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# 'French endings': Christianity, sentimentality and the arts in the context of Covid

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the need for a theological approach to sentimentality in the arts that is informed by context. During the Covid pandemic, the value of sentimental artworks that afford respite and distraction from the grim realities of death and disease has been evident. To illustrate the dangers of absolutist, anti-sentimentalist theological arguments that overlook the significance of context in such circumstances, this article presents a challenge to the theological 'countersentimentality' set out by Jeremy Begbie. I argue that condemning all sentimentality in contemporary culture as a 'disease of the feelings' manifested in people and the arts, without paying attention to the context in which people seek out sentimental artworks, is inadvisable. Then, through analysis of two examples from literary fiction, I illustrate the weaknesses of a theological countersentimentality that evaluates artworks without reference to the situation in which they were created and received.

## KEYWORDS

Sentimentality; theological aesthetics; Begbie; popular culture; literature; Dostoevsky; escapism; *Emily in Paris*; pandemic; Dickens

## Introduction

Recently, having returned home from hospital after undergoing surgery to treat brain cancer, I was unexpectedly confronted with a theological conundrum. With visitors still banned from hospitals due to Covid restrictions, I had endured several days of loneliness, nausea, pain and disorientation whilst recovering from the surgery without the comforting presence of family or friends. So, I was feeling desperate for respite and reassurance. Taking refuge on a familiar sofa, I turned on the television seeking relaxation and distraction. I chose to watch *Emily in Paris* on Netflix, which promised silly, sentimental escapism. But imagine my dismay when I was quickly forced to engage with an ethical debate over the purpose of art. An argument over the relative merits of American and French romantic films leads two of the French colleagues of Emily, the eponymous fish out of water from Chicago (played by Lily Collins), to try to explain the importance of tragic realism. Justifying their disdain for the American narratives that always deliver a 'happy ending', they complain that these predictable, comforting storylines are deceptive: 'American romantic comedies, they are so dishonest'. The two colleagues, Luc and Julien, explain to Emily that the French version of the genre is superior, as French romantic films inevitably feature a 'French ending' that is 'more like life' because the hero is left bereft, injured, or dead. 'Happy endings are very American', they aver. Leaping to the defence of her beloved American rom-coms, Emily suggests that they

may offer an important source of escapism: ‘don’t you want to go to the movies to escape life?’, she asks her colleagues. But they have little sympathy for this argument: ‘thinking you can escape life is your problem: you can never escape life’.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief exchange, the value and morality of artforms that do not aspire to offer a gritty, unvarnished portrayal of the painful realities of human life was brought into question. As I had just chosen to watch *Emily in Paris* in order to ‘escape life’, the relevance of this debate to my particular situation was unavoidable. This bizarre coincidence raised the question of whether it is ever, theologically speaking, acceptable to use the arts as a form of escapism when the suffering and drudgery of life feel overwhelming. In light of this, my intention in writing this article is to reflect on an absolutist, predetermined theological argument against sentimentality in the arts, then to show that this argument is inadequate due to its failure to take seriously the significance of context in ruling on matters of theology and sentimentality.

First, I outline the theological countersentimentality set out by Jeremy Begbie, an influential voice on all questions pertaining to theology and the arts, then I use two specific examples from literary fiction – examples that Begbie himself discusses in setting out his countersentimentality – to illustrate how his absolutist argument is undermined by a lack of attention to context.

## A theological countersentimentality

Jeremy Begbie unites several of the traditional philosophical objections to sentimentality in his theological ‘countersentimentality’. He criticises sentimentality as a ‘deep, pernicious strand in contemporary culture’ that ‘the arts have played a leading part in encouraging’. Although he acknowledges that sentimentality is a ‘somewhat sprawling concept’, he argues that it is best seen as ‘a disease of the feelings’ manifested primarily in people and secondarily in the arts.<sup>2</sup> Begbie does important work highlighting the need to take suffering and pain seriously, and to avoid what William Stringfellow refers to as ‘the sentimentalization of pain in the experience of a particular person’.<sup>3</sup> His suggestion that Western modernity is inclined to react to the ‘pain and losses of the world’ through ‘evasion and trivialisation’ is worth paying attention to.<sup>4</sup> However, the problem is that these insightful warnings are used to justify a sweeping dismissal of all sentimentality.

