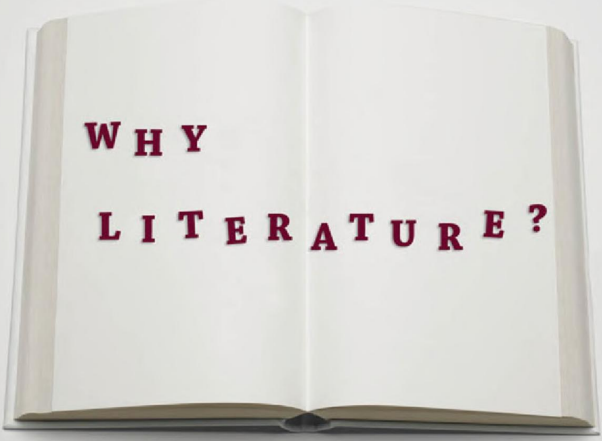
"One of the most informed and challenging books on why we should read and teach literature."
J. HILLIS MILLER



The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching

CRISTINA VISCHER BRUNS

continuum

Why Literature?

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By
Cristina Vischer Bruns

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Preface — Situating the Questioner

Why literature? In most of my years as a reader the question never occurred to me. The importance of literature was to me undeniable. From middle school onward, many of the books in whose worlds I temporarily dwelt — from *The Chronicles of Narnia* to *The Brothers Karamazov* and *King Lear* — provided experiences of such weight and power that I never doubted their significance. Certain poems I encountered in college seemed to take up residence in my mind like familiar fixtures to which I could and did repeatedly return. The process of writing papers on particular literary texts as an English major produced such moving experiences that I still consider my copies of those texts — Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, among them — to be some of my most cherished possessions. The value of reading literature was, to me, self-evident. None of my pastimes felt more valuable. So why do I raise the question?

Before giving an account of the importance of the question, Why literature?, for the profession of literary study as a whole, I want to establish its significance from my own frame of reference by briefly recounting the occasions in my life which brought me to this inquiry. Donna Haraway provides a justification of sorts for this autobiographical indulgence when she characterizes the typical approaches to the discovery and reporting of knowledge in Western academia as "ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively", what she calls "the god-trick" (191). The alternative to the god-trick, Haraway asserts, are partial, locatable, situated knowledges, not a view from nowhere but from somewhere. This project, like all works of knowledge, emerges from a particular person in a particular context and to meet a particular need. Rather than leaving those particulars unmentioned, I want to disclose them in order to make explicit the need which motivates this study and the context from which it arises.

Late in my undergraduate years, I stumbled upon another love, nearly able to rival literary reading for my affections: teaching. To satisfy a service requirement, I volunteered as a tutor at the local community college and was surprised by the joy and satisfaction I found in the role. After graduation, with a brand new B. A. in English, a desire to teach, and no credentials, I was hired by an alternative adult education project,

initially teaching employment skills to welfare recipients in downtown Chicago and later English as a Second Language in factories for their employees. Not long after taking this job, I was given a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the first and, for many years, only book I'd read on education. Under Freire's influence, I learned to see all of my students — long-term welfare recipients and immigrant factory workers — as experts in their own contexts and active contributors to the learning community of the classroom. These rather unconventional teaching environments provided me many rooms full of students with whom I could experiment on different ways to work out what I'd gleaned from Freire's book, particularly how to transfer authority for the production of course content from my shoulders alone as teacher to the students' as co-authors with me. That meant making the objective of the training — in this case, to perform well on a job — the explicit focus of the course and regularly inviting students to think with me about what knowledge and practices were necessary to accomplish that objective. Rather than serving as the sole judge and arbiter of what students needed to know or do, I sought to involve students in creating the content of the course, utilizing the knowledge of the work-world they already possessed and supplementing it with the more specialized knowledge I'd gained from employers.

During those years I also worked on a Masters degree in literature, which eventually enabled me to teach as a community college adjunct. My hope was to teach literature, and so to bring my two favorite pastimes together, but I quickly discovered that all the adjunct jobs were in composition. The seven years I spent developing and refining my own curriculum for employment training and workplace ESL proved to be invaluable experience as I faced a community college composition classroom — with no guidance beyond a short list of textbooks from which to choose. I spent most of the next ten years or so as a part-time community college instructor, developing my own approach to teaching composition by utilizing what I'd learned from Freire and from teaching in those other contexts (and not in resistance to all that's out there about composition pedagogy, but in ignorance of it). Again, I focused as best I could on sharing authority with students in courses that I attempted to construct as joint inquiries (students and me inquiring together), centered on the broad objective of producing effective written work. When asked the purpose of most writing tasks, students routinely pointed to their capacity for communication, which then became the primary criteria by which we evaluated written work. Instead of "good" writing, we focused on writing that communicated effectively. I was able to tap students' vast, though usually tacit, knowledge of communication to involve them in determining the particular criteria by which we would evaluate their written work. As much as I could, I strove to redirect their attention from

me as the sole classroom authority to their own (and each others') abilities to recognize effective written communication. Since the classroom apathy common among some of the students I taught could easily undermine the involvement in and ownership of course work necessary to produce this shift in authority, I also sought to counteract that indifference by pushing students early in a course to consider why an ability to write well matters in life and then by attempting to craft assignments that would allow them to experience that value — to experience the power of speaking their minds on paper as they hear the responses of those who read their work, their fellow students and me.

Though I thoroughly enjoyed teaching composition, I didn't forget my hope of eventually teaching literature, and this is where the problem emerged for me. How could I translate the teaching approach I'd developed over my years in composition for a literature classroom? In order to invite students to think with me about what the content of such a course should be, and in order to begin developing an effective course myself, I have to have a clear sense of the objective. What is a literature course attempting to accomplish? And, even more perplexing to me, why does it matter in life? I knew it mattered, or at least I felt it did, but that vague though deeply rooted sense of the value of reading literature seemed inadequate as a guide for my students and me in shaping a course.

