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R. L. Stevenson's "The Enchantress" (1889): A *Fin de Siècle* Cautionary Tale?

Abstract I: *The Enchantress* di R. L. Stevenson racconta "le avventure di un gentleman squattrinato e di una giovane ereditiera", che si incontrano in Francia, vanno in Inghilterra e poi in Scozia per contrarre "un matrimonio singolare". La coppia si separa il giorno stesso delle nozze dacché la signora Hatfield abbandona il marito per recarsi nelle Americhe. Ci si propone di rileggere il racconto, con attenzione particolare alla sua valenza in termini di critica sociale e di cambiamento culturale. Indagando se e in che misura il racconto funga da monito per il lettore, se ne sottolinea la rappresentazione di tradizione e convenzione, coi propri limiti e potenzialità, oltre gli stereotipi culturali dominanti nel periodo del *fin de siècle*.

Abstract II: R. L. Stevenson's *The Enchantress* recounts "the adventures of a penniless man and a rich heiress" meeting in France, travelling to England and then to Scotland to be united in "a singular marriage". The newlyweds separate shortly afterwards, with Mrs Hatfield leaving her husband for good and moving somewhere "in the continent of America". This study focuses on the tale's value in terms of social critique and cultural change. In posing the question of whether it is a cautionary tale, it investigates Stevenson's insight into the meaning, the potentiality and the limitations of tradition and conventions as well as his ability to go beyond *fin-de-siècle* clichés.

Keywords: Stevenson, *The Enchantress*, New Woman question, *fin de siècle.*

Robert Louis Stevenson's long lost *The Enchantress* recounts 'the adventures' of a young gentleman turned 'penniless and a rich heiress in a foreign country', as the subtitle from the original manuscript has it (Catucci 2021: 40, n30). Mr Hatfield and Miss Croft meet accidentally in the French town of Royat, where he yearns for an evening meal and a bed he cannot afford, having pawned his "last remaining articles" and spent all the money (Stevenson 1989: 554). Thus, he encounters the eponymous charming "orphan of wealth and beauty" (555). The couple comes to an agreement, with Hatfield signing "a marriage contract [*he*] never saw the like of […] for stiffness" (564) and travelling to England, then to Scotland, where the two marry. As soon as they leave the clergyman's house, however, the newlyweds separate, with Mrs Hatfield abandoning her husband for good without explanation. It turns out, in the epilogue, that she has moved 'to the continent of America' (567), leaving

him free to seek divorce or else accept the terms of their 'singular marriage' – the original title of the tale. Stevenson wrote *The Enchantress* around 1889, during a boat trip to Samoa, where he would spend the last years of his life together with his wife Fanny and stepson Lloyd Osbourne. It took a whole century for the manuscript to be printed and published, thus formally closing the Stevenson canon. After the author's death in 1884, the 27-page handwritten text went missing for a while, arguably because of Lloyd's disapproval of a story that seemed too autobiographical[1]. Following Fanny's death, it was sold by Stevenson's stepdaughter, Isobel Strong, to a Manhattan art gallery in 1915. It was subsequently auctioned and resold in 1923, before being acquired by a librarian in 1947 and donated to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library – Yale University in 1983[2]. Six years later, US scholars David D. Mann and his wife, Susan Garland Mann, announced the discovery of the uncatalogued manuscript, "RLS: Un-cat. Ms. 406", which they transcribed and published in the north American quarterly *The Georgia Review*[3].

Since then, the story has been translated into Italian, French and Spanish[4], but has received relatively little critical attention compared to Stevenson's other works, both his major and canonical ones and those which may be termed as minor writings. Scholars who have written about *The Enchantress* have expanded on the line of investigation first pursued by the Manns, thereby further exploring the aspects of hereditary wealth, class, gender, marriage and the law. Indeed, the tale is a romantic parody about marriage laws in Scotland and England, with special attention to gender differences and a woman's right to manage her own finances and retain ownership of her property (the Married Women's property Acts had been passed by the British Parliament in 1870 and 1882)[5]. However, there is more to *The Enchantress* than just that. Undoubtedly this is a typical *fin-de-siècle* tale, testifying to Stevenson's own expertise in legal matters, his interest in "the background of gentility" (Mehew 1989-1990), in male-female relationships. It also bears testament to his high regard

