have been purchased for the most part from his local bookshop, a place one can also consume 'good coffee and cakes', and where books of this ilk are displayed on a table in the corner of the literature section of the shop.⁴ From the outset, then, we are invited into the space in which Pieters himself dwells, giving rise to an intimacy between reader and writer, like that created in Barthes' texts, too. In this sense, *Literature and Consolation* also reminded me of the start of Kris Pint's book on Barthes and reading, *The Perverse Art of Reading* (2010). Both authors welcome us into their argument with a description of a body comfortably occupying space while reading or writing. In his introduction, Pint describes his attachment to a postcard of a painting by W. B. Tholens which depicts two sisters reading together on the same chaise-longue.⁵ He is drawn in by the intense experience of one of the

reading girls, whose attitude of absorption reminds him of his own experience of reading, and the degree to which our attention can be held by a book. The intimacy of sharing these experiences – where the author begins a critical text with references to their own body and the existential states it undergoes – generates a feeling of warmth and generosity for the reader. Pieters is offering to share his experience with us, inviting us into his way of thinking, and using his own experience as a starting point to help us to reflect on our own intuitions about literature's power to comfort and console.

As Pieters puts it: 'Literary authors have the power to save lives'.⁶ I contend that writers of critical theory, too, have the power to inflect our lived experience, and to make us feel good about our own experience of engaging with texts. Feeling 'comforted' by a text is not only a confession of sentimental attachment, but also a way of acknowledging that literature provides a means of sharing experiences with an unknown other, and recognising that these experiences have been *offered* by that other for the reader's benefit. As Barthes writes in his review of Jean Daniel's *Le Refuge et la source* from 1971: 'no writing can happen without a decision of generosity towards the world'.⁷ Pieters' text, too, represents a decision of generosity: to share, with warmth and care, his own thoughts about the comfort of reading. Pieters' book therefore constitutes an offer to the reader that might confirm their own hopes about the power of literature; a power that is all too often denied in the face of more easily provable forms of care.

Notes

¹ Jürgen Pieters, 'Fragments of a Consolatory Discourse: Literature and the Fiction of Comfort', *Barthes Studies*, 1 (2015), 123.

² Jürgen Pieters, *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 8.

³ Roland Barthes, 'En sortant du cinéma', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. IV, p. 782; translation mine. Further references to the *Œuvres complètes* will be given in the form of *OC*, followed by the volume and page number.

⁴ Pieters, *Literature and Consolation*, p. 2.

⁵ Kris Pint, *The Perverse Art of Reading: On the Phantasmatic Semiology in Roland Barthes' Cours au Collège de France*, trans. by Christopher M. Gernerchak (London: Rodopi, 2010), p. 9.

⁶ Pieters, *Literature and Consolation*, p. 1.

⁷ Roland Barthes, 'Préface à "Le Refuge et la source" de Jean Daniel', in *OC V*, p. 313; translation mine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Eager was awarded her PhD from King's College London in August 2021. Her thesis considered how Barthes' 'loving distance' can be used as a way to understand being together with others, and with the other represented in the text, as explored in and through Barthes's work. More broadly, she is interested in questions of social connection, having worked within the UK Government's Tackling Loneliness Team, and she is now pursuing further study in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London.

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