My own literary education, as I recall it, offers little help with these questions. I can remember my teachers standing before us in class and speaking, but I can remember little of what any of them said.[1] What I remember most vividly is the power of many of the texts that I read in those classes. A case could be made that this is indeed the point, and that my instructors succeeded in producing a student who could make meaning from literary texts, but who is to say I hadn't developed that ability on my own. What happened in my classes seemed more often to have little connection with the powerful experiences I was having with those texts outside of class.

It would be easiest, it seems, to say that the purpose of a literary education is to enable students to read — or make meaning from — literary

1 In my senior year in college I experienced firsthand a challenge of the teaching approach by which I was taught, which may have contributed to my resistance to it. A professor of mine asked me one evening to fill in for her in one of her classes the next morning since she was suffering from laryngitis. She had thought of me since she knew I'd taken the same course with her earlier and would have my notes of her lecture to use. Honored by her request, I agreed, only to find that the notes I'd taken for that particular lecture were less than a page long. It took me approximately eighteen of the fifty minutes of class to speak those notes in as extended a form as I could manage before I dismissed her bemused students early. I had no idea what else to do with them. When she asked me to take her class a second day, I quickly declined, not wishing to relive my embarrassment.

texts, but that claim leaves unanswered a glaring question: what for? Why does it matter that someone can read a work of literature? I could make the assumption that, once my students are able to read literary texts like I can, the value of the endeavor will be self-evident for them as it has been for me. But how can I expect that a course I teach will produce students who've experienced the value of reading literature if I'm unable to conceptualize or articulate that value? Without a conception of that value, how can I ensure that what's done in my classroom fosters experiences of the value of literary reading rather than being merely tangential or, worse yet, an impediment? Instead of merely hoping for the emergence in my students of some nebulous sense of the value of literature, I'm choosing to examine these questions in the form of this project: what is the value of literary reading and how should a conception of that value influence the way we teach literature?

Introduction — the Question and Its Importance

Situating the Question

Why literature? The question is a timely one for the profession of literary study. In the past few decades as marketability and revenue production increasingly take precedence over all other considerations, scholars of the humanities and of literature specifically have faced the need to justify their work. The recent economic downturn has only added to the pressure on English departments.[1] In the words of Sheila Cavanagh, "our famous inability to market ourselves to the world at large is no longer sustainable" (132). Essential for the profession of literary study to flourish or perhaps even to survive is that we articulate more persuasively the value of the work that we do.

Of course, claims for the value of reading and studying literature — works of fiction, poetry, and drama — have been made for millennia, but critiques arising out of deconstruction, cultural studies, and other critical approaches of the past generation, have rendered untenable the assumptions of prior ages. As a result, the challenge of justifying literary study is not only a matter of persuasion but also of conception. Marjorie Perloff makes this distinction in her discussion of the apparent growing irrelevance of the humanities. She claims that solutions offered to this problem tend to construe what's needed as "just a matter of convincing those crass others, whether within the university or outside its walls, that they really need us and can use our products", but the trouble is, according to Perloff, that behind these solutions is the mistaken assumption that "we have a clear sense of what the humanities do and what makes them valuable" (2). In other words, we can't sell the public on what we do until we work out a better understanding of what it is we're doing and why what we do really matters. While the study of literature seems to undergo regular reforms attempting to correct the blind spots of previous generations, including the inclusion in recent decades of minority and underrepresented literatures, these developments have done little

1 The most recent Modern Language Association conventions of 2009 and 2011 have devoted numerous sessions to the escalating challenges facing departments of language and literature as universities attempt to address budget shortfalls.

to address the question of literature's value. According to Perloff, "... without clear-cut notions of *why* it is worthwhile to read literary texts, whether by established or marginalized writers, in the first place, the study of 'literature' becomes no more than a chore, a way of satisfying distribution requirements" (15 emphasis original).

Perloff's concern that we develop clearer ideas of why it is worthwhile to read literary texts is the objective of this book. Other scholars also share this concern, as is evident by the number of works published in the last decade on the subject of the value of literature.[2] Two distinctions set this book apart from most of these others. One is my explicit intention that the conception of literature's value that emerges from this study resonate with what's commonly called "pleasure reading", or the kind of reading experiences that more likely motivate readers to pick up a work of literature outside of school, an issue to which I'll return later in this introduction. This book's other distinction is that it treats this question ultimately as a pedagogical one. As I explained in the preface, my interest in the value of literature emerged out of my own teaching experience as I struggled to articulate for myself the purpose of a literature course. That the connection be made between our ideas about literature and what we ask of students is crucial for the relevance and effectiveness of the profession. It is, after all, in the classes we teach where we have the greatest opportunity to communicate and even enact our theories of why reading literature is worthwhile. However, evidence suggests that literature instruction may not often succeed at passing on the value of our subject.

Though some students succeed at coming away from their literature courses with an experience of the value of the texts they have read, as I did, many likely consider a literature class to be the "chore" that Perloff describes, like the college student I happened to meet at a wedding reception. He told me that he only had a few courses left before he could graduate, just "crap like literature". When I asked why literature courses were "crap", he contended that all the literature he'd read in school was just a waste of time. The much-discussed National Endowment for the Arts' report, *Reading at Risk*, which showed a marked decline in the reading of fiction and poetry among American adults, suggests that this student's experiences with literature in school are likely more typical than mine. Responsibility for the public's reading habits rests largely on

2 These include: Glenn C. Arbery's *Why Literature Matters*, Mark Edmundson's *Why Read?*, Frank Farrell's *Why Does Literature Matter?*, Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*, Gregory Jusdanis' *Fiction Agonistes: In Defense of Literature*, Mark William Roche's *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, Daniel R. Schwartz's *In Defense of Reading*, Dennis Sumara's *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*.

schools and universities as the primary locations where these practices are shaped. Writing more than ten years before the NEA study, John Guillory argues, using E. D. Hirsch's terminology, that "if Americans are 'culturally illiterate,' this fact is evidence of the educational system's failure to instill a motive for reading in a nominally literate population" (35). If teachers of literature lack an adequate conception of the value of literary reading, it is unlikely that we will be able to convey to our students why both reading and studying literature is worthwhile. The endeavor then appears to be only one academic task among many, leaving students little motivation to read literary texts outside of school. Perhaps, therefore, the lack of a conception of the value of literary reading is a factor contributing to its apparent marginalization.

