CHAPTER 12

Literature and Interpretation:
Conventions, History, and Universals

I

There are probably more people studying and (alas) writing about literature today than in the last five hundred years of Western history. Even for the modern literatures the volume of writings about literature far exceeds the corpus of the literature itself. This is a situation that the scholar working on Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, or Shakespeare has come to live with (in however uncomfortable a way), but it is a situation dismaying to students of Henry James or Proust or Joyce or even T. S. Eliot—authors whose books are scarcely decently cold and lack the moldy look of the texts we classicists poke around in.

As critics and teachers of literature, we swim in baffling currents and cross-currents of approaches, with their conflicting sources in ethics, epistemology, psychology, linguistics, political theory, anthropology, and so on. There is not one but several New Criticisms, to say nothing of the old New Criticism. The warring parties do not just exchange salvos between New Haven and Chicago, as in the good old days of the fifties, they have to deal with intercontinental missiles from Paris, Geneva, Constance, and even Tartu. The very boundaries of literature are being constantly redefined as the question of what constitutes a literary text becomes more acute. As literary study, in the wake of structuralism, has become more concerned with

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the problems of how discourse constructs meaning, it embraces a larger range of possible texts, from formal history and philosophy (always a sort of boundary area for literary criticism) to documents, letters, the writings of Freud (a favorite topic these days), or even literary criticism itself.

Literary study today is consequently less definitely literary than at any time in the past. It is extraordinarily hospitable to a wide range of extraliterary influences. Indeed, these are perhaps the most powerful determinants of current critical directions; for example, the Marxist and feminist approaches that call attention to the hidden ideological intent of works of art alongside the older and more established extraliterary movements, the anthropological or psychoanalytic.

Criticism, then, becomes necessarily hermeneutic, that is, it has to take account of the fact that there are different modes of reconstituting an apparently singular object. When a work is acknowledged to have a range of possibly divergent readings, in what sense can it be said to exist? What kinds of operations are valid for arriving at such readings? What kind of “truth” do these readings have, and indeed what kind of truth does the work itself have?

These are the problems that force themselves upon the scholar and teacher of literature, for, unlike the unsystematic reader, the critic is in the somewhat ambiguous position of treating an object of aesthetic experience as an object of knowledge. As a result, he or she has the unenviable task of relating this problematical object of knowledge to a problematical discipline and, whether liking it or not, has to confront the task of interpretation as itself a problem. Instead of the simple model of reader confronting work, he or she is aware of all the intermediary processes, processes that not only determine the nature of the critical activity but even to some extent determine the nature of the work itself. The literary critic lives, as we all do, in the post-Heisenberg era, knowing that the observation of a given phenomenon changes that phenomenon.

Those trained in the classical tradition probably find it congenial to view works of art as opening upon the external world rather than upon themselves. For this orientation the most powerful statement is still Longinus’ famous comment on sublimity in literature (35.2):

What then was the vision which inspired those divine writers who disdained exactness of detail and aimed at the greatest prizes in liter-
nature? Above all else, it was the understanding that nature made man to be no humble or lowly creature, but brought him into life and into the universe as into a great festival, to be both a spectator and an enthusiastic contestant in its competitions. . . . The universe is not wide enough for the range of human speculation and intellect. Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings. If anyone wants to know what we were born for, let him look round at life and contemplate the splendor, grandeur, and beauty in which it everywhere abounds.¹

Instead of this outwardly directed, ennobling contemplation of boundless horizons, the modern gaze is more inward, sees around the object, views both the inside and the outside simultaneously in a perspective that is steadily conscious of the aesthetic dimension, acutely aware of the viewer’s eye and indeed of the eyes of a succession of viewers seeing the beloved object from multiple angles. With Longinus’ magnificent vision to the limits of the universe, we may perhaps contrast Proust’s Swann as he sits in Odette’s apartment, enjoys the roseate glow of the lamps that she has placed before him in the winter twilight, and thinks of the view from outside, through the eyes of “some solitary lover wandering in the street below.”² It is as if in the very moment in which it is being lived, the private, interior scene is self-consciously constructed as an aesthetic object with both an objective and a subjective dimension, a piece of rich artifice that can be seen and enjoyed from different perspectives of space (as here) or time (as often in the novel).

