
The Moral and the Aesthetical

Literary Study and the Social Order

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Determining how literary study relates to the social order has occupied the best minds at least since Plato excluded poets from his ideal republic. The subject has been so thoroughly aired that it seems difficult, in Samuel Johnson's phrase, to say anything new about it that is true, or true about it that is new. Plausible arguments contend that the study of literature is a civilizing influence that nurtures good citizenship by providing instruction and models in compassion, justice, and the moral law. But forceful arguments also contend that engagement with literature is primarily an aesthetic experience having no direct practical consequences for civil affairs. After centuries of consideration, the matter still defies resolution. But because it is perennially relevant, each age grapples with it in the context of its own views regarding the nature of literature and the ideals of society. My purpose in what follows is to survey some significant recent contributions to this endless debate over what literary study can or should do to promote the civic good and offer some observations concerning the debate and the direction it should take in the future.

The question of the moral and social effects of literary study is so knotty that even people who have made a career of teaching literature sometimes reverse their beliefs concerning the effects of the study of literature upon human conduct. For example, Peter Thorpe explains in *Why Literature Is Bad for You* why he, as a professor of literature, became disillusioned with his former belief in the edifying consequences of literary study. "For years,"

he says, "I believed that if a person lived with great books he would be a better specimen of humanity—more mature, aware, happy, tolerant, kind, and honest. But I'm not a believer anymore" (vii). His approach is to examine the behavior of people who devote large portions of their life to literary study—writers, students, critics, and particularly professors. His conclusions are these: "That literary art, instead of making us more mature, has a subtle way of guiding us into a new immaturity. That the great books, instead of endowing us with more awareness of the cosmos and the human condition, put the blinders on. That instead of showing us the way to happiness, literature moves us toward gloom. That it fogs our minds, instead of enabling us to think more clearly. And finally, that instead of improving our ability to communicate, it keeps us from getting through to each other" (xii). These are controversial assertions, of course, and his evidence, although extensive, is unlikely to be widely persuasive. But I must admit that having associated closely with literature professors for thirty years, I find that much of Thorpe's characterization of them rings painfully true. Obviously, studying the best literature does not, in itself, produce the best people.

A more significant example is the case of Lionel Trilling, one of the most distinguished literary intellectuals of his age. He began his career with a published doctoral dissertation on Matthew Arnold in 1939, a book that has never been out of print. Arnold is a giant figure among those convinced of the edifying effects of literary study, and Trilling was strongly influenced by Arnold, who said, "It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life—to the question: How to live" (478). This notion of literature as a criticism of life is apparent in the preface to Trilling's famous collection of essays *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), in which he suggests that in the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, "literature has unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself upon politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty." Yet, in teaching a renowned course in modern literature for many years at Columbia University, Trilling gradually became disturbed that modern literature provides

so few examples of literature promoting moral good. With its emphasis on the self in an adversary relationship to society, modern literature seems to question civilization itself. This alarmed Trilling because, from his secular perspective, the social relationship is the only source of obligation and authority. Increasingly his Arnoldian faith in literature as a social stabilizer was subject to some very hard tests, and his work during the fifteen years preceding his death in 1975 can be read as a transcript of discomforts occasioned by an actively radical literature in a mind for which the idea of society was of ultimate concern. He faced the dilemma of reconciling two divergent convictions. First, that great literature benefits man individually and socially by stimulating and extending his moral imagination and enlarging his awareness of his necessary connection with his fellows. Second, that modern literature, though possessing genius, has divorced morality from imagination and denied the validity of the social connection, and consequently may be harmful.

“Anti-hygienic effect of bad serious art.”