While it is impossible to conclusively correlate the findings of the NEA study and an inability of literature courses to instill in students a motive for reading, some teachers of literature have long noticed evidence of inadequacies in literature instruction in their own classrooms. For these teachers, the ineffectiveness of their students' previous literature education has tended to be apparent in the hollowness of students' written work and classroom discussion of texts. According to Sheridan Blau, students in his undergraduate literature courses "behave as if they are obliged to hunt for symbols, . . . engage in perfunctory discussions of prescribed universal themes, or gratuitously compare and contrast characters, rather than address any of the issues that might illuminate a text for a reader who cares about it or account for why a text might be important or interesting or even offensive to real readers" (102).

Writing three decades before Blau, Walter Slatoff makes a remarkably similar observation about his students' dealings with texts: "Many of them learn very well how to bring methods to bear on literary works — how to talk about structures, how to trace themes and patterns of imagery . . . Very few have learned how to bring their experience to bear in such a way as to deepen the work and make it matter" (169). Slatoff's and Blau's students tend so dutifully to perform these mechanical tasks with the texts they're assigned to read, showing little evidence that a text has value for them, because they are trying their best to do with literature what they have been taught to do in their past English classes.

In describing the same kind of pointlessness in students' work that Slatoff and Blau observe, A. D. Moody, of University of York, England, makes explicit the connection between the methods of literature instruction and the work students produce. He writes, ". . . the subtext of their education, if not the overt message, tells [students] that what counts is success in examinations and that nothing succeeds so well as a skillful recycling of some expert's view, while an honest effort to make their own sense of something is unlikely to impress". Moody continues, "The sad consequence is that good students become able to discuss the meaning

of a poem without its necessarily meaning anything at all to them. Not infrequently they then reach the cynical conclusion that it is all a meaningless game, poetry and criticism alike" (98). Students' efforts to satisfy their teachers' expectations on exams or in papers preclude their own attempts to make the texts they read meaningful. As a result, according to Moody, Slatoff, and Blau, students learn to perform tasks with literature without experiencing for themselves what makes any of those tasks worthwhile. And this apparent pointlessness of literature courses may not be a phenomenon of only the recent generation. In his history of the academic profession of English, Gerald Graff observes, "By the turn of the century it was a commonplace among educators that English courses were boring or baffling students . . ." (100). The apparent inability of literature courses to instill in students a sense of the value of literature may have already been characteristic of literary study not long after its emergence as an academic field.

Not only is there a lack of an adequate conception of the value of literary reading, but the possibility that students will experience for themselves the practice as worthwhile seems often to be hampered by the mode of instruction — the spoken and unspoken expectations of teachers that constrain and over-determine what students do with a work of literature. This is why this book treats the question of literary value ultimately as a pedagogical one. Students' efforts to satisfy the expectations of their instructors can prevent them from having meaningful experiences reading texts or, at least, may prevent them from bringing into their coursework reports of the meaningful reading experiences they've had outside of class.

This disjunction between literature instruction and the academic field of literary study on one hand, and encounters with literature that readers experience as valuable on the other is worth further examination as it provides focus to this inquiry. Robert Scholes points to the professional priority on specialization as a factor contributing to this gap: "for every move toward greater specialization", he writes, "leads us away from the needs of the majority of our students and drives a larger wedge between our professional lives and our own private needs and concerns" (*Rise and Fall*, 82). When successful scholarship is characterized by increasingly narrow areas of specialization, little room remains in professional practice for attending to the larger questions that can define a field's contribution to society at large. The effect of practicing a profession without remaining mindful of its value in broader life is an inevitable split between the profession and the real needs of those whom the profession serves — both the students and the professors themselves.

A telling and rather dramatic instance of the effect of this exclusion and the split it can produce between professional concerns and private needs is the crisis in professional practice of Jane Tompkins. According to her

account in her memoir, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, it was her education that stifled her love of literature, a loss she struggled to recover later as a professor herself. After describing a childhood and youth spent striving to win approval through her academic performance, Tompkins recounts her memories of pursuing a doctorate in English literature at Yale where "the fear of not wanting to appear stupid or ill-informed was dominant and set the tone". She continues, "People were afraid to show who they really were, and most of all they were afraid to show what had drawn them to study literature in the first place. It was love that had brought us there, students and professors alike, but to listen to us talk you would never have known it" (78–79). Looking back on herself as a student, she sees "a person who was taught not to feel" (212). The banishment of feeling she experienced in graduate school promoted a climate of fear, and it also denied the very quality of literary experience that made her subject of study attractive. The fear and reticence Tompkins develops were not a response to explicit instruction, but to the hidden subtext of classroom interaction — the questions that were asked, the responses that were valued. She was shaped more by the manner of instruction than by its content, a phenomenon she claims is generalizable when she asserts, "The *format* of higher education, its mode of delivery, contains within itself the most powerful teachings students receive during their college years" (212, italics original).

Later in her career, once she'd received tenure at a top institution, Tompkins realized that she no longer needed to be driven by fears of inadequacy and allowed her long-buried feelings to return to both her life and her teaching, with dramatic results. Up to this point, her teaching, she writes, had been "a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me" (119). As she rejected that goal, what shaped her teaching instead? She writes, "The desire not to be alone in my classes led to much of what I did by way of experiment. That and the longing to be free from fear. I say that now, in retrospect; at the time I just did things, impelled by a force unnameable" (124). As she felt the freedom to risk laying aside the manner of teaching by which she was taught, all that she initially found to replace it was whatever alleviated the loneliness and fear of her past. And this provided little direction for the teaching of literature, as she acknowledges: "It was as if, given the opportunity to choose between literature and life, or rather, between literature and each other, we chose each other. The class never did learn how to discuss a literary text, though we fell into a habit of reading poetry aloud from time to time" (143). Tompkins rejected the professional practices that preclude meaningful, personal reading experiences, and then struggled to reorient her teaching around the emotional attachment to literary reading that drew her to the profession in the first place.