In constructing a ‘theological countersentimentality’, Begbie argues that ‘appropriate attention’ must be paid to the theological narrative of Easter. Begbie’s conviction that ‘Christian sentimentalism arises from a premature grasp for Easter morning’<sup>5</sup> is inspired by the ‘theology of Holy Saturday’ which emerged out of Alan E. Lewis’s personal experiences of cancer. Lewis writes vividly about the ways in which cancer challenged

<sup>1</sup>Andrew Fleming, *Emily in Paris*, season 1, episode 7, ‘French Ending,’ written by Darren Star, aired 2 October 2020, Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289287?trackId=200257859>.

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Begbie, ‘Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts,’ in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, eds. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbans, and Rodger Lundin, 45–69. London: IVP Academic, 2007, 46–47.

<sup>3</sup>William Stringfellow, *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, ed. Bill W. Kellerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 62. There is a tendency in the Western world to search for a spiritual ‘silver lining’ when confronting suffering or loss that lies behind the deeply unsatisfactory ‘pseudo-spiritual phrases frequently offered to cancer patients’. See Jake Bouma and Erik Ullestad, ‘Introduction,’ in *Cancer and Theology*, eds. Bouma and Ullestad (Des Moines: Elbow Co., 2014), 16.

<sup>4</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 48–49.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 61–62.

and reoriented his theology,<sup>6</sup> and it is the resultant ‘stereophonic’ unity of pain and promise, darkness and light, which Begbie identifies as a model for ensuring that theology and art are ‘purged of sentimentality’.<sup>7</sup> The question of how we should go about developing a theological aesthetics that respects troubling and traumatic experiences, like those caused by cancer, is evidently a key – and commendable – concern driving Begbie’s pursuit of a theology ‘purged of sentimentality’. The answer Begbie offers to this question is based on his diagnosis of sentimentality as a ‘disease of the feelings’, identifiable by ‘three major traits or elements’. According to Begbie, this ‘emotional pathology’ is shown in people who 1) ‘avoid appropriate costly action’; 2) are ‘emotionally self-indulgent’; and 3) ‘misrepresent reality’.<sup>8</sup> Begbie frames these as theological problems that must be avoided through a renewed focus on beauty and truth as revealed in Christ’s Crucifixion.

The first criticism Begbie raises is that the sentimentalist ‘avoids appropriate costly action’, enjoying the emotional gratification that feelings like sympathy or sorrow bring without taking action to correct injustice or prevent suffering. Oscar Wilde characterises the sentimentalist as one who will not ‘pay’ for their emotional expenditure, and Begbie uses this idea to explain their failure to take ‘costly action’.<sup>9</sup> To make this point, he also refers to Stjepan Mestrovic’s notion of ‘postemotionalism’. Mestrovic argues the ‘post-emotional’ modern will ‘never be called upon to demonstrate the authenticity of their emotions in commitment to appropriate action’, as they are fed ‘abstracted emotions’ by the culture industry.<sup>10</sup> Begbie takes up Mestrovic’s idea that emotion must ‘cost’ something to be ‘authentic’, suggesting that if an emotion is not paid for by self-sacrificial action, it loses all validity.<sup>11</sup> He believes that when emotions are not emulating Christ’s ‘love-in-action’ that is ‘revealed most intensively on the cross’,<sup>12</sup> they are empty of beauty and meaning.

Begbie’s sentimentalists are, therefore, also ‘emotionally self-indulgent’, as they are concerned only with ‘the satisfaction gained in exercising their emotion’.<sup>13</sup> Begbie uses Milan Kundera’s well-known definition of kitsch to convey this criticism: a scornful satirisation of the ‘second tear’ of the sentimentalist that betrays the pleasure they take in the impression their emotion makes on others.<sup>14</sup> Kitsch and other sentimental art makes possible this gratifying indulgence by facilitating what Begbie describes as ‘a rich emotional experience that will screen out the darker dimensions of reality’.<sup>15</sup> However, he does concede that ‘comforting and immediately reassuring’ art ‘may have its place in some contexts’. This point is vital, because it acknowledges the role of context in determining the ‘place’ of certain forms of art. Indeed, it speaks to a need for the same ‘comforting and immediately reassuring’ aesthetic experience that drew me to *Emily in Paris*. However, rather than developing this important caveat or discussing it in greater

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<sup>6</sup>Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 16.

<sup>7</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 61.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>10</sup>Stjepan Mestrovic, *Postemotional Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 26, 56, quoted in Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 51.

<sup>11</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 52–54.

<sup>12</sup>Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018), 86.

<sup>13</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 51.

<sup>14</sup>Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 251, quoted in Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 50.