As early as the 1950s, he had remarked in an aside that “No one has yet paid attention to the anti-catharsis, the generally anti-hygienic effect of bad serious art, the stimulation it gives to all one’s neurotic tendencies, the literal, physically-felt depression it induces” (*Gathering* 99). His doubts about the edifying effects of art grew during his final years, and he found himself asking “whether that wonderful Victorian confidence in the educative, moralizing power of art has been justified or if it can be accepted simply and without qualification” (“Sincerity and Authenticity” 105). “What is the basis of our society’s belief that art is so important?” he asked. “What do we expect of it? Only good, it seems. I am quite open to the idea that art can produce bad effects as well as good ones, even that what might be called good art can produce bad effects. . . . I would like to hear why, apart from its usefulness as entertainment, art should be supported” (Qtd. in Chace 52-53).

Frank Lentricchia provides a different kind of example. After earning a reputation as an historian and polemicist of literary theory who spoke passionately about literature as a political instrument, Lentricchia wrote “Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic” for *Lingua Franca* (1996), in which he explains that when his book *Criticism and Social Change* appeared in 1983, he was convinced that “a literary critic, as a literary critic, could

be an agent for social transformation" (60). He confesses that he has now mostly given up reading literary criticism because much of it is no longer literary, and he has reverted to the pleasures of reading that brought him to literary study in the first place, heeding "the repressed but unshakable conviction that the study of literature serves no socially valued purpose" (65). This was a startling turnabout for the man once labeled "the Dirty Harry of literary theory."

*Much literary criticism
"no longer
literary."*

Stanley Fish is another scholar-critic who, if not reversing himself in the same way as the three men just mentioned, has certainly modulated his opinions in striking ways. In fact, he has made a career of going against the grain of accepted literary opinion, adroitly dancing along the line between brilliance and self-serving notoriety—between being provocative and being dismissed. Occasional missteps—like claiming that his criticism need not be true, only interesting—have toppled him into heated controversy. In *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (1995) his targets are social constructionism, interdisciplinary studies, cultural studies, new historicism—in short, literary studies intended to produce social-political change. His thesis in a nutshell is that academic work is one thing and political work quite another. He acknowledges that in centuries past literature contributed "to civic harmony and public aspiration, guidance to princes and generals, education of children of the ruling class," and the inculcation of religious sentiments. But in our time, he insists, literary activity is deprived of a role in government and commerce and instead is "increasingly pursued in the academy where proficiency is measured by academic standards and rewarded by the gatekeepers of an academic guild." His name for this is professionalization, a form of organization requiring special training, its members bound together "because they perform the same 'moves' in the same 'game'" (32).

One of his main arguments is that general conditions in American society prevent it from paying attention to what goes on in literary and cultural studies: "Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, the conversation that takes place within the humanistic academy and the conversation that leads to legislative and administrative action remain segregated from one another" (60-61). He believes that the prominent exposure of certain literary theorists (probably himself included) in regard to such things as

deconstruction and political correctness is not evidence that the public takes them seriously. It is evidence that it does not (65). He contends, in fact, that “the language of literary theory is not subversive, but irrelevant: *it cannot be heard* except as the alien murmurings of a galaxy far away,” and thus the relationship between literary study and the production of civic virtue “is thin to the vanishing point” (91, 32). Under these circumstances no revisionary interpretation of a literary text, regardless of how politically oriented it might be, will make a practical political difference. He frequently reiterates the point that literary study is an autonomous discipline not linked with public action. Literary critics traffic in metrics, narrative structures, imagery, symbolism, and a long list of things. But the list does not include “arms control or city management or bridge-building or judicial expertise or a thousand other things, even though many of those things find their way into the texts critics study as ‘topics’ or ‘themes’” (90).

Fish points out that a discipline becomes such by performing certain practices, and “disciplinary actions issue from narrowly defined disciplinary intentions and only reasonably (one must leave room for accident and serendipity) aim for disciplinary effects” (87). This is what he means by his playfully provocative title: *Professional Correctness*. His point is that “the vocabularies of disciplines are not external to their objects, but constitutive of them. Discard them in favor of the vocabulary of another discipline, and you will lose the object only they call into being” (85). Thus, from this perspective, new historicism or cultural studies cannot effectively turn literary criticism to partisan agendas because literary criticism by nature—by discipline—will not allow it to be effective outside the academy. Therefore, “the return to literary criticism of political questions does not make literary criticism more political in any active sense” (55). Changing the mode or object or name of literary analysis, he insists, “will not change the material effectiveness of literary analysis and make it into an instrument of political action” (44). Furthermore, says Fish, new historicists and cultural materialists may claim to show literary study how to do what it does better, but if literary criticism hearkens to them it will not be doing what it does better, but will be doing something different—no better or worse, but different.