Not many have responded in the rather drastic manner Tompkins did to the incongruity between the expectations of a literary education and the ways of reading that make the practice both attractive and meaningful, but her case offers an illuminating picture of this peculiar challenge of literary education: teaching in a systematic and academically rigorous way a subject (or a practice) that feels most worthwhile when it takes a deeply personal form. Contributing to this incongruity are instructors' assumptions about the value of literary reading that remain implicit and unexamined, and so are not available to inform the development of instructional methods more conducive to instilling in students a motive for reading. While most teachers likely intend for their students to learn to enjoy literature, the lack of an adequate conception of the value of literary reading may indeed contribute to a preponderance of instructional methods that tend to undermine students' abilities to have experiences with literature whose worth is apparent to them. This study seeks to examine and make explicit the value of the literary reading that avid readers like Tompkins find personally meaningful so that it can serve as a guide for instruction. In this way I hope to begin remedying the split between the academic and the personal.

However it is not only the lack of a conception of literary value that hinders students' opportunities to experience literary reading as worthwhile, but also the scholarly approaches taken toward texts in recent decades which constrain those encounters. Rita Felski points to a source of this problem when she claims, ". . . the current canon of theory yields a paucity of rationales for attending to literary objects" (2), later adding, "our language of critique is far more sophisticated and substantial than our language of justification" (22). An outcome of the current direction of theory in academic literary study is a diminished role for literature, a role Frank Farrell describes as "impoverished". He writes, "To read widely in academic literary criticism of recent decades (that written from 1970 to 2000) is to wonder why literature matters at all" (1). While unquestionably important, the work of deconstruction and cultural criticism leads to an unfortunate result. In Farrell's words, ". . . the arrangements of the literary text itself, the precise way the author has placed particular words in a particular order, seem to lose their importance" (1). According to Farrell's assessment, literature, as it is written about in academic circles, bears little resemblance to the books I and many other readers have found so significant in our lives. With academic criticism's focus on the ways texts are implicated in structures of power or on the undecidability of the meaning of language, the role accorded literary texts in many of these writings does not fit with the reading experiences of those who love literature, those for whom literary reading is of great personal importance. And as these approaches to texts shape what is said and done in literature classrooms, students are further prevented from discovering for

themselves "the good of literature". Along with the instructional methods of several generations, the critical approaches dominant in academic literary study in recent decades seem to have little connection to the value many experience in reading literary texts.

The career turn of another well-known literary critic (and, interestingly, a former colleague of Jane Tompkins) serves as an especially vivid instance of the dichotomy between personally meaningful reading experiences and the dominant critical approaches to texts. In his well-known essay, "The Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic", Frank Lentricchia explains his choice to abandon the professional practices that brought him success as a literary critic out of frustration at what he considers to be the double life he led. Publicly, as an influential "historian and polemicist of literary theory", he spoke about literature as "a political instrument", but in contrast he describes a secret life in which his "silent encounters with literature are ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport" (59). Why did Lentricchia feel that he needed to keep his powerful, personal experiences of reading a secret? He doesn't explore that question except to say, "When I grew up and became a literary critic, I learned to keep silent about the reading experiences of liberation that I'd enjoyed since childhood" (63–64). Lentricchia assumes that the form of literary criticism he learned to practice was incompatible with the form of reading he had loved since childhood, and so the two remained disconnected for him. But rather than allowing his personal reading experiences to cause him to question the dominant critical assumptions about the nature and function of texts, Lentricchia claims he is abandoning professional criticism for personal reading. Because his graduate students have followed the scholarly trend of denying the attraction of reading, Lentricchia says, "I gave up teaching graduate students. I escaped into the undergraduate classroom — in other words, slipped happily underground in order to talk to people who, like me, need to read great literature just as much as they need to eat" (64).[3] In Lentricchia's essay, the dissonance between literary texts as objects for critique and literary texts as sources of deep personal significance could hardly be more blatant, and it remains unresolved and relatively unexamined.

Without a conception of the value of literary reading capable of accounting for personal reading experiences like Lentricchia's and thereby challenging or supplementing the dominant critical approaches of recent decades, he sees no alternative to abandoning professional criticism entirely as if it was necessarily opposed to ways of reading that feel

3 The difference between Lentricchia's characterization of his undergraduate students and how Blau, Slatoff, and Moody describe theirs raises questions not only about varieties of student readers, but also about instructors' perspectives of students' experience.

personally valuable. Like Tompkins, Lentricchia rejected the professional practices that can threaten a love of literary reading, though, in his case, not how he taught but whom. In these writings neither Tompkins nor Lentricchia have found a way to integrate the reader and the critic or the reader and the professor. But can't we use the personal to inform the professional? What might Lentricchia's personal reading experiences imply about how literary texts work and toward what effect? What would Tompkins' moving and meaningful encounters with literature suggest for a literary education — what it should seek to accomplish and by what means? These are the questions I want to take up in this study.

Narrowing the Question

The professional crises of Lentricchia and Tompkins serve as illustrative focal points for my inquiry. The benefits of a practice like literary reading are certainly innumerable and widely varied, including, in fact, the importance of the knowledge of human interactions produced by reading literary texts in order to make visible the usually hidden workings of cultural and political power or to demonstrate the indeterminability of language. But this is not the type of value that interests me because this is not what typically motivates readers to pick up a book outside of school, nor is this the type of value that provokes the powerful attachments to certain literary works to which many readers attest. The type of value in literary reading that is my concern is that which Tompkins and Lentricchia sought to regain by their rather atypical professional choices. What is the good of literary reading (and I'm making the assumption that there is one) that is capable of evoking the attraction or compulsion that produces a need to read literature that feels to Lentricchia and his undergraduates like the need to eat? What is the good of literary reading that generates the great love of literature that I've experienced?