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[1] See Catucci (2021: 41-42). Expanding on David Mann and Susan Garland Mann's suggestions (in Stevenson 1989: 552), Catucci lists possible reasons for Lloyd's resistance, including the fact that his mother was a divorcee, whom Stevenson had met and pursued while in France and followed her to California. According to Ernst Mehew, this is all "nonsense": "There is nothing to suggest the resemblance between Stevenson's marriage and his heroine's". Mehew's notes, dated 2 November 1989, were published by *The Times* on 13 November 1989. Copies of the article and original notes are held in the National Library of Scotland and catalogued as "Research papers concerning 'The Enchantress' by Robert Louis Stevenson, including a photostat of the original manuscript [1888-1889], 1989-1990, Acc.13917/251".

[2] Cf. Mitigan 1989: 17. Mitigan replicates the information reported by the Manns in their introduction to the 1st printed edition of the tale (the 1989 edn.). According to Ernest Mehew (1989-1990), "almost every statement in that introduction is incorrect or misleading", and he goes on to provide the correct information.

[3] This is the first edition of the story. In Britain, *The Enchantress* was first published in 1990, in the *Telegraph Weekend Magazine* (4 August, pp. 20-22, 48-53). Ernest Mehew belies this information too. It is 'nonsense' to say that the Manns discovered a manuscript, which was uncatalogued, while the librarian had a list of all Stevenson's materials. *The Enchantress* had been accessed by Mehew himself in 1986 who "had no difficulty in obtaining a Xerox copy" (1989-1990).

[4] *L'incantatrice: un amore a sorpresa* (1990a, repr. 1993) translated by Claudio Maria Messina; *L'incantatrice* (1990b) foreword and translation by Ornella De Zordo; *La Magicienne* (1991) translated by Patrice Rapusseau; *La hechicera* (2004) translated by Juan Antonio Molina Foix.

[5] See, especially, Mallardi (1996: 133-152), Linehan (1997: 34-59) and Wånggren (2020).

for literature and the art of writing[6], which is best understood, to cite Ian Duncan, "in terms of a series of choices and experiments which involved a critical refusal of the Victorian novel and its protocols, rather than a failure to master them, on the one hand; and, on the other, a virtuoso formal refinement of the magazine genres of tale, sensational novella and adventure serial" (2010: 15). Duncan speaks in defence of Stevenson's *oeuvre* with a view to redressing the balance between the British canon and the work of a genius who remains somehow unduly considered secondary vis à vis the great authors of his time – Shaw, Wilde, Hardy, Conrad, Kipling, to name a few. Along Duncan's lines, this study revisits a lesser-known, complex and thought-provoking, piece by Stevenson whose strength lies in its ability to tackle and articulate the individual's existential dilemmas against the backdrop of late-Victorian social anxieties regarding power, gender roles, sexuality, finance and social conventions. In posing the question of whether or to what extent *The Enchantress* can be taken to be a cautionary tale in an extended sense, my aim is to investigate the writer's engagement with what Francesco Marroni (2010) terms 'Victorian disharmonies' – a condition of permanent dissonance between the individual and society – as Stevenson looked beyond *fin-de-siècle* cultural stereotypes and clichés and focused upon the individual in his rapport with tradition and the present.

Significantly, the story depicts a paradoxical situation in which everything is "very much upside down" (Stevenson 1989: 564) especially regarding gender roles: "In a man's stories – Hatfield tells Miss Croft – it is always he who gives […] and I find myself in the position of the taker" (559). As the plot unfolds, in fact, it is the woman not the man, who proposes (564); it is she, not he, who owns and revels in managing the money. Indeed, while Hatfield loses all that he has at the casino, Miss Croft gains full knowledge of her possessions and looks forward to being her own administrator. She is "not highly emotional" (564) whereas he is; the man gives her his hand rather than take hers; the woman asks for and takes his arm rather than give him hers (563; 567). In Edward Hatfield's words: "You are the man in this story, I the woman" (559). Man and woman emerge both as ethical and moral categories: in other words, what the protagonists do and say reflect cultural biases which this tale seeks to expose and possibly subvert. The reader is invited to imagine a world in which women yearn to manage finances ("Nothing agrees with me like business", "Let me be your banker", Miss Croft tells Hatfield, 563, 557), and men are at their service because they choose to be and not because they are tricked into it ("Do with me what you will. I am your chattel", Hatfield tells Miss Croft, 565), women give orders and lead the game, and they do it well. The prospect of living in such a world *à l'envers* fed social anxieties in relation to the demands of early feminist movements and activists, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, the militant champion of woman suffrage, who may have inspired Stevenson to give his hero-