T. S. Eliot, writing about the difficulty of “trying to learn to use words,” calls the effort “a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion” (East Coker, V). We still face the problem of imprecise feeling, but the critic’s difficulty with words today is the opposite of Eliot’s: not “deteriorating equipment” but an excess of fancy gadgets, a plethora of high-tech screens and buttons, and we are not always sure which ones to push, whether we should push them all, one only, or none.

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It is, then, natural to feel sympathy for a solution like that of Susan Sontag in the title essay of her Against Interpretation: cut the Gordian knot and simply reject interpretation as strangling literature. It would certainly uncomplicate our lives if we could go back to the texts and read them as if they, and we, existed in a total intellectual vacuum. The problem is that neither they nor we do so exist, and we have to take the texts with the problems of interpretation that they bring.

II

The appreciation of literature is both a moral and an aesthetic appreciation. The difficulty lies in the copula. One cannot detach the moral considerations inherent in meaning (that is, the questions about the ends and quality of life, the nature of human relationships, both personal and social, the questions of values and conduct, conflicts, emotions, crises of identity, and so on) from the experience of the language. This is among the most platitudinous truisms of literary study ("The medium is the message," in its most reduced form); and yet this relation between the content and the form of the discourse, between the signified and the signifier, is what makes criticism interesting, controversial, and problematical. In our current, poststructuralist interest in the signifier-signified nexus, we risk losing sight of the signified.

A recent issue of New Literary History proposes as its theme "Literature and/ as Moral Philosophy." One of the major texts discussed is Henry James's The Golden Bowl. One would hardly consider James a moralist, and yet his work is deeply moral: its endlessly and finely discriminating details are held in place by the moral seriousness of the central theme, the balance between our desire for perfection and integrity and the deceptions, concealments, and compromises that our complex emotional lives create and also can tolerate. This imperfection, of course, is among other things what the flaw in the Golden Bowl symbolizes.

Martha Nussbaum, in a valuable essay on the moral issues in The Golden Bowl, squarely faces the problem of the moral uses of literary works and asks: "Why, it may still be asked, do we need a text like

this one for our work on these issues?" 4 Why, in other words, do we bother with a text that takes such a long, oblique, and indirect route to get to its admittedly important questions about honesty and dishonesty in personal relations? Nussbaum's answer, with which I agree, is that "this task cannot be accomplished by texts which speak in universal terms" or "with the hardness or plainness which moral philosophy has traditionally chosen for its style." Imaginative literature has a flexibility, a suppleness, a freedom to delve into the minute particulars of which so much of lived life is composed. Thus it enables us to enter the moral realm as an area of concrete emotional experience in ways that the more abstract language of philosophy or psychology would not permit.

If the reading of an author like Henry James shows us anything, it is that the moral experience of the work is mysteriously and inextricably fused with the experience of the style and the language: the puzzling and sometimes infuriating ellipses, the crucial nuances in phrases that seem to make a minimal statement but prove to be vital for the situation, the little pauses when a character at such a critical moment "hangs fire."

Like all great artists, James disciplines us to the demands of his language; and this disciplined following of meaning as it unfolds in a particular style, with a particular tempo, is one of the most important things that professors of literature have to teach their students to do. Good reading is a matter of paying attention, of observing the effects of adding one detail to another and of watching how the new details build on, qualify, refine, elaborate, or contradict what has gone before. The bold metaphors of Aeschylus, parodied in the first sustained piece of literary criticism in Western literature, or the hyperboles of Elizabethan drama, or the interminable convolutions in the sentences of Proust, these are not just a set of inconvenient obstacles to finding out what is going on: they are the substance of the work.