Philip Davis offers a memorable description of this kind of interaction with texts as he explains the type of reader that is his concern in his 1992 book, *The Experience of Reading*:

> Not Art for Art's sake, said Lawrence in a letter, but Art for *my* sake. "Reading as if for life", said Dickens of his poor boy David Copperfield. And as it is with these writers, so with the serious reader whom I have in mind. For that is what I am after: the idea of a reader who takes books personally — as if what the book describes had really happened to him or to her, as if the book meant as much to the reader as it had in the mind of the writer behind it.
>
> (22)

Might it be possible to establish a conception of the function of literary reading that renders these personally meaningful reading experiences as

significant as they feel? It is this type of value that is capable of setting literary texts apart from other types of texts, a function they serve that other kinds of texts tend not to. It is this type of value that can provide a rationale for sustaining and encouraging the practice of reading literature, that can diminish the conflict between academic literary study and more personally oriented reading, and that can give literature education a greater possibility of fostering in students meaningful encounters with texts that will inspire life-long reading.

The personal significance of encounters with texts has received little acknowledgement in academic circles, perhaps because this aspect of reading seems more self-indulgent than rigorous. While it does apparently ignore the constructedness of texts and the slipperiness of language, reading "for *my* sake" still carries the potential for significant broader social contribution and plays a role in intellectual advances. Self-interest, social good, and intellectual rigor, in this case, need not be considered mutually exclusive. The apparent conflict between the personal, the social and the intellectual underlies the sharp contradiction Frank Farrell points out between conclusions drawn from the work of some figures influential in cultural theory and the motivations that produced such work. In order to more effectively capture Farrell's argument, I will quote him at length:

> More generally, the cultural studies theorist does not see how complicated the process is by which ideas develop and circulate that lead eventually to radical critiques of our forms of life. The recommendation is that we read and write with an awareness of how we are thereby supporting or resisting the role of representations in socially unjust practices. But consider how many of the ideas of cultural studies derived from Foucault and ultimately from Nietzsche. Yet Nietzsche was concerned in his reading and writing with textual energies closely associated with issues of self-formation, of private fears and archaic anxieties, of an aesthetics of self-making that could style itself as healthy and vital. He did reflect on and intervene in systems of social power and subject formation, as in his critique of Christian morality and its sense of innerness. But he did this not to increase the flow of representations less favorable, say, to sexism and colonialisms, but rather to understand his own unhappiness, and his own self-formational needs, as culturally symbolic. A cultural studies theorist placed back in his day would have found him to be considering literature and art in an elitist manner, unconcerned with the marginalizing of the poor. Yet that was the manner in which emerged many ideas that cultural studies as a field finds significant. Another case is that of Melville, whose deeply personal, anxiety-driven meditations on his culture, because of powerful archaic materials in his patterns of self-formation, ultimately led to a richer

> critique of the patriarchy and subject formation of his time than did other works that intervened more obviously in public ethical debates. For someone interested in how representations circulate in culture, the cultural studies theorist has an astonishingly impoverished view of how representations emerge that will prove useful to ethical criticism. In teaching students to make only the more direct political readings one may be eliminating the future Nietzsches or Melvilles who might contribute novel ideas to cultural criticism in the future.
>
> (154)

In the cases of Nietszche and Melville, Farrell contends that significant advances in social and cultural theory stemmed not from projects intentionally designed to intervene in public debates but from personally motivated reading and writing, reading and writing that is closer to what Davis describes as a search for "powerfully private moments of echo" (*Experience*, 38), driven by a need more like the need to eat in Lentricchia's comparison, as if one's life depended on it. Farrell then draws a necessary but challenging conclusion: that in emphasizing the political to the exclusion of the personal, teachers may prevent students from performing the kinds of reading and writing that can potentially produce such original contributions.

It is my intention through this project to arrive at an understanding of the value of reading literature that is capable of accounting for these kinds of personally significant experiences with literary texts. In what follows I will examine others' attempts to articulate a conception of literary value, including Farrell's, in order to begin to see what can be said about the value of reading that is unique to literary texts, the benefit of literary reading that is capable of making the endeavor so deeply and personally attractive to many. Following that inquiry, I will return to the question of pedagogy. By working out the implications for our teaching that emerge from the resulting conception of the value of literary reading, I will address the gap scholars like Tompkins, Blau, Slatoff, and Moody recognize between what tends to happen in literature classrooms and the kinds of experiences with literary texts students might consider valuable. By these means I hope both to remedy this need within the profession and to bring some resolution to my own persistent pedagogical question that has arisen out of my teaching experience.

1 Why Read Literature?

The question of literature's value is hardly a new one. Plato himself considered poetry to be in need of defense if it was to be allowed in his republic. Writing several centuries after Plato, Horace provides the terms for the value of poetry that would remain dominant for centuries: that it instructs its readers as well as delights them. The seemingly natural union of moral teaching and pleasure that Horace attributed to literary works, as did generations of critics who followed him, no longer so easily holds together for most who take on the question in recent decades. Conceptions of literature's value put forward today either tend to theorize the good literary reading accomplishes in ways that overlook the nature of pleasurable or satisfying reading experiences, or they tend to articulate aspects of literary pleasures without providing an understanding of the benefit of such experiences, and some benefit is required to justify the practice of literary reading as a human endeavor worth preserving. In this chapter I will examine some recent contributions to the question of the value of literature that exhibit one or the other of these tendencies, and I will then incorporate some additional perspectives on the matter that, I think, together can account for the human benefit of literary reading in a way congruous with the deep satisfactions the practice provides.

Literary Reading as Instructive

A common attempt to justify literature's place as an academic subject is to list skills widely recognized as necessary in today's world that can be developed through reading and writing about texts — skills of interpretation, problem solving, oral and written communication, evidence-based argument, and the ubiquitous critical thinking. While making sense of a literary text even outside of school indeed requires important abilities like making inferences or drawing conclusions, other kinds of texts do as well, so this justification does little to ensure literature's place either in schools or in society. More promising is another common claim: that learning to read literature helps us to read the world around us.