[6] *Essays in the Art of Writing* (1905) is the title of a collection dealing with aspects such as *On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature*, *The Morality of the Profession of Letters*, *Books which have Influenced Me*, *A Note on Realism*, to cite a few titles.

ine that same name[7]. Notably, this name of Norman origin signifies 'vigor' and 'bravery'[8] and echoes also the concepts of 'work' and 'industriousness'[9], thereby highlighting the peculiar character of his protagonist. Stevenson fashioned Miss Croft as a strong-willed and independent woman, a New Woman in her own right. Perhaps he agreed with Emmeline Pankhurst that "well-behaved women rarely make history", to cite a popular quotation that has been attributed to her but also to women like her (*e.g.* Eleanor Roosvelt), who devoted their life to the feminist cause and the emancipation of women within the largely male-dominated social and cultural contexts of the *fin de siècle*[10]. And he must also have known that well-behaved women rarely make stories either – indeed the literature of the period displayed a plethora of unwomanly, unconventional or 'improper' women, who did not conform to the angel-in-the-house motherly cliché and were therefore considered to be 'bad' or evil, fallen women, man eaters, man haters, agents or symptoms of social degeneration and decline[11]. Emmeline Croft would appear to add to that catalogue of heroines who "exploit men for mercenary advantage" or else are "caught up in the grip of spiritual possession, whether devilish or divine" (Linehan 1997: 45), on a par with Wilde's Salome (1893) and Machen's Helen Vaughan (1894), to name a couple of contemporary fictional degenerates. Her story may thus be taken as a cautionary tale about the consequences of disrupting current or traditional power structures, including the separate-sphere conception of society.

The title of the story would accordingly highlight as its focus the bewitching quality of the female protagonist: associated with the moon (Stevenson 1989: 557), Stevenson's enchantress replicates the notion of woman as *femme fatale*, manipulative and dangerous because capable of seducing, alluring, tempting, hypnotising men, and leading them away from their virtuous paths. Thus viewed, Miss Croft, is the kind of 'plotting' woman preying on her 'innocent suitor' that late-Victorian readers probably assumed her to be. Yet, a careful re-reading of the tale reveals that there is more to its New Woman rhetoric than meets the eye. Indeed, while *The Enchantress* draws attention to the machinations of a presumably opportunist young lady – partially belying its author's reputation as a narrator of a men-only world (Linehan 1997: 34-35) – there is little doubt as to Mr Hatfield's central place in the plot, as well as to the scope of this tale.

Unlike a well-behaved woman a well-behaved man makes both history and a story; at least this is what *The Enchantress* appears to suggest. The story is told from Hatfield's perspective: recounted in retrospect, it is a typical first-person narrative, which readers are inclined to believe while also empathising with the protagonist. His little odyssey follows the fate of a

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[7] Ernest Mehew relates of a character named Emmeline in a tale that Stevenson drafted in the 1870s but which he never completed. See Mehew (1989-1990).

[8] "Emmeline" (*The Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources* 2023, http://dmnes.org/2023/1/name/Emmeline consulted on 19/06/2025).

[9] "Meaning of the first name – Emmeline", https://www.ancestry.com/first-name-meaning/emmeline (consulted on 19/06/2025).

[10] A slight variation of the sentence appears in an essay by the north American historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich entitled *Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735* (1976: 20).