<sup>15</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 54.

detail, Begbie maintains that because ‘beauty at its richest has been forged through the starkness and desolation of Good Friday’, sentimental art can – at best – offer a cheap imitation of true beauty.<sup>16</sup>

The third identifying trait of the sentimentalist, in Begbie’s view, is their willingness to see the world through ‘rose tinted spectacles’, so that only the ‘pleasing or undisturbing aspects of a situation’ are visible.<sup>17</sup> But Begbie believes that ‘turning the aesthetic into an anaesthetic’ will ultimately lure us away from Beauty Itself, as ‘there can be nothing sentimental about God’s beauty’.<sup>18</sup> As an example of art that offers aesthetic anaesthetic, Begbie says it is ‘almost impossible not to mention greeting cards’ that treat death as a ‘friend in disguise’.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, he believes that seeking out art that might soften, or distract us from, the horrors of death and disease is symptomatic of the ‘emotional pathology’ of sentimentalism. Whilst the sending of such greetings cards is usually well-intentioned, Begbie sees them as an example of the misuse of art as an ‘anaesthetic’ for those experiencing suffering or grief.

However, Begbie does mention – albeit in a footnote – that our ‘interpretation and use’ of art that offers pleasing pictures of harmonious resolution ‘often depends hugely on matters of context’. This concession to the significance of ‘our state of mind and body’, ‘memories and associations’ and ‘social and cultural connections’ in shaping our response to sentimental art is a crucial caveat.<sup>20</sup> If these matters are often ‘hugely’ dependent on context, then this not only merits far more detailed consideration than a single footnote allows, but also undermines the kind of pre-contextual, absolutist positions against sentimentality that constitute the main thrust of his thesis. If both our need for art that allows us to ‘escape life’, and the theological and moral implications of seeking out such art, are hugely dependent on context, then we should not seek to rule *a priori* on whether the presence of sentimental, escapist art in popular culture is a ‘pernicious’ threat.

This is of particular concern because such ‘matters of context’ have recently taken on a new relevance. The use of the arts as a source of escapism and reassurance has been much discussed during the Covid pandemic.<sup>21</sup> The reasons for this are not difficult to discern; a long period of dealing with disease and mortality, alongside boredom and life-limiting restrictions, will inevitably lead people to seek succour and solace in the arts. Yet

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 56–57, 63–64.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 61–63.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 47–49. This touches on a point made in Gregory Syley’s theology of cancer, which warns against the ‘theological mistake’ of trivialising the impact of cancer by ‘layering the suffering with Hallmark platitudes’, when ‘pain and suffering’ should always be treated as ‘profound and truly powerful realities’. See Syley, ‘On Pain, Suffering and Cancer,’ in *Cancer and Theology*, eds. Jake Bouma and Erik Ullestad (Des Moines: Elbow Co., 2014), 97–99.

<sup>20</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 49.

<sup>21</sup>See, for instance, Allie Volpe, ‘Why Escapism Benefits from a Dose of Pandemic Reality,’ *BBC*, 19 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210211-why-escapism-benefits-from-a-dose-of-pandemic-reality>; Wendy Syfret, ‘I Turned to Reality TV to Escape During the Pandemic – Until Reality Caught up,’ *The Guardian*, 13 April 2021; Robert Crampton, ‘Jolly Telly: Shows to Cheer You Up,’ *The Times*, 24 February 2022, 4; Natalya Robinson, ‘How Art Helps Us Transcend the Grim Reality of Coronavirus,’ *The Oxford Student*, 10 April 2020, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2020/04/10/how-art-helps-us-transcend-the-grim-reality-of-coronavirus/>. A particularly interesting example of this is the study conducted by the York Music Psychology Group that gathered empirical evidence of the importance of ‘music-evoked nostalgia’ for sustaining ‘a sense of meaning and purpose in life’ and protecting wellbeing during the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. See Hannah Gibbs and Hauke Egermann, ‘Music-Evoked Nostalgia and Wellbeing During the United Kingdom COVID-19 Pandemic: Content, Subjective Effects, and Function,’ *Frontiers in Psychology* 22 (22 March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.647891>.

this specific situation exposes the need for a theological understanding of sentimentality that considers matters of context. Can we really condemn those who, overwhelmed by another day in which thousands more lost their lives to a virus, turned to a television series for a 'rose tinted' vision of the world? And can it be right to censor those who, in such situations, seek art that screens out the 'darker dimensions of reality'?

What is required is an approach that recognises the significance of the context in which an artwork is created and received: those details of 'our state of mind and body', 'memories and associations' and 'social and cultural connections' that Begbie alludes to. To demonstrate what this might look like I will now offer two examples of literary analysis informed by a context-based approach to theology and sentimentality in the arts. Using the two literary examples cited by Begbie whilst outlining his countersentimentality, I explain how due attention to matters of context could have led to a softening and reshaping of the conclusions that he draws from these fictional extracts.