The most significant recent exchange concerning the relationship between literary study and ethical-social-political behavior involves Richard A. Posner, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Wayne C. Booth. The first venue for this debate was a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. The papers were subsequently published in expanded form in *Philosophy and Literature* during 1997 and 1998. Posner, who is Chief Judge, U. S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and senior lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, presents the challenge in "Against Ethical Criticism," an essay drawn from his book *Law and Literature*. Nussbaum, Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago and author of such books as *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* responds with "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism." Joining her in defending ethical criticism with an essay titled "Why Banning Ethical Criticism Is a Serious Mistake" is Booth, a prominent scholar-critic, emeritus professor of English at the University of Chicago, whose book *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* is a highly regarded treatment of its subject. Posner provides a rejoinder in "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two." Of course no minds are changed in this debate and the perennial issues remain unresolved, but the essays provide stimulating exposition of the subject by three people who have thought and written on it extensively. Their essays are like iceberg tips, projections of weighty consideration.

Posner defends "the creed of aestheticism, or art for art's sake—if understood to mean that the moral content and consequences of a work of literature are irrelevant to its value as literature." As a motto for this position he cites Oscar Wilde's remark that "there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." Posner admits that "reading can have consequences, including moral and political ones," but his insistence in both essays is on "the separation of the moral from the aesthetic" ("Against Ethical Criticism" 1-2). He admits that in reading literature we learn about values, experiences, and sensibilities of many kinds and thus expand our emotional and intellectual horizons; but he does not consider this empathy-inducing role to be morally edifying: "empathy is amoral" (19). He also concedes that literature, in providing a vision of life more "concrete, meaningful, intelligible,

Posner a literary formalist.

coherent, conscious," enables us to feel enlarged and exhilarated; but he claims that this has to do with "a sense of power and selfhood rather than with the moral sense," and that the rich and varied emotional effects of literature "are psychological rather than moral" (22). "The world of literature is a moral anarchy" (5). Moreover, he counsels us to be skeptical of "any claim that readers can extract from works of imaginative literature practical lessons for living" (10). Against the opponents of the aesthetic tradition, particularly those in the "law and literature" movement, he defends three theses: "First, immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people. Second, we should not be put off by morally offensive views encountered in literature even when the author appears to share them. Third, authors' moral qualities or opinions should not affect our valuations of their works" (2).

*Nussbaum
confuses
morality with
egalitarian-
ism.*

Nussbaum is careful in her essay to make no claims about the moral properties of literature in general. Her argument is that some specific novels encourage a certain "wondering and fancying" that "nourishes the ascription of humanity, and the prospect of friendship" (356). She chooses "to focus rather narrowly on certain questions about how to live, and to leave other equally interesting questions to one side" (346). Her focus of interest is on the way certain novels can arouse our sympathetic attention to people or groups who are ignored or mistreated because of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Searching through narrative fiction, she enlists for her purposes works which she believes promote the kind of liberal, pluralistic tolerance she values. Being committed to this perspective, she not surprisingly argues "that Posner's assault on ethical criticism is, at bottom, an assault on political egalitarianism, and that his defense of aesthetic detachment is best understood as an anti-egalitarian political stance" (344-45). Her understanding of the aesthetic differs radically from Posner's. Her claim is that in general, and as far as novels are concerned, "we find aesthetically pleasing only works that treat human beings as humans and not just animals or objects, that contain what I have called respect before the soul. But this quality is also moral, so we might say that in the novel aesthetic interest and moral interest are not altogether unrelated" (357). In short, she contends that selected novels can be used to

complement moral or political philosophy in furthering egalitarianism.