The strenuous participation in the verbal universe of the literary work, then, gives us an experiential grasp of an otherness that we assimilate as part of ourselves as we discover, recreate, and interpret in the act of reading. Georges Poulet tries to get at this paradoxical

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combination of self-identification and self-alienation, the processes of assimilation and estrangement that go on in the responsive reading of literature, quoting Rimbaud’s line, “Je est un autre.”

Poulet’s work shows us how hard it is to define the mode of “knowledge” constituted by this experience. This is a form of knowledge different from the nuggets of factual information that a historical novel like Flaubert’s *Salammbô* or George Eliot’s *Romola* may contain. It is closely connected to the experience of rhythm and sound as well as sense. The ancient critics insist on the importance of individual syllables, clusters of consonants, sequences of vowels. In considering a passage of Demosthenes, Longinus experiments with rewriting the simile “like a cloud” in several different ways to show that the exact phrasing has a kind of inevitability and perfection to it.

We tolerate this microcosmic scrutiny of language for lyric poetry, rarely for other genres. But in prose too, of course, minor details of phrasing make a difference. Our view of the landscape, as it were, depends on the way in which we move over the terrain; and at times it is helpful to take a look at our feet. It makes a difference that the choral pronouncement awarding the crown of victory to the sick Philoctetes is in dactylic hexameters, the meter of epic and of oracles; or that Lady Macbeth’s talk of blood changes from the pentameters in her speech of Act I to prose in her last utterances in Act V. Appreciation of the verbal texture of language is one of the most important objects of the teaching and study of literature. Nor is this merely a matter of stylistics in the narrow sense. Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* shows how intimately language is bound up with thought, historical context, and intellectual history.

III

The emphasis on the synchronic over the diachronic dimension of the literary work during the past couple of decades—that is, the concern with structure and the process of signification rather than the historical filiations and origins—is probably one of those natural re-

actions which take place as cultural styles and the paradigms of what constitutes knowledge shift from one phase to another. But historical concerns have returned in a new way, informed by a new theoretical spirit. For example, when we study literary echoes, the imitation or quotation of one author by another, we are now likely to pose questions about source and influence less as problems of fact-finding in a positivistically conceived history than as issues that have to do with the nature of literary discourse, the universe of forms, traditions, conventions, and genres in which literature exists. The writer is not, like a Cynic philosopher, a naked wanderer who lives out of a barrel. He has his own intellectual capital, though this is not always fully evident or acknowledged.

Thanks to the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser and the Rezeptionsästhetik school, we are also more aware now that the reader too does not exist in a vacuum. The reader too is at the end of a long process of evolving tastes and judgments, as the canon of “classics” in any given period changes and the active genres expand, contract, or change boundaries. Jauss and his school are concerned to recognize the historical dimension of the aesthetic category. The development of a given genre at a particular time is not just a matter of the chronological priority of texts that were always there but also a function of what can be perceived and understood in a text as aesthetic horizons or expectations expand, contract, or alter direction. Why, for example, should Senecan tragedy have been rated so high in the Renaissance and so low in the nineteenth century, and why the recent interest in it? Why are Hesiod’s Theogony, Euripides’ later tragedies, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and the Greek Novel saying more to us now than to our predecessors of a century ago?

The concern with the place of the literary work in a long sequence of both literary production and literary consumption is a necessary corrective to the total isolation of the work from the historical process. At the same time, the hermeneutic emphasis on understanding how and why different works are judged differently at different times poses the question of changing tastes as a problem that can be approached with some degree of analytical rigor. We neither have to

7. For the problem of classicists’ resistance to such paradigm shifts in their discipline, see John Peradotto, “Texts and Unrefracted Facts: Philology, Hermeneutics and Semiotics,” Arethusa 16 (1983) 15–33, especially 22ff.

8. See, for instance, Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. T.
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hide such questions away in the closet nor see in them the bugbear of a relativistic subjectivism that condemns literary study as a matter of private indulgences and non-negotiable likes and dislikes.