### **Little Nell and 'sheepish sentimentality': illustrating an alternative approach to theology, sentimentality and the arts**

The death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a literary example of a piece of sentimental art that is often misunderstood by its critics, who overlook its significance as 'a culturally specific response to a particular set of circumstances'.<sup>22</sup> The wildly divergent responses to the death of Little Nell perfectly illustrate the 'problem' of sentimental art. This fictional scene has come to be regarded as a 'notorious example of the lachrymose excesses of Victorian sentimentality', and its critical fortunes were representative of the 'broad cultural change' that saw 'sentimental' become a term of abuse.<sup>23</sup> Wilde regarded Nell's imagined death as typifying Dickens' 'sentimental lapses', allegedly saying that 'one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing'.<sup>24</sup> As an implausibly peaceful deathbed scene, this 'lapse' came to be regarded as typical of all that is wrong with sentimentality: an 'insubstantial' and 'unrealistic' fantasy that 'tugs at the feelings' and induces 'gratifying and reassuring modes of thought'.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Begbie argues that this scene not only 'epitomised Victorian sentimentality' but is also part of a tradition carried forward into the treatment of death today; it is both a 'lie in the midst of a world so obviously *not* beautiful', and a precursor to the sentimentality in contemporary culture that 'raises hopes where none should be had'.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Dickens' emotive portrayal of a young girl's death was, in fact, closely tied to the harrowing realities of Victorian life. The early death of a young child in the family was a common experience in Victorian England and, when *The Old Curiosity Shop* was first published, Dickens received dozens of letters about Little Nell from mothers relating how they, too, had 'lost such a child at such a time', and that their child 'resembled Nell in their purity'.<sup>27</sup> As Richard Walsh observes, Dickens' fiction took up a 'commonplace of

<sup>22</sup>Richard Walsh, 'Why We Wept for Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement,' *Narrative* 5, no. 3 (1997): 308.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>24</sup>Marcia Eaton, 'Laughing at the Death of Little Nell: Sentimental Art and Sentimental People,' *American Philosophy Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1989): 269.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>26</sup>Begbie, 'Beauty,' 49; 57–8.

<sup>27</sup>Philip Collins, *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), 149.

consolation' amongst bereaved parents, so that 'his sentimentalism was perfectly attuned to the emotional needs of his age'.<sup>28</sup> These responses revealed how the 'personal' value of sentimentality is bound up with the 'perspectival element of emotional experience'.<sup>29</sup> A striking number of those affected by Little Nell's death 'had themselves been moved by the death of a favourite', and the meaning they found in Dickens' work can only be understood with reference to their grief.<sup>30</sup> It is evident in these circumstances that – whilst related – 'sentimental value' and 'aesthetic value' are two distinct things.<sup>31</sup> Although it would be entirely reasonable to make critical judgements about the aesthetic merits of a piece of art without knowing how it is received in specific contexts, the same is not true of its sentimental qualities. Anthony Hatzimoysis describes the sentimental value of a given object as residing 'at the centre of a triangle whose points are defined by emotion, memory, and the self'.<sup>32</sup> As such, sentimental value is found within the interplay of subject and object, at the heart of the 'relational field' of environmental influences. So, to criticise a piece of art as 'sentimental', whilst objecting to it solely on the basis of its content, is to misunderstand the role of this interplay in determining sentimental value.

Criticising the sentimentality of Little Nell's death also raises the 'problem of emotional responses to fictional narratives': the flaw in judgements of sentimental works informed by the criteria of 'mimetic adequacy'. If you come to sentimental fiction expecting stark realism and show no interest in its 'affective aspect' – the extent to which it invites emotional involvement – then you are missing the point.<sup>33</sup> Those who value sentimental stories are seeking to be moved. They appreciate excess and manipulation, because these bring out strong feelings hidden in their 'deepest roots', allowing them to access buried emotions. As Carl Sandberg puts it: 'anything which brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of our personality'.<sup>34</sup> Of course, it is sometimes the case that this will be an indulgent, aimless exercise, but it remains true that 'the sentimental has a crucial place in art in so far as it keeps people in touch with their emotions'.<sup>35</sup> There are clear benefits to artworks that aid the development of our emotional sensitivities, affording catharsis and enhancing our capacity for empathy.<sup>36</sup> Some works challenge our intellect whilst others exercise our feelings, and there is no reason why the probing of our minds should be privileged above the stirring of our hearts.