Booth addresses Posner's challenge primarily by trying to clarify the definitions of "moral," "ethical," and "aesthetic." Booth defines these terms broadly, and from his point of view there are two Posners: one who (using narrow definitions) rules out all ethical questions from aesthetic judgment, and another who practices what is really (according to Booth's definition) ethical criticism. Booth's strategy for clarifying the debate and enlarging the area of common ground is to expand "moral" to include all "ethical" virtues—"the virtues, the powers, the habits of mind and heart" (375)—while at the same time expanding "aesthetic" in the direction of those same virtues: "If aesthetic quality is merely a matter of surface beauty or loveliness or attractiveness, and if by ethical we mean easily formulated moral matters like 'thou shalt not kill or commit adultery,' then obviously aesthetic quality can be separated from ethics" (376). His purpose, of course, is to negate both of those "ifs." He attempts to do so by making clever and amusing alterations in familiar poems by Wordsworth, Yeats, and Keats and in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The alterations do not change the formal qualities of the works, yet they seriously mar their total artistic effect. As Booth says of his changes in lines from Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," "By destroying the quality of mind and heart of the original speaker, with his delicate spiritual probing, I've ruined the aesthetic quality, in my definition" (381).

Booth brings two concepts of his own into the discussion. The first is his notion of "implied" author and reader, which he first introduced many years ago in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. The implied author is neither the actual author nor the speaker in the story, although he may share qualities with both of these (just as Mark Twain is neither exactly Samuel Clemens nor Huckleberry Finn), but instead is the choosing consciousness that constitutes the full ethos of any particular work. "The implied author is, in short," says Booth, "a character who though more complex than the portrayed characters is far less complex than any real person, including the flesh-and-blood person who created that implied author, and less complex than ourselves as flesh-and-blood readers." In engaging with implied authors, we become implied readers, which is to say that we project part of ourselves into the context

and ethos of the narrative. "Thus in our moments of actual reading we are led to become quite different from who we are when we put down the book and go to the toilet or to do some grocery shopping or to quarrel with our beloved" (378). This process, according to Booth, has a significant bearing on the way reading fiction affects us: "Once we expand the notion of the ethical to include all the characteristics of the implied creator, and all of our relationship to him or her we find that all of our aesthetic judgments—of the beauty of the work, of the sheer joy that living with it produces—are inescapably tied to ethics" (378-79).

Booth's second concept is one he introduced in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. He calls it "coduction." He means by this concept that no one is qualified alone to determine the meaning or value of any great story. Reflecting upon a story should involve exchanging ideas with others: "Our full ethical judgment is finally not based on any form of philosophical inductive or deductive proof but on what I've elsewhere dubbed coduction: I make my inferences of quality, then modify them as I debate them with others, neither side ever offering decisive logical proof" (373). This concept also has important implications for the way reading literature might influence us, for it suggests that our immediate reading of a story not only can but should be modified in consultation with others.

This completes my brief survey of recent ideas on literary study and the social order. The sampling is small, but representative enough to justify a few modest observations. The first is the obvious one that the debate hinges on distinctions and definitions. Nussbaum and Booth, for example, accuse Posner of defining ethics and aesthetics too narrowly, and Posner in return complains that they define the terms too broadly. Fish, for his part, subsumes aesthetics under professionalism, and ethical questions are conspicuously absent from his book. It is obvious, however, that his notion of "professional correctness" excludes ethical evaluation as a significant part of literary analysis.