For a variety of reasons, we have in the recent past come to a fresh awareness of the implicit value systems in the determination of literary values and literary canons. The revaluation of aesthetic categories and value judgments also brings a shift in the canon of accessible authors—something that makes some classicists uncomfortable. But in classical studies, as in other areas of literature, there are great rewards to be gained by sacrificing an absolutizing and idealizing aesthetic to a critical attitude that takes account of the contexts of production and considers the formation of literary conventions and the different needs that literary works satisfy both for their own time and for the times that preserve or enthrone them as classics.

Interpretation has to confront the ideologies masked by some of the greatest literary works—the patriarchal bias of Aeschylus’ Oresteia, for example, or the aristocratic consciousness of property and inherited excellence in Pindar’s Victory Odes. It has to consider too why some ideologies more than others are visible to us, or bother us, or interest us. If we have to acknowledge areas of narrowness and culture-bound ideology in Aeschylus or Plato or Virgil, we may discover other literary values that we have neglected. The gain in breadth of view and critical perspective which comes with freeing ourselves from a posture of defensive hostility to new movements and cultural change more than compensates for the recognition of flaws, limitations, and biases in our favored texts.

The reactions and counterreactions between historicist and universalizing or a-temporal approaches are probably a healthy situation, since every work of art exists both in its own well defined historical context and also, in a sense, out of time, as an artifact that can speak to men and women across the boundaries of specific historical moments. Certain forms seem to have a remarkable tenacity across the millennia. James Bond is a reincarnation of a very hoary type, fighting dragons and monsters that have vanquished all previous contestants, descending to underworld places, mixing war and love, and enjoying or combatting in turn helpful and sinister wizards, kindly

Bahti (Minneapolis 1982), especially “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 3–45.
and deadly witches. Superman is a close cousin to Theseus, Perseus, Heracles, and others: he is raised by surrogate parents after mysterious separation from a quasi-divine realm of remote, godlike parents; he goes on a quest to a distant land to discover his real father, which he does through a token, weapon, or magical instrument; and he fights heroic battles against evil monsters to rid the world of disorder, and so on. Northrop Frye has accumulated long lists of generic continuities in romance and in other narrative forms that have strong mythic components. 9

One side-benefit of taking a long view of continuities in literary forms is the realization that certain features of, say, narrative which we accept as a given are conventions that other periods may value less highly. As Alastair Fowler points out in an important article on literary canons, there are relatively few "active genres" at any one time; and the place of the novel's mimetic realism at the top of the generic hierarchy is a recent phenomenon in literary history. 10

In Book 10 of the Odyssey Homer takes pains to show his hero's difficulty in carrying back to his men at the shore a deer that he has managed to shoot. But Virgil in Aeneid 1 can have his hero transport no less than seven deer from woods to shore. The beasts are no less heavy, and Aeneas is presumably not in that much better shape than Odysseus. 11 Commentators suggest various literalistic solutions. 12 We can perhaps better grasp the modification of Homer as due to a difference in the horizon of expectation that he and the norms of post-Hellenistic literature shape for his reader. 13 He uses a literary texture that does not necessarily give realism first place.

Genres themselves are not absolutes: they too change and evolve, and they have different definitions and demands at different times.

13. The difference between the explicitness and continuity of oral style and the greater density and obliquity of written poetry obviously plays a role here.
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They are not closed boxes or ideal forms but groupings based on “shared assumptions” between writer and audience, assumptions that have to do with a mental organization of reality deeply rooted in an entire culture.\(^{14}\) For the Graeco-Roman literary world, for example, which is highly sensitive to formal classifications of meter and diction, pastoral poetry is a subspecies of epic.\(^{15}\) Thus Theocritean pastoral at every point leans on Homeric diction and exploits the discrepancy between the heroic and the everyday, between the aristocratic warriors about whom much of this language was used and the lowly herdsmen who are, after all, slaves.\(^{16}\) Virgilian pastoral exploits the discrepancy between the literariness of its Hellenistic model and the contemporary crisis of Rome. The generic leveling of pastoral, however, particularly through the influence of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century norms, led to neglecting the political and historical dimension of Virgil’s Eclogues—the confiscations and civil wars in the background of several of the poems—and to viewing their essential quality as a dreamy unreality, a golden haze of wistful contemplation, as in a Poussin or Claude Lorrain.