In order to capture the theological dangers of sentimentality, and the 'tendency toward premature harmony' that it invites, Begbie uses a passage in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that he regards as 'the classic wrestling with these matters in modern times'.<sup>37</sup> This passage, a conversation between brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov, raises the issue of the tendency to discern order in suffering which Begbie rightly warns against. As Ivan challenges the faith of his brother, Alyosha, his impassioned insistence that '[t]oo

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<sup>28</sup>Walsh, 'Why We Wept for Little Nell,' 307.

<sup>29</sup>Anthony Hatzimoysis, 'Artistic Value and Sentimental Value: A Reply to Robert Stecker,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 212 (2003): 374.

<sup>30</sup>Walsh, 'Why We Wept for Little Nell,' *Op. cit.*, 307.

<sup>31</sup>Julian Dodd, 'Artistic Value and Sentimental Value,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 3 (2013): 283.

<sup>32</sup>Hatzimoysis, 'Sentimental Value,' 373.

<sup>33</sup>Walsh, 'Why We Wept for Little Nell,' 308.

<sup>34</sup>Carl Sandberg, quoted in *The i*, Quote for the Day, 21 April 2020, 2.

<sup>35</sup>Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 60.

<sup>36</sup>Eaton, 'Laughing at the Death of Little Nell,' 279.

<sup>37</sup>Begbie, 'Beauty,' 60.

high a price has been placed on harmony' reflects Begbie's objections to theodicies that rely on the notion of an 'aesthetically harmonised final bliss' to justify the existence of evil.<sup>38</sup> Ivan refuses to accept the idea that a beautiful resolution could compensate for all pain and evil: '[s]urely I haven't suffered simply that I . . . may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else'.<sup>39</sup> He becomes a voice for the fury felt by those who face horrendous ordeals only to be told that their pain is part of a higher plan 'contributing to the overall "beauty" of God's purposes'. Begbie contends that these offensive metaphors are the consequence of the refusal to recognise and respect 'the seriousness of the world's evil' which he sees as the hallmark of the sentimentalist.<sup>40</sup>

However, there is another passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* which deals more directly with suffering and sentimentality, and which can be used to illustrate the problems with essentialist objections to sentimentality.<sup>41</sup> Whilst Begbie's warnings about the potential pitfalls of theodicies based on harmony are convincing, his absolutist stance against all sentimentality does not fit well with the nuance and complexity of human life. Applied to specific people, places and situations it becomes too abstract and inflexible; and it is this mismatch between theory and practice that Dostoevsky expertly highlights. The latter parts of *The Brothers Karamazov* introduce the character of Kolya Krassotkin, an 'extremely vain' boy who detests displays of what he calls 'sheepish sentimentality'. Due to his self-consciousness and 'coldness', Kolya intentionally avoids 'demonstrations of feeling' and is deeply suspicious of even his own mother's affection (578). His 'positive hatred' of sentimentality also leads him to treat his classmates with derision when they visit their dying friend, Ilusha (598). These visits, and the 'tender affection and sympathy' shown by the boys, are a 'great consolation to Ilusha in his suffering' but Kolya's aversion to all 'softness and sentimentality' means he feels unable to take part. Instead, he constructs elaborate theories about human behaviour, maintains an air of clear-thinking superciliousness and reacts to tenderness with disdain (591–609). He comes across as an exaggerated parody of the kind of rationalising which treats open emotionality as thoughtless indulgence. Behaving like someone who has swallowed whole an absolutist condemnation of sentimentality, Kolya reveals how easily such a stance can outgrow itself when accepted uncritically and lead to a mistrust of all freely expressed feeling, however sincere.

Yet when Kolya eventually relents and, setting aside his desire to appear 'manly', visits the dying Ilusha, he shows an inclination towards empathetic tenderness as he passes his hand through Ilusha's hair, and struggles to 'control his emotions' and 'not to burst out crying like a child' (608). As Dostoevsky describes Kolya's internal tensions, his narrative dramatises the 'mildly repressive schizophrenia' caused by the clash between an 'anti-sentimental persuasion' and the emotional flux of real life.<sup>42</sup> Kolya's resolute resistance to

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>39</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 267. [References to *The Brothers Karamazov* from this point given as page numbers in the main text].

<sup>40</sup>Begbie, 'Beauty,' 60.

<sup>41</sup>This analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov* expands on an article I have previously published in the *Transpositions* journal. See Ewan Bowlby, 'Theology, Cancer and Sentimentality in The Arts,' *Transpositions*, 9 March 2018, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/theology-cancer-and-sentimentality-in-the-arts/>.