Perhaps it is helpful in defining the key terms and determining the relation between aesthetic appreciation and ethical evaluation to remember that the great justification of literary study at any time is that it can help clarify and emphasize the function of the humanities themselves. By their very nature, the humanities do not offer analysis without synthesis, description without

evaluation, abstractions without feeling, or means without human ends. This, indeed, is the principal distinction between them and the physical and social sciences. As an activity that *suberves* the humanities, literary study fulfills its purpose best when it is fully aware of the aims and character of what it subserves. Literary study as criticism of the humanities, that is, must itself be humanistic; and to be humanistic is to be aware of basic human values and evaluate literature (its aesthetic and moral properties combined) in light of the ends these values promote. Such evaluation inevitably benefits the social order, though perhaps seldom or never in immediate, programmatic, or quantifiable ways.

Fish's professionalization of literary study highlights its distinctive nature as a discipline and pragmatically circumscribes its impact on political change, but at the same time ignores literary experience among nonprofessional readers and underestimates the subtle and gradual influence of literature upon society. The project of negotiating definitions of ethics and aesthetics in relation to literary study is not well served by subsuming the terms under professionalism. And Posner's restrictive definitions and sharp distinctions seem inadequate applied to literary art, which deals so comprehensively with human experience and blends so inextricably beauty, truth, and problems of good and evil. Nussbaum's definitions are broader, but I am troubled by her inclination to identify ethics so exclusively with the new compassion of multiculturalism and then attribute an aesthetic character to that compassion. Morality involves standards, judgments, and spirit-wrenching discriminations as well as sympathy. And, as with all passions, the passion for compassion should be bridled to some degree. As Hannah Arendt warns, "Pity, taken as the spring of virtue, has proved to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself" (84-85).

*Morality
more than
sympathy.*

Booth's hearkening back to the classical sense of ethics as the virtues, powers, and habits of mind and heart and his recognition that these are ineluctably implicated in the aesthetic experience seems to me the best avenue for exploring the relationship of literary study to the social order. And in defining terms in this relationship, we should heed Aristotle's admonition at the beginning of his treatise on ethics that "it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far

as the nature of the subject admits" (3). The nature of literature's impact on society allows only limited precision. Ethics and aesthetics are not the same thing, but taken in their proper breadth, they are symbiotic. "The fact is," Paul Elmer More wisely observed, "that ethics and aesthetics are inseparable in art. Or, more precisely, just in proportion as the practice or criticism of art becomes superficial, ethics and aesthetics tend to fall apart, whereas just in proportion as such practice or criticism strikes deeper, ethics and aesthetics are more and more implicated one in the other until they lose their distinction in a common root" (108-09). This relationship underlies certain paradoxes in the best ethical criticism, for example, the application of literary standards, which in order to be effectively literary, must be more than literary. Or, as Peter Shaw observes, "Paradoxically, the only satisfactory procedure for deriving a moral vision from literature lies in starting with fidelity to pleasure, even though pleasure is not in itself moral" (149).

Another observation related to the meaning of key words in the debate is that "ethical" has recently replaced "moral" as the preferred adjective modifying literary criticism interested in conduct as well as beauty. Since the terms are largely synonymous, the shift may seem insignificant, but it is not. "Moral" connotes making judgments between right and wrong, good and evil—an uncongenial practice in a relativistic age which celebrates diversity as an end in itself. On the other hand, "ethical" connotes conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession, group, or subculture. Unlike "moral," which suggests a universal and unchanging foundation in human nature, "ethical" suggests a constructed code appropriate for certain groups or situations. The shift in terms mirrors the recent shift in literary-intellectual opinion from logocentrism to historicism or social constructionism. Until the last few decades, phrases like moral criticism, moral imagination, and moral nature were common in literary study. Lionel Trilling, for example, used such phrases twenty times in his famous 1948 essay "Huckleberry Finn," an average of nearly twice per page (*Liberal Imagination* 100-112). Wayne Booth himself used the word "moral" frequently in his 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, titling his concluding chapter "The Morality of Impersonal Narration." More recently, however, he has strategically shifted to "ethical" as more palatable to his

audience. The subtitle of *The Company We Keep* is “An Ethics of Fiction” and certainly not “The Morality of Fiction.” Is the substitution of “ethical” for “moral” in critical discourse significant? It may be that literary study devoted to ethical rather than moral concerns (as I have distinguished the two) has both a cause and effect relationship to the social order: a retreat from judgments of good and evil in society impacts literary discourse and vice versa.