To take one example, the eighth seems of all the Eclogues perhaps the most literary and the most detached from political actualities. But any reading of the poem has to take account of the dissonance between the great “deeds” (\textit{facta}, 8) accomplished in real places by the general addressed in the dedication (6–13) and the serenity of flocks and herdsmen in an idealized setting of magical song (1–5, 14–16). It has to take account too of the next poem’s movement towards the violent urban world that disrupts the peaceful pursuits of pastoral life. In that perspective, Eclogue 8’s wonder at song’s power to suspend the movements of nature (1–5) appears as a precarious interlude. Its Orphic world is surrounded by forces that are not susceptible to the charm of shepherds’ music. In such a case, generic expectations can blur what is unique and original in an author’s handling of a tradi-


16. For some of these discrepancies see David Halperin, \textit{Before Pastoral: Theocritus and the Ancient Tradition of Bucolic Poetry} (New Haven 1983) chap. 11, especially 236ff.
tional form. The label “pastoral” does not prepare us for Virgil’s startling combination of Theocritus’ elegant surface and the Roman concreteness of the political and historical moment.

IV

For the contemporary critic, there is no avoiding the problem of the hermeneutic circle. The problem is, as Martin Heidegger says, to come into it in the right way. Our understanding of the whole always depends on our view of the particulars, whether these are the individual lines of a text or a single work within the whole corpus of literature. And conversely, our ability to see and select the particulars—the felicitous adjective we find so powerful or the particular text we use as the basis of a revaluation of an author, a period, or a genre—will always depend on our view of the whole. Our literary evaluations have a basis in judgments, assumptions, theoretical and methodological choices, exclusions, rankings, preferences, and so on; and we need to be aware and explicit about these, both to ourselves and our students, as we go about the work of interpretation.

The deconstructive movement, from Jacques Derrida to Harold Bloom and the lamented Paul de Man, has helped to raise this critical self-awareness. It calls attention to the fact that all interpretation involves a process of supplementing the text studied and thereby producing another text in an infinite series of writings—disseminations and misreadings. Deconstruction has here a certain kinship with both Marxist and structuralist interpretation in pointing out the danger of merely replicating our own assumptions and thought processes when we think we are objectively reconstructing the text.

Here too we face the hermeneuticists’ vicious circle: we can see the Other only through the lenses of ourselves, through the knowledge, theories, and methodologies that we have assimilated in order to help us understand the otherness of the text. So we can no longer pretend that there is anything like a final, objective, impersonal criticism of literature. We need not, however, fall back into despairing solipsism. The problem may lie in the kind of truth we expect literature to give us and in the scientific model that we are accustomed to use as a criterion for that truth.
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Our reading of the text may indeed be a process of adding supplements from the outside; but those supplements are still brought to a definite text, and the features of the text should themselves suggest and direct us to the kind of supplements that we make. As David Hoy suggests, the deconstructive process may itself be a moment, a necessary and inevitable moment, in the hermeneutic process but not the whole of the process. The process of interpretive understanding is a shifting movement between recognizing the text in its unassimilable otherness, its ultimate strangeness, and making the text in some sense our own, something to which we can assent on the basis of our experience of what the text signifies.

The fact that literary study involves personal choices and personal responses does not mean that it is totally subjective. The antithesis of "personal," as Charles Altieri points out in a 1978 essay on the question of literary indeterminacy, is not "subjective" but "impersonal." That many meanings are possible for a given work does not mean that any meaning is possible. An interpretation still must have its grounding in a respectful accuracy about the details of the text. The absence of a transcendental signifier need not imply that there is no signified at all. Bellini, Canaletto, Turner, and this summer's tourist all have their pictures of Venice, and there are an infinite number of other such visions. But each of these, after all, still depends on an identifiable (if complex) entity many of whose features can be described with some degree of precision, objectivity, and unanimity.