<sup>42</sup>Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 205.



‘sheepish sentimentality’ forces him to fight the natural surges of his feelings, trapping him in an intellectual position that cannot accommodate the movements of his own heart.

As well as highlighting the problem of repressive, uncritical anti-sentimentalism through Kolya, Dostoevsky uses the character of Alyosha, Ivan’s conversation partner, to introduce a very different perspective on ‘tender affection’ and ‘sheepish sentimentality’. Alyosha is a ‘happy and vigorous young man’ whose strength of character ‘derives entirely from his rootedness in the basic robustness and normality of life’.<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams describes him as embodying that ‘attentive love in small particulars’ that is ‘full of unnecessary things and casual griefs and joys’. Alyosha’s ‘rootedness’ allows him to embrace the unpredictable, idiosyncratic qualities of human feeling, remaining attentive to both the ‘consequences of evil’ and the ‘gratuitous overflow of human warmth and kindness’.<sup>44</sup> After the tragic death of young Ilusha, Alyosha’s behaviour at the funeral reveals the importance of this ‘attentive love’. As Ilusha’s father stands ‘struggling, sobbing and wailing’ over his son’s coffin, Kolya tries to tell him to ‘give over’, because ‘a brave man must show fortitude’. Alyosha, alert to the needs of the stricken family, simply tells Kolya to ‘let them weep’ (866). He is not bound by any preordained notion of what is ‘brave’ and what is unacceptably sentimental, relying instead on a compassionate consciousness of the demands of each moment, even when they call for a ‘gratuitous overflow’ of emotion.<sup>45</sup> In the passionate speech that draws the novel to a close, Alyosha tells Kolya and his classmates that ‘a man often laughs at what’s good and kind’ in the world. His words border on the idealistic and naïve, but the final advice Alyosha offers to the boys – ‘dear friends, don’t be afraid of life’ – serves to underline the importance of empathetic consideration of the ‘small particulars’ and ‘casual griefs and joys’ that shape our emotional lives (868–9).

Alyosha represents ‘a dramatic answer to a theoretical problem’. His humane approach to suffering and grief provides ‘the only answer offered in the novel to Ivan’s most agonising argument’<sup>46</sup> – the same argument that Begbie draws on to explain his misgivings about sentimentality. Having used Ivan to lay out the problem of suffering and sentimentality in abstract, intellectual terms, Dostoevsky investigates these matters in relation to the ‘basic robustness and normality of life’ through the character of Alyosha. Reading the novel’s conclusion, it remains the case that ‘theoretically, Ivan’s criticisms are unanswered’, but Alyosha’s response reveals that ‘the answer is to go forward from theory to practice’.<sup>47</sup> As Dostoevsky narrates this progression into practice he demonstrates how fiction can be an ‘especially fruitful’ medium for examining sentimentality, as it can ‘get between the rigidities of conventional understanding’.<sup>48</sup> Instead of trying to rule with ‘abstract consistency’ on the merits and morality of sentimentality, *The Brothers Karamazov* sets out the intellectual issue before showing how fiction ‘dramatizes the same questions more

<sup>43</sup>Boyce-Gibson, A., *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 174.

<sup>44</sup>Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 35–36.

<sup>45</sup>For more on the theological approach to suffering modelled by Alyosha Karamazov, see my article on intertextuality and the theology of attention in John Green’s novel *The Fault in Our Stars*: Ewan Bowlby, ‘John Green’s Theology of Attention in *The Fault in Our Stars*’, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (forthcoming).

<sup>46</sup>Alexander Boyce-Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 173.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>48</sup>Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, 57–9.

holistically'.<sup>49</sup> Kolya embodies the 'rigidities' of an essentialist position on sentimentality when he refuses to soften his stance in response to a dying boy's desire for consolation. He reveals that once sentimentality is 'diagnosed as an ethical defect' it 'loads the issue' and prevents any allowances being made for context.<sup>50</sup> His hatred of 'sheepish sentimentality' seems to have evolved into a broader, unchecked fear of all emotion, as the move 'from theory to practice' reminds the reader how easily such a position can outgrow itself when applied to real life. Alyosha, meanwhile, lives out his response to Ivan's theoretical challenge by meeting each person on their own terms and in their unique moment of need.