[11] See definition by Lyn Pykett, highlighting the arbitrary use of the term 'New Woman' (2001: xii).

man whose 'gentlemanly exterior' is of no use to him in a foreign country (it would probably serve him more, were he in England). It could perhaps constitute a warning of the risk of being genteel and earnest in a world in which chivalric values have lost their significance – "I knew my fellow creatures – Hatfield muses – even to the most clamant cases of distress […] they would be little likely to exceed a franc" (Stevenson 1989: 554). Mr Hatfield is the moral and emotional barometer of this "miserable story" (557), and a self-proclaimed tool in the hands of Miss Croft to whom he says: "You have picked up a tool […] what do you propose to do with it? You have bought a slave; I hope you like him" (559). Thus read, *The Enchantress* is surely a cautionary tale about the tragic fall of its protagonist, a 'gentleman' proper, raised to be well-mannered as much as well-bred and possibly well-off, who faces the consequences of living at a time when the virtues of nobility and of nobleness no longer hold their classical value but rather are lost to the priorities of a changed society. Stevenson may have had in mind Walter Scott's reflections on chivalry as expressed in a popular article of that title dedicated to the mutability of ideas and institutions (1824)[12]. He may also have drawn on Samuel Smiles' conception of "the True Gentleman" as "one whose nature has been fashioned after the highest models. […] His qualities depend not upon fashion or manners, but *upon moral worth*. Not on personal possessions, but *on personal qualities*" (2002: 314; my emphasis). In fact, Mr Hatfield is one who could 'never inflict pain', to paraphrase Cardinal Newman's definition of the gentleman (quoted in Antinucci 2012a: 78), as the end of the tale clearly suggests:

> Mr Venable: 'O, I think Mrs. Hatfield fully justified.'
> 'I have no doubt of that,' said I; and then immediately, 'and I suppose nothing can be done for me.' 'Well,' returned Mr. Venables. 'You can go to law.'
> '*I will never do that*,' cried I.
> 'I believe she rather figured on it in that way,' returned the lawyer.
> 'She can go on figuring upon it in that way *till Hell is cold*, for me,' I said, getting my hat.
> 'That was just as she expected; she had a great esteem for your character, Mr. Hatfield' (Stevenson 1989: 568; my emphasis).

A product of his time, Edward Hatfield thinks of himself and acts like a traditional gentleman (the histrionic gesture of 'getting the hat' in the exchange above is significant, in these terms). He represents "a steady anchorage to face the social, political and philosophical uneasiness of the Victorian period" and "the moral champion of an age that was ontologically in transition" (Antinucci 2012a: 79). As the tale progresses, he comes to terms with the need to adapt to a less perfectly noble ideal of the English gentleman – one that has no instinct for command, appears not to know right from wrong, has no authority nor power, an ordinary man, or worse, a "common beggar":

[12] Commissioned by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the entry on "Chivalry" compiled by Scott thus defines the qualities of the gentleman: "A general feeling of respect to the female sex; in the rules of forbearance and decorum in society; in the duties of speaking truth and observing courtesy; and in the general conviction and assurance, that, as no man can encroach upon the property of another without accounting to the laws, so none can infringe on his personal honour, be the difference of rank what it may, without subjecting himself to personal responsibility", https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sir-Walter-Scott-on-chivalry-1987278 (consulted on 19/06/2025).

> 'Miss Croft,' I broke out, '… I have no money, no hopes, no friends, no honest trade; I am a *common beggar*, and that is the miserable truth.'
> 'How on earth have you got to such a pitch?' she asked. I told her at some length my *miserable story*; and though I was myself appalled by its *unbroken silliness*, I told it honestly. 'You can judge for yourself,' I added, 'if it be worthwhile to help *a creature so incompetent*' (Stevenson 1989: 557; my emphasis).

A self-confessed incompetent, Stevenson's *fin de siècle* gentleman is a 'hero in transition' (Antinucci 2012a: 79), the survivor of an extinct race, humble enough to speak "honestly" and admit to the "unbroken silliness" of his tale; he is possibly the result of the emergence of the New Woman in British culture and literature of the time. Mr Hatfield himself is rather naïve, somehow "proud" (Stevenson 1989: 564) and immature when it comes to sentimental relationships. He assumes he will be playing the traditional masculine role and pursuing chivalric love, while Miss Croft demands of him "knightly service" (Stevenson 1989: 560), clearly mocking Hatfield's love vocabulary with words and deeds:

> […] And from you – what do I ask?
> 'It is what I wish I knew,' I said. 'You say I picked you up,' she continued. 'You read in tales of magicians who pick up strays like you in the slums of mediaeval cities, and what is it they buy from them? their wind, their appetite, their soul. You will begin to think me greedy, for I want a little of all that.' She broke off with her smile. 'I hope I frighten you,' she said. 'You charm me,' said I. She looked at me in a manner too peculiar to be told, so much of doubt, of interest, of animation as that glance contained.
> 'I did not say I wished your love,' she said (Stevenson 1989: 559-560).