A version of this view is developed in a sophisticated and intriguing way in Lisa Zunshine's book, *Why We Read Fiction*. Drawing on a recent area of research in cognitive psychology called Theory of Mind, Zunshine asserts that reading fiction engages and exercises two broad mental faculties that are essential for social functioning. First is our ability to explain

people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, or beliefs — to recognize the mind behind the action — and second is our ability to keep track of the source of what we are told even through several levels of "embedment" (as in, "She said that he said that you thought . . ."). Making sense of the human world around us requires both of these skills in order to recognize the likely meanings of actions and to identify the reliability of the sources of representations. Reading fiction involves both with varying levels of complexity and so stimulates their use, prompting Zunshine to call one of her chapters, "Why Is Reading a Detective Story a Lot like Lifting Weights at the Gym?" (123). Yet the impulse to pick up a good book may seem quite different than the typical motivation to begin a session of vigorous exercise. Zunshine accounts for the pull of reading, in spite or perhaps because of its calisthenic nature in her view, by claiming that humans crave the kind of social engagement that fiction mimics or represents. For Zunshine, ". . . the novel feeds the powerful, representation-hungry complex of cognitive adaptations whose very condition of being is a constant social stimulation . . ." (10). In other words, literary reading brings pleasure because humans need and enjoy the engagement of these cognitive faculties.

However, this view of literature's value seems not to account fully for some readers' interactions with texts, like those described by Farrell, Davis, and Lentricchia as mentioned in the introduction. Does the claim that humans crave this sort of cognitive stimulation sufficiently explain the attraction of literary reading? Using as illustration reading experiences with which I'm most familiar — my own — I do indeed use the skills Zunshine describes as I read, but overwhelmingly the satisfactions which I relish do not seem focused on those activities but on the experiences they help bring about. What grabs hold of me and stays with me is depth of the loss and regret in *King Lear*, or the growing contentment of the protagonist in the second half of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, or the shock of sudden death in a Flannery O'Connor story, as I experience them while I read. Zunshine not only acknowledges this objection but articulates it herself by means of a hypothetical reader who complains that Theory of Mind does not capture the "instant recognition and heartache" that can be such an important part of one's interaction with a novel (163). Zunshine's response to this complaint is to contend that Theory of Mind encompasses much more than just the few cognitive faculties she has discussed, and that "we are at present a long way off from grasping fully the levels of complexity this engagement entails" (164). She is persuaded that, as this area of cognitive psychology continues to develop, all aspects of a reading experience will eventually be explained by it. While Zunshine is forthright in acknowledging this objection to her position, her perhaps overly optimistic rejoinder points to a potential gap in this view, and it illustrates the first of the two tendencies of recent conceptions of literary value. Theory

of Mind succeeds at providing justification for the practice of literary reading as a beneficial means of stimulating crucial social competencies, but that justification in its current form does not sufficiently resonate with the attachment many readers describe for literature. Based on my own interactions with texts, these cognitive skills are a means toward the literary experiences from which I derive a deep sort of pleasure rather than the source themselves of pleasure.

In another conception of the value of literary reading that emphasizes its capacity for instruction or improvement, literature serves as a potential source of values, perspectives, or ways of living that may be better than one's own or those available in present society.[1] An example of this approach is Mark Edmundson's book, *Why Read?*, one of the only recent contributions to the question located explicitly in the context of teaching. Edmundson advocates teaching students to read literature for "truth" because for many people, in his words, "the truth — the circle, the vision of experience — that they've encountered through socialization is inadequate. It doesn't put them into a satisfying relation to experience" (52). The "best repository" for this non-objectivist type of truth, for "better ways to apprehend the world", are the works of poets, novelists, painters, and composers (52). Thus, for Edmundson, the goal of interpreting literary works is to bring forth "the philosophy of life" latent in them (77), and the truth of a work or its value for a reader can be ascertained by asking of it questions like: "Can you live it? Can you put it into action? Can you speak — or adapt — the language of this work, use it to talk to both yourself and others so as to live better? . . . Can it make a difference?" (56). Edmundson's position does indeed make literature matter by giving it an important use in instruction for life, yet it calls for an approach to texts that is tangential to typical ways of reading for pleasure, requiring much additional work of analysis and reflection in order to identify how or whether a literary work might be "lived". This kind of activity may produce a meaningful intellectual engagement with a text, but the experience of, say, undergoing with Odysseus the relief of his long-awaited reunion with Penelope carries value then mainly as it informs the philosophy of life one might draw from the epic. In this case valuing literature for its instructive capacity seems to leave its potential for delight in a subordinate role. For other scholars, however, the delight or pleasure of literary reading alone is sufficient justification of the practice.

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1 This is also perhaps an overly simplified version of Mark William Roche's position, that literature in its best instances offers "a window onto the absolute," or "onto an ideal sphere," and through this capacity authors and critics alike can "help readers reach the fullness of value inherent in them as persons" (259). However, a conception of literature's value premised on objective idealism raises many questions in the current intellectual climate.

Literary Reading as a Source of Pleasure

Those who focus almost exclusively on the pleasure of reading literature in recent years seem to do so in explicit resistance to the turn in literary study toward the political. Robert Alter's book, *The Pleasure of Reading in an Ideological Age*, is a clear instance of this. Alter challenges the direction of contemporary literary studies which, he claims, makes literature "seem chiefly a battleground of politics" by offering his readers "a systematic invitation to recall again the particular gratifications of the experience of literature" (4), characterizing literature as "high fun" (30). Marjorie Perloff is another who is troubled by the turn in the field away from the literary and toward political concerns. In her essay on the crisis in the humanities, she does not explicitly propose a response to the question of the good of literary reading, but she does suggest a motivation for the practice that, she claims, will return training in reading literature to favor. That motivation? She writes, "Such study, I believe, will come back into favor for the simple reason that, try as one may, one cannot eliminate the sheer jouissance or pleasure of the text" (17). In other words, according to Perloff, the pleasure produced by literary reading will ensure that the decline in this area of study will not continue unabated. And that pleasure seems to be the ultimate good Perloff attributes to literature, according to a statement she made in an interview published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. To explain a key difference between her views on poetry and those of Helen Vendler, the subject of the interview, Perloff said, "I don't think art makes one a better person, that literature teaches you the meaning of life. But the sheer pleasure of the text — the sheer joy in all the different values of literature, fictive or poetic — these are the greatest things" (McLemee, A16). For Perloff, the "sheer joy" of literary texts is sufficient justification for their reading and study. Though Alter's perspective on literature and Perloff's are far from identical, both leave me with the same glaring question. How might they delineate the value of the pleasure of the text or the high fun of literature? Without an understanding of the ultimate good of this kind of pleasure, literary reading appears to be little more than a self-indulgent pastime.