The plurality of interpretations, incidentally, seems not to have tormented critics so much that in despair they stop interpreting. Stanley Fish, with a relish that some may find a bit grotesque, subtitles a chapter of a recent book, "How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Interpretation." To recognize the plurality of possible readings of a text is not to deny that some readings may be better than others: the "better" readings may have more insight, take

fuller account of the totality of the text and the author's oeuvre, range more widely over the implications, discriminate more keenly among the qualities of certain parts or certain characters, and so on.

The paradigm for teaching and criticizing literature is probably shifting from the notion of conveying "solid" nuggets of information in the tradition of a positivistic historicism to that of performing a score and teaching art. We then have to stress, as Altieri does, the standards of competence which make for a good performance rather than the existence of objective, scientifically verifiable knowledge.

And of course a great deal of factual knowledge is necessary for the teaching and criticism of literature: philological knowledge, historical knowledge, knowledge of genres, conventions, formal expectations and their development in time and place. It goes without saying that the critic and teacher of literature should be continually trying to expand, enrich, and refine the bases of factual knowledge that he or she has to draw upon in interpreting a text. One can never know enough Greek to understand Aeschylus or Sophocles. The first step in any interpretation is to get the facts right; and someone has to know whether a given translation of a Greek tragedy or a Petrarcan sonnet is saying at a basic factual level what the original said.

Once these basic determinations of factual meaning are more or less satisfactorily settled (and sometimes that is not so easy, as students of early Greek literature know), we probably have to admit that we are dealing with texts rather than closed, sealed off "works"—that is, with complex structures that can be viewed in a very large number of ways, with many shifting perspectives. We have to abandon a final, definitive interpretation for a process of endless interpreting. More important, we need to recognize that we are always interpreting. We perhaps need a more open definition of "the classic," and Frank Kermode seems to me to do rather well in his book of that name: the classics, he says, "possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions."

Every work of art, then, requires reinterpretation in the contempo-

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rary idiom and against the contemporary concerns of each genera-
tion. But each has also a meaning—or rather a complex of mean-
ings—in its own time and place. I believe that it is both possible and
necessary to determine those meanings as best we can, knowing full
well that we can arrive at only an imperfect approximation. No full
understanding of the Iliad is possible without knowing something
about the central role of shame and honor in a warrior society, where
the regard and esteem of one’s peers form the central value. No full
understanding of the Divina Commedia is possible without some grasp
of the system-making, universe-ordering symmetries and hierarchies
of the late medieval theologies. This effort at a historical as well as a
contemporary understanding of the great literature of the past is
important not just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity but also to help
us understand ourselves by illuminating the gaps and the differences,
as well as the similarities, between our condition of life, our attitudes
to such fundamental things as social order and disorder, violence,
war, love, and the conditions and attitudes of those who have pre­
ceded us and to some degree influenced us.

It is as important to appreciate the otherness that separates us from
the past as well as the universal that unites us to it. Without the
philological and historical work of determining basic factual matters,
the interpretive activity is impossible. Without the interpretive effort
to make the work somehow our possession, the work remains a
captive of its own historical circumstances, “hermeneutically dead,”
so that, in its otherness, it would have no means of access or contact
with us, in our otherness.