The exchange confirms Stevenson's interest in the themes of romantic love, gentility and courtship, which he had previously explored in several essays reflecting a critical awareness of the "blind arrogance rooted in his society's system of distorted sex roles", what the Scottish writer termed a "man's vanity and self-importance" (Stevenson 1906: 87). He contended that "men must learn to reckon with female individuality and subjectivity if adult love is to succeed" (Linehan 1997: 36), possibly as a result of his own experience, being the partner of a woman his senior and facing the daily challenges of love as necessarily linked to an individual's moral maturation. Indeed, love challenged "both sexes not only to move beyond youthful extremes of egoism, but also to repair the effects of a social ideology which artificially aggrandizes ego in men while misguidedly denying it in women" (Linehan 1997: 36).

Hardly a New-woman or a New-man writer *stricto sensu*, Stevenson was intrigued by the possibility afforded to him by the art of writing to explore and narrate "a vertiginous sense of fractured perspectives" (Poole 2009: 267)[13] – he conceived of life as adventure; to him existence remained an open question. Viewed in such terms, *The Enchantress* does not simply tell the story of a *femme fatale* and of her victim, nor does it relate solely their singular

[13] What Adrian Poole (2009) writes with reference to *The Master of Ballantrae*, also written in 1889, equally applies to *The Enchantress*.

marriage, rather it expands on the author's interest in the individual and his/her maturation or elevation – the capacity to cope with the adversities of life and pursue one's goals in a non-selfish and openminded way[14]. A former Socialist, Stevenson looked back 'with regret' on those times; already by 1875 he was convinced that "we had better leave these great changes to what we call great blind forces: their blindness being so much more perspicacious than the little, peering, partial eyesight of men" (Stevenson 1881: 94-95). He referred to both men and women; though cognisant of the claims of the "enslaved sex" (Stevenson 1923: 360), he focused upon the condition of the human being ontologically caught up in existential dilemmas such as Shakespeare, one of his mentors, had magisterially staged them[15].

Hatfield faces the consequences of his actions – the fact that he gambled all his money in a casino – and of that strange encounter which is somehow reminiscent of Macbeth's fatal encounter with the three witches, also transposing Hamlet's dilemma to the present. The question of "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them" (Shakespeare 1994: III, i, 56-60) – Hamlet's choice between life and death – becomes a choice between financial security and the lack of it. If Hatfield were to break the matrimonial contract, he would lose the £300 yearly allowance he and Emmeline have agreed on. But if he doesn't, he must remain committed to an absent wife and give up both his liberty and the possibility of engaging in a genuine love relationship. The tale's end presents him with a moral question concerning his integrity: whether it is more noble to suffer and live penniless but a free man, or else to set the price of his own freedom and happiness (£300), thereby also giving up his gentlemanly past. Stevenson provides no answer other than that which every reader is prepared to give him/herself each time s/he goes through the pages of the story. Here as elsewhere with his work, reading is "an independent effort – a window open to a different view" (Henry James quoted in Fielding 2012: 159). And as he wrote to Trevor Haddon in a letter, "No man can settle another's life for him. It is the test of the nature and courage of each that he shall decide it for himself" (Stevenson 1923: 123). Or herself, for that matter. Miss Croft is equally entangled in a dilemma regarding her survival. Brought up in a world in which men fail her, one way or another – her father has died while Mr Ramley, her guardian, is "not a sound man of business" (Stevenson 1989: 568)[16] – Emmeline must learn to look after herself and her inheritance. She thus employs Mr Venables, a lawyer, a 'venerable gentleman' by name and deed, who helps her make the most of marriage laws in order to gain access to her father's property[17]. By the end of the tale, it becomes clear that the

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[14] Stevenson was clearly influenced by J. S. Mill's individualism as expressed, for instance, in chapter 3 of his essay *On Liberty* (1859). Individualism is opposed to the blind submission to social customs and traditions, and choice is crucial to individual freedom and happiness: "He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice" (Mill 1991: 65). By making independent choices, individuals develop and strengthen their character.