Denis Donoghue also appeals to the pleasure of literary reading as the motivation for its practice and as capable of reversing its decline, but his conception of the source of that pleasure goes further than Perloff's toward articulating its value. In his book, *The Practice of Reading*, Donoghue writes, "The pleasure of reading literature arises from the exercise of one's imagination, a going out from one's self toward other lives, other forms of life, past, present, and perhaps future. This denotes its relation to sympathy, fellowship, the spirituality and morality of being human" (75). For Donoghue literary reading brings the reader pleasure because it involves the exercise of her imagination in a way that draws her toward other lives. It is unclear whether Donoghue would locate the source of

the reader's sense of pleasure in the use of imagination itself or in the movement toward others that the text makes possible or perhaps in both. But he does make explicit that it is this exercise of imagination with its connection to the spiritual and moral realms, not the pleasure itself that is the good of literary reading, which, like the other arts, he claims, "should provoke me to imagine what it would mean to have a life different from my own" (56). For him this imaginative activity is somehow pleasurable, and this pleasure can motivate the practice of literary reading. But why might we find such pleasure in imagining that we are different?

C. S. Lewis wrote in a prior and very different generation of literary scholarship, but his reflections on the value of literary reading offer some insight into Donoghue's claims — though they predate them — and so they are worth another look. Unlike Donoghue, Lewis considers the pleasure of literary reading to be a good separate from that of imagining being different, rather than arising from it. Pleasure, for Lewis, derives from the form of a text, a text as *Poiema* or something made, appreciating a text as a carefully constructed object of art (132), a sentiment Perloff might share though the two likely appreciate very different sorts of literary objects. But Lewis considers pleasure alone insufficient explanation for the good of literary reading. It is in the content of the literary text, the text as *Logos* (something said), that Lewis locates another good, perhaps for him the primary good of literary reading, and it is here that his comments intersect with and potentially inform Donoghue's. Making allowance for the overly tidy distinction Lewis seems to draw between the form and the content of a text, what is the good Lewis proposes of reading what literature says? In words remarkably similar to Donoghue's, Lewis writes, "The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself . . . we want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own" (137). According to both Lewis and Donoghue, we read literature in order to move beyond ourselves, to enter into others' perspectives, but Lewis adds that our search for "an enlargement of our being" is a fundamental human impulse, "to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness" (138). In a particularly pithy summary, Lewis writes, "Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality" (140). In other words, we can share in other lives through reading literature without losing a sense of our own separateness. So "a going out from one's self toward other lives" through literary reading may be a source of pleasure, as Donoghue claims, because it is a means to ease loneliness, to experience a sense of connection with others different from ourselves without the risk of a threat to our own individuality.

This conception of the pleasure of literary reading as an outcome of literature's capacity to facilitate an experience of other lives may certainly be more convincing as a rationale in light of the real world challenges we face than is Perloff's conception of literary pleasure as an apparent end in itself. As human society becomes increasingly more global, it seems that a pervasive sense of alienation grows as well, making any practice that might ease loneliness appealing in its provision of comfort. But justifying an academic subject or even just a human practice on the basis of the pleasure it offers — whether that pleasure derives from an appreciation of an elaborately crafted object or from an experience of a connection with other lives — may be a futile endeavor in the face of so many competing pleasures made possible by newly available technologies. If the reading of fiction, poetry, and drama is in decline, it is accompanied by dramatic growth in visually oriented forms of fiction, especially movies and video games, themselves sources of such pleasure that they are widely considered worth the investment of much time and money. It seems that literary pleasure can't currently compete, leaving it as an insufficient rationale for the reading and study of literature.

There is another problem with basing the value of literary reading on the pleasure it provides: encounters with some works of literature affect some readers in ways much more complex than the term "pleasure" can encompass. In explaining why he has chosen to abandon his professional practice of literary criticism for his private love of reading literature, Frank Lentricchia relates his feelings for the literary texts he calls "the real thing", the books that he experiences as deeply affecting. He writes, "I confess to never having been able to get enough of the real thing. I worry incessantly about using up my stash and spending the last years of my life in gloom, having long ago mainlined all the great, veil-piercing books. Great *because* veil-piercing" (63, italics original). Lentricchia's allusions to drug use — using up his "stash" and "mainlin[ing]" books — certainly convey a type of pleasure derived from texts. Yet his description of his relationship with literature reaches beyond Alter's "high fun", for instance. A "fix" for an addict feels less like the pleasure of some elaborate and enjoyable game, and more like the pleasure of breathing, something upon which his very survival seems to depend. And Lentricchia's repeated phrase "veil-piercing", while pointing to a gain in insight that might appeal to many, conveys a force that feels more painful than pleasurable. (A "piercing" of any kind is not comfortable to experience or observe.) For Lentricchia, the reader, literary reading provides not simple pleasure but an unsettling or stripping form of vision or insight into other lives and other worlds, which he nevertheless craves. Literature can disrupt and disturb as well as delight. Not only does an emphasis solely on the pleasure of literary reading seemingly ignore the painful events captured in many texts (something Alter himself acknowledges),

when an instance of language use is written rather than spoken, its levels of distanciation multiply as it takes on a fundamental autonomy which Ricoeur describes as threefold: "with respect to the intention of the author; with respect to the cultural situation and all the sociological conditions of the production of the text; and finally, with respect to the original addressee" (*Text*, 298). Although still shaped by its original conditions, a piece of writing is in this way freed from them as it can be picked up and read by anyone from any time or place who runs across it. That text will necessarily be "distant" from its reader. As Ricoeur observes, ". . . distanciation is not the product of methodology and hence something superfluous and parasitical; rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing" (*Text*, 84). Distance or alienation can therefore be recognized as "not only what understanding must overcome but also what conditions it", suggesting "a relation between *objectification* and *interpretation* which is much less dichotomous, and consequently much more complementary, than that established by the Romantic tradition" (*Text*, 84), and, I might add, than the "aporia" J. Hillis Miller construes between "innocent" and "critical" reading. According to Ricoeur, "The emancipation of the text constitutes the most fundamental condition for the recognition of a critical instance at the heart of interpretation; for distanciation now belongs to the mediation itself" (*Text*, 298). Because a text, by its very constitution, meets its reader at a distance, overcoming that distance in the process of interpreting the text necessarily requires the critical, analytic mode of explanation. There is never a reception of a text that doesn't entail distanciation. In other words, every reading of a text necessarily involves some critical or reflective activity on the part of the reader.