Classicists are so imbued with the historical approach that they
often have to make a special effort to see literature in more general,
more universalizing and synchronic terms. Yet this grounding in the
historical dimension of literature is a very important part of all liter­
ary study, and classicists here have a major contribution to make. To
flatten out the past into a great synchronic mush is like a perpetual
diet of hamburger or noodle casserole—nourishing, but we should at
least know that tournedos Rossini exist. Without the historical di­

ension, our sense of ourselves runs the risk of being thin and super­

icial. The philosopher George Santayana once wrote that he who is
ignorant of history is compelled to repeat it. That dictum applies both
to the past of the individual life and to the collective past of a whole
culture.
Finally, for all of our fascination—and it is a healthy and just fascination—with the theoretical issues involved in the representation of reality by art and with the methodologies of structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and affective stylistics which problematize in different ways the nature of literary discourse and the nature of our response to that discourse, we should not lose sight of the quality of pleasure which literature gives us, and we should not forget the naive delight in the experience of a text as it enlarges our sensibilities, widens our horizons, broadens the range of our emotions, and teaches or reminds us of what human life, for good or ill, is like. Plato has the rhapsode Ion thus describe his recitation of the Homeric poems: “Whenever I recite anything that moves pity, my eyes fill with tears; and whenever I recite anything fearful or terrifying, my hair stands straight up in terror, and my heart pounds” (535c).22 A. E. Housman, in his 1933 lecture The Name and Nature of Poetry, describes a similarly physiological response to poetry:

Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes.23

He continues with a third, located “in the pit of the stomach.” Some of us, as teachers or as readers, would perhaps be content even with milder reactions; but these two practitioners of literature, two thousand three hundred years apart, will perhaps serve as an example of the peculiar and mysterious coinvolvement of both heart and head, feelings and thoughts, in the experience of literature and of every other art.

Do these responses to literary works make us better? The belief in the educative and improving force of literature persists through the

22. See also Gorgias, Helen 9: poetry produces in its hearers “fearful shuddering and much-weeping pity” (φόβη περίφοβος καὶ ἔλεος πολύδακρυς).
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centuries, from Aristophanes’ *Frogs* to *Educating Rita*. Probably we
can no longer assert this principle today with the same confidence.
Housman, in his inaugural lecture as professor of Latin at University
College London, delivered in 1892, observed wryly, against the Ar­
noldian tradition of high seriousness and moral improvement: “I
never yet heard it maintained by the wildest enthusiast for Classics
that the standard of morality or even amiability is higher among
classical scholars than among men of science.”

“The classics,” he
continues a little later, “cannot be said to have succeeded altogether in
transforming and beautifying Milton’s inner nature. They did not
sweeten his naturally disagreeable temper; they did not enable him to
conduct controversy with urbanity or even with decency.”

There
are, of course, answers to Housman’s rhetorical assertions. But in any
case the idea that literature is only a toy or a leisure pastime on the one
hand or a series of intellectual games—a kind of verbal chess—on the
other is false to the content of literature as we survey the themes that
have concerned the great writers, the meditations on death, suffering,
war, love, and hope (to take but one cluster of themes) from Homer’s
*Iliad* to Saul Bellow’s *The Dean’s December*.

I
end, as a Platonist might have begun, with a definition, a sort of
operational definition of literature, a little old-fashioned perhaps, but
still serviceable:

If it [literature] doesn’t open up for you the inner life of at least one
other human being, who may be either the author or one of his fictional
creations; if it doesn’t release you for a moment from your lonely island
in the sea of the individual’s isolation; if it doesn’t inform you of some
of the resources of the human spirit, of its triumphs and frustrations, or
of its complexities, perversities, and incongruities; if it doesn’t convince
you that the inner world of the human spirit is as boundless and won­
derful as the outer world of the seven seas and the starry heavens [one
may think here of the passage I quoted from Longinus earlier]; if it
doesn’t indicate that the moral law is as important as the laws of ther­
modynamics; if it doesn’t lead you toward an insighted understanding
that, in spite of all outward and measurable differences, inwardly all
human beings are akin—if it affects you in none of these ways, then no

quotation appears on 21 (or in Housman, *Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter [Cambridge
1961] 9, 10).
matter how great its other merits of diction and form and style may be, what you have been reading is not literature.25

Or, from the poet’s point of view, and more concisely,

Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure
Eparse au vent crispé du matin
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym . . .
Et tout le reste est littérature.26