[15] Stevenson acknowledges Shakespeare as the first of his most influential writers (Stevenson 1905a: 77).

[16] "A famous financier in those days, and a great and daring card player; nor will the reader have forgot the singular scandal with which, some ten years later, he collapsed and like Samson involved thousands in his fate" (Stevenson 1989: 555).

[17] It is interesting to note that the three male figures in the tale are defined as 'gentleman', each of them rep-

law allowed her, almost compelled her to find a man who would agree to her peculiar terms and get married. She also knew that Mr Hatfield was a true gentleman and that he would behave as one – he would honour his word to the last.

'A literary treasure'[18], *The Enchantress* confronts its reader with significant moral and ethical questions while also liaising with themes and tropes that were crucial to the cultural debate of the *fin de siècle*, notably the New Woman question, the marriage debate, the place of love in the matrimonial contract, and the meaning and value of honesty, liberty, trust and self-dignity in human relationships[19]. Stevenson experimented with his characters in a way that recalls not only Shakespearean tragedy, but also his own Dr Jekyll conducting his laboratory tests. In that gothic novella (published just three years earlier) it is an accident that initiates the story; here too life happens in consequence of an uncalculated or unpredictable event. A destitute gentleman and a young heiress meet, by chance, they unite in a matrimony that serves to resolve each other's issues while it questions their integrity and ability to choose freely. A dissonance underlies the tale and functions as "a structural element of change" (Marroni 2010: 49): the myth of stability through matrimony gives way to a pressing demand for individual evolution and maturation. Hatfield will have to face up to his being a "melancholic anachronism" (Antinucci 2012b: 33) and negotiate his worth, as an individual and a man. This brings us back to the question of whether and to what extent Stevenson's tale is a cautionary tale. It cannot be considered such if viewed as the expression of *fin de siècle* degeneration theories, which would mean considering Stevenson's enchantress as the root of all of Hatfield's evils. On the other hand, the tale is cautionary in its exposure of the perils of an uncritical mind (one that blindly accepts social customs and traditions). At first, Hatfield articulates his sense of superiority to women to justify how he chooses the person he will ask for money: "Being a man, I should certainly be a great ass if I did not choose a woman: upon that I did not hesitate an instant", he tells the reader (Stevenson 1989: 555). As the story unfolds, Miss Croft reveals herself as the agent of Hatfield's transformation – this enchantress is construed not as a destructive woman but rather as a vehicle of his self-realisation. Her 'use' as a 'tool' within the tale is in stark contrast with Hatfield's preoccupation that he has "no use" (Stevenson 1989: 554) and has become "a tool" in her hands (559). By shaking the world of his delusions ('the gentlemanly exterior'), Emmeline allows him to look around and within himself with different eyes and a different sensibility, leaving him (and the reader) to face the existential dilemma of what it is to be (or not to be) a man and of whether he can still be a true gentleman. Storytelling – itself a supreme enchantress amongst the arts (Stevenson 1905b: 9-12) – gets the reader emotionally and intellectually involved as s/he is confronted with a necessary disharmony and possibly ends up sympathising with Hatfield while also sharing Mr Venables's view that Miss Croft is "fully justified" (Steven-

resenting a different way of being a gentleman in late-Victorian times, each of them allowing for a critique, on the part of the author, to that tradition and its legacy.

[18] That is how *The Telegraph Weekend Magazine* defined the tale in the issue that published the first British edition of the tale.

[19] See, on these aspects, a study conducted among law students asked to assess Stevenson's tale in the light of Karl Polanyi's social theory (Wolcher 1990).

son 1989: 568). The singularity of Stevenson's *récit* lies precisely there, in its potential for cultivating mutual understanding and comprehension beyond consolidated clichés and fears of precariousness and fragmentation.

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