This is not to say that Dostoevsky's fiction becomes a defence of all sentimentality. The force of Ivan's impassioned rejection of 'harmony' is irresistible, casting a shadow on all that follows. And in the dramatic exploration of sentimentality that takes place around Ilusha's death, there are examples of the dangerous, deceptive aspects that sentimentality can sometimes take on. Ilusha's parents have become desperate and frenetic in their grief, with the father resorting to 'playing the buffoon' in a bid to 'assure and comfort' his son, whilst the mother becomes increasingly childlike and emotionally volatile. Whilst their grief is understandable, the unedifying spectacle that their behaviour creates is something Ilusha can 'not bear to see', as his parents' lack of emotional control prevents them from engaging with the reality of his condition (605–8). Here we see the 'polyphonic' dimension of Dostoevsky's literature at play: the 'coexistence of profoundly diverse voices' that makes each novel 'an unfinished interplay of perspectives'. What emerges out of this interplay is not 'an outcome that will vindicate any [single] point of view', but an accurate portrayal of the vicissitudes of human sentiments that reveals that our emotional lives are an inconsistent jumble of shifting impulses that defy prejudgement.<sup>51</sup> Whether sentimentality seems to be pernicious or beautiful simply depends on which of these voices is heard most clearly amidst the drama of each moment.

What Dostoevsky's fictional exploration of sentimentality-in-practice exposes is the gap between academic debate and "real life" emotional discrimination'.<sup>52</sup> It reveals that what happens at 'street level' is often overlooked by the 'persistent and highly literate minority who tell us that sentimentality is a dangerous corruption'.<sup>53</sup> The skill with which Dostoevsky's prose reflects the different forms that sentimentality can take undermines this illusion of 'abstract consistency',<sup>54</sup> offering insightful observation in place of dogmatic judgment. Kolya's obdurate resistance to 'sheepish sentimentality' seems intended to satirise those who use criticism of sentimentality to 'associate themselves with emotional control'. This tendency to 'reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred being', sometimes used in male society to 'demean the emotionality of women',<sup>55</sup> appears to be the driving force behind Kolya's condescension towards sentimentality. Although, as Begbie and others demonstrate, it is perfectly possible to find far better reasons than this to warn us off sentimentality, Kolya reflects some of the

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 57–9.

<sup>50</sup>Robert Solomon, 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (1991): 8–9.

<sup>51</sup>Williams, *Op. cit.*, 3–6.

<sup>52</sup>Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, 205–6.

<sup>53</sup>Mark Jefferson, 'What is Wrong with Sentimentality?' *Mind* 92, no. 368 (1983): 520.

<sup>54</sup>Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, 57.

<sup>55</sup>Robert Solomon, 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality,' quoted in David Morgan, *Visual Piety: History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 30.

unwarranted prejudices that can lurk behind objections passed off as purely intellectual criticism. This vain, prideful teenager, obsessed with appearing ‘manly’ and ‘strong’, becomes emblematic of ‘Western culture’s difficulty with sentiment’ – a difficulty that ‘results in the shedding of tears, especially by men [being] seen as a negative, a psychological weakness’.<sup>56</sup> His conflation of ‘emotionality with ineffectiveness’<sup>57</sup> speaks to the ‘fear or condescension toward feeling’ that influences contemporary Western culture.<sup>58</sup> It is this fear that can push people towards extreme anti-sentimentalist positions that do not allow for the subtleties and inconsistencies that shape the polyphony of life. Clearly, the opposite extreme must also be avoided. Begbie is justifiably unimpressed by ‘minimalist’ definitions that deny that sentimentality can ever be ill-judged or inappropriate.<sup>59</sup> Lived experience and literary fiction both tell us that certain kinds of thoughtless, excessive emotional outpouring can cause harm. But the issue remains that unacknowledged prejudices and concealed anxieties seem to have contributed to influential denunciations of everything that could be considered ‘sentimental’.

The danger of these denunciations is that they ignore the potential value of sentimentality: the need to ‘let them weep’ that Kolya is oblivious to. Like other displays of heightened emotion, crying can be a natural and necessary means of expression. The kinds of ‘self-conscious emotions’ like empathy, guilt or grief that crying conveys are vital to the repair of social relationships,<sup>60</sup> whilst expressing positive emotions can ease human interactions and reduce stress.<sup>61</sup> Sentimentality can also be ‘empowering’, because it gives us a means of ‘exploring and expressing desire’, bringing to mind those things we most urgently want or need.<sup>62</sup> Suppressing emotion hinders these processes that allow for the easy flow of human life, and sometimes sentimentality is what is required to draw our true feelings out. Kolya’s rare moments of emotional candour are those that allow him to be reconciled to his mother (581), or make peace with his dying friend, even if he cannot understand this. It is when he contradicts his own strict rules and gives in to tears or surges of emotional warmth that he can interact meaningfully with those around him. His conflicted character shows that to suppress all sentimentality is to ‘stifle emotions that reassure people of their human value’, because there are times when sentimentalism is integral to the honest, free communication of feelings.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explained the need for an approach to theology, sentimentality and the arts that takes into account the significance of context when considering if sentimentality is theologically or morally condemnable, then offered an illustration of how this approach might work in practice. By analysing the death of Little Nell as a ‘culturally specific response to a particular set of circumstances’, then drawing attention to the

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<sup>56</sup>Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 31.