My own experience of reading aloud to my two children has illustrated for me what Ricoeur has demonstrated so convincingly in theory. The differences I've observed between the three of us as readers make visible the role of critical activity in every act of reading and also point to differences in our awareness of that activity according the abilities and proclivities of readers. The distance Ricoeur identifies as conditioning every text has tended to remain invisible in many of the reading experiences of my older child, Ian, and myself, but it is apparent in my daughter Anna's interactions with the books I read aloud to them. Our reading of the *Harry Potter* series can serve as an example. For me, an experienced reader, these books have proved to be easily engaging, allowing me to dwell temporarily in this imaginary world of which I've admittedly grown very fond, requiring from me almost no attention to the work of decoding words on paper and constructing from them a meaning as the world and the story unfold effortlessly before me. My son, likewise, even as young as three or four, has been able to create without apparent effort a very real world from the words I've read aloud to him. A scene from the first of the Harry Potter books, which he encountered solely through my reading to him

as a six-year-old, took shape sufficiently in his imagination to become, regrettably, part of his nightmares. A few years later, as I read an especially suspenseful scene from one of the later books, I will never forget him literally leaping around the room from the intensity of the experience. He "saw" and lived the world of the text as I read it.

My daughter, on the other hand, has been a very different "listener" to books. Although she also considers herself a fan of the Harry Potter stories, it's the movies she initially enjoyed most. Even as a ten- or eleven-year-old, she often remained either only marginally engaged as I read aloud or required frequent pauses in my reading in order that I explain what's going on in the book. Although Anna is an exceptionally bright student, who, for instance, solves complicated math problems in her head for fun, the questions she asked as I read aloud showed that she was not easily able to make the inferences required by literary texts, even ones as relatively "simple" as the Harry Potter books. The gaps in the text that Ian was able to fill without effort even as a very young child were a challenge for Anna, limiting her ability to construct a world from the words I read aloud. The critical activity involved in crossing the distance that is the condition of written text required for Anna much effort. I could help her overcome that distance by periodically returning the text to an event of communication in the present — where I became the speaker addressing her, the audience, in the moment, catching her up on what's going on in the story. It was not that Ian and I need not undertake such critical activities in our reading acts; it was just that for us they were not effortful like they were for Anna and so they were easy to overlook. (Here one might ask if a reading move can still be considered critical when it is effortless or automatic. Regardless of the reader's awareness or effort, a distance must be crossed for a text to mean anything to a reader. The crossing of that distance, however the reader manages it, is my focus here.)

For Anna what was effort-full in reading has gradually become effortless with continued practice. She could be found laughing her way through some chapter books written at a lower level (the Junie B. Jones series for instance), clearly enjoying the world she was able to create from them, and more recently her own reading of the Harry Potter books has finally surpassed the movies as moving and satisfying experiences in a story world. The nature of effortless reading experiences for Ian continued to expand as well. While listening to me read has long been easy for him, reading the words on the page himself had felt like work until around the time he turned thirteen. After we finished reading the sixth of the Harry Potter books together, he reread on his own the whole series and announced that when the last of the books was finally published he wanted to read it himself. Decoding the words on the page had finally become effortless enough for him that he knew he would be impatient waiting for me to speak the words that he can read more quickly himself.

While all acts of reading require the crossing of distance, I have recognized from my experience reading with my children that the effort involved in that critical or reflective activity will vary considerably among readers according to their individual levels of expertise and, perhaps, inclinations or habits of mind. The effort required of readers to accomplish such activity will also evolve with exposure and practice. As teachers, it can be costly to assume that the process of constructing a world from a text is or should be uniform for all readers.

To return briefly to Ricoeur, there are two other important levels of distanciation that he locates in literary reading. Both of these have to do with his conception of the meaning that a literary text produces — a conception remarkably consistent with the claims of many of the theorists I've discussed thus far regarding the nature of literary reading. For Ricoeur the meaning that a reader seeks from a text is not "an intention hidden behind the text", as in what the author originally meant, but rather is "a world unfolded in front of [the text]" (*Text*, 300), a "world" that is "the ensemble of references opened up by the text" (*Interpretation*, 36). Thus, according to Ricoeur (and in reference to Heidegger), ". . . what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a 'pro-ject,' that is, the outline of a new way of being in the world" (*Interpretation*, 37). The task of reading a literary text is therefore "to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front* of the text", drawing forth a "proposed world" that the reader can "inhabit" (*Text*, 86, italics original).

It is this world or way of being in the world proposed by a text that calls for the two additional forms of distanciation that Ricoeur describes. Inhabiting the possible world of a text means setting oneself temporarily at a distance from one's everyday reality, a distance that yields an important opportunity for critique of that reality. This is one way that interpretation of texts "turns toward the critique of ideology" (*Text*, 300), which Ricoeur originally located in the hermeneutic of suspicion. This level of distanciation makes possible the interrogation of one's everyday world from the place of an alternative world which one inhabits temporarily by means of the text.

A similar kind of distanciation becomes possible toward one's self, as well, as a means of advancing self-understanding. In words that recall Gabriele Schwab's reference to the "derealization" of oneself in literary reading, which I mentioned early in this chapter, Ricoeur explains, ". . . just as the world of the text is real only insofar as it is imaginary, so too it must be said that the subjectivity of the reader comes to itself only insofar as it is placed in suspense, unrealized, potentialized . . .. The metamorphosis of the world in play is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego" (*Text*, 300). The possibility of this distanciation of the self from itself within the act of reading further emphasizes the inseparability of explanation from understanding or critique from receptivity. For Ricoeur

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