<sup>57</sup>Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 21.

<sup>58</sup>Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*, 160.

<sup>59</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 46.

<sup>60</sup>Fraser Watts, ‘Self-Conscious Emotions, Religion and Theology,’ in *Issues in Science and Theology: Do Emotions Shape the World?* Ed. Michael Fuller, Dirk Evers and Anne Runehov (Zurich: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 209.

<sup>61</sup>Laura Otis, *Banned Emotions: How Emotions Can Shape What People Feel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>62</sup>Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>63</sup>Otis, *Banned Emotions*, 1.

theological exploration of sentimentality informed by ‘attentive love in small particulars’ in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, I have highlighted the importance of a more pragmatic, open approach to sentimentality than Jeremy Begbie’s absolutist theological countersentimentality promotes. Begbie does acknowledge that our ‘use’ of sentimental art ‘often depends hugely on matters of context’, but my intention in this article has been to emphasise the importance of this caveat. Introducing this article by referring to personal experience, I aimed to show how an essentialist position on theology, art and sentimentality will always struggle to accommodate the complexities of person, place, and situation. So, rather than recommending an absolutist position in favour of sentimentality, I have provided examples of the need to leave room for context when ruling on this subject.

If I am right in suggesting that we need an alternative theological framework for evaluating our experiences of sentimental artworks, I believe the theological basis for a more constructive approach to the prominence of sentimentality in contemporary culture can be found in the work of David Brown and Gavin Hopps. Hopps and Brown emphasise the significance of the ‘Beholder’s Share’: the ‘psychological and emotional involvement’ of the individual viewer.<sup>64</sup> Crucially, in the context of sentimentality, this means that the ‘therapeutic potential’ of an artwork – the ‘pure escapism’, reassurance, or emotional healing it can offer a particular person – are treated as part of its meaning.<sup>65</sup> This means that ‘popular’ or ‘sentimental’ artforms are not written off as such, but are considered in relation to the ‘psychological, emotional, and social benefits’ they might bring to those affected by them.<sup>66</sup>

Brown notes that by drawing attention to ‘the way in which emotion can actually contribute positively to our perception and evaluation of the world’, the approach that he and Hopps have developed is ‘consistent with more recent approaches to emotion more generally’.<sup>67</sup> Contemporary cognitive psychology has found that ‘affective components’ and ‘cognitive components’ in our neurology are both at work in our emotional responses.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, when discussing sentimentality, it makes no sense to claim – as Begbie does – that emotion has increasingly been ‘divorced from the intellect’,<sup>69</sup> because emotion and intellect operate together in a single, unified self. By noticing and valuing personal, affective responses to art, Brown and Hopps recognise this interconnectedness of reason, feeling, and spirit. Because it is attuned to the importance of personal, emotional responses, this approach offers a promising basis for the type of value judgment necessary to understand the potential significance of sentimental art. And this different value judgment will be especially important during a time when we seek to

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<sup>64</sup>Gavin Hopps, ‘Spilt Religion,’ in *The Extravagance of Music*, by David Brown and Gavin Hopps (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 241–42.

<sup>65</sup>Gavin Hopps, ‘Introduction: An Art Open to the Divine,’ in *The Extravagance of Music*, by David Brown and Gavin Hopps (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 24.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>67</sup>David Brown, ‘Discovering God in Music’s Excess,’ in *The Extravagance of Music*, by David Brown and Gavin Hopps (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 133–66.

<sup>68</sup>Anne Runehov, ‘Cognitive or Affective? A Philosophical Analysis of Modes of Understanding Compassion,’ in *Issues in Science and Theology: Do Emotions Shape the World?* Eds. Dirk Evers et al. (Zurich: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 98. The reality is that ‘[t]here is no self uninvolved in the emotions’, so the idea of ‘a rational self’ controlling the ‘dark, alien forces’ of emotion is persuasive, but misleading (Otis, *Banned Emotions*, 9).

<sup>69</sup>Begbie, ‘Beauty,’ 53.

understand how, and why, people turned to the arts for an ‘escape from life’ during the grief, suffering and chaos caused by the Covid pandemic.

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