One point of agreement in the debates I summarized is that reading good literature does not in itself make good people. Yet many good people believe they have been improved by reading literature. The implication of this is that something more than what and how much one reads is involved. And that something is perhaps related to the distinction between moral and ethical I just suggested. Literature can be good for you, and can be bad for you. And the difference is not simply a matter of which literature. The same book could be good or bad for different persons, or even for the same person at different stages of mental, emotional, spiritual development. This is because so much depends on the persons and how they read—that is, on the general values, assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and intuitions that orient their reading. That orientation, I am inclined to believe, is ultimately determined by the strength or weakness of a primordial moral sense (not a socially constructed ethical sense), an intuition that there is purpose behind the phenomena of the world corresponding to the immediate sense of purpose in the individual conscience. It is an intuition of how things *really* are that is prior to all subsequent thought and rational analysis. This innate sense is the source of our conviction that we are responsible free agents, and our entire moral vocabulary rests upon it. We cannot explain it away because it abides beyond the reach of causal concepts. It is an ineradicable inner certainty that a shining point exists where all lines converge. Saul Bellow describes it as a “channel to the soul” and says that “it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the life struggle is

Deriving the most from literature requires sense of higher reality.

all about" (16-17). People are influenced by literature according to how hidden or discovered, how clogged or open, this channel is. And of course it is the images, stories—in short the intellectual-imaginative stimulation—of certain kinds of literature introduced early in life that nurtures this inherent moral inclination. The aim of the best literature has always been to reconcile us to life by showing (or at least intimating) that life is not limited to the actual data of existence. Considerations of literary study and the social order must take this channel—this primordial "sense of reality," as Isaiah Berlin calls it (xxviii)—into account. Literature is as varied as the persons who produce it. Some of it reveals and some of it conceals the channel to the soul.

*Postmodernist
literary theory
intrinsically
reductionist.*

My final observation is that talk of a channel to the soul and the exchange of arguments for and against ethical criticism may be beside the point for much current academic literary study. Theory appears to reign in the academy, and the *raison d'être* of much theory is a denial of essentialist conceptions of self and foundationalist notions of truth and values. The notion of soul used in the preceding paragraph exists only to be negated in both the poststructuralist critique of logocentrism and the cultural studies critique of essentialism. The deconstruction of the "I" or "disappearance of the subject" in postmodernism makes the ethics-aesthetics argument ultimately mute by eliminating the very ground of responsibility.

Similarly, the arguments of Posner, Nussbaum, and Booth remain too much within traditional parameters to engage the postmodern theorist. Posner, Nussbaum, and Booth, for example, speak of literary "works" instead of "texts," signaling their disregard of the fundamental postmodern premise of "textuality." Booth alone mentions postmodern theory and does so only in an incidental dismissal of "some dogmatic postmodernists" who have declared the author dead (378). The literary works cited and discussed in the debate are all from the traditional canon, and the principal assumptions, technical terms, and vogue words of postmodernism are absent. While Posner, Nussbaum, and Booth argue the merits of literary study as an ethical influence on social harmony, postmodern theorists conceive literary study as a "problematizing" of the settled surface of received truths—a sanctioned space for the expression of social dissidence. And while Posner, Nussbaum, and Booth examine the impact of literary

study on experience, current theory seems, in its self-referential rationalism, to disavow the relevance of experience. This is why critics of postmodernism allege that it puts “reality” in question marks in order to finesse its lack of justification in any empirical observation of the real world. James Seaton claims, in this vein, that radical postmodernists (and he singles out Fish) “not only disallow attempts to move from literature to life; they argue that the literary work itself has no stable, independent existence and thus cannot be used as a basis for any judgments at all. One cannot settle arguments about life or law by reference to a literary text, since there is no boundary between the text itself and competing interpretations” (184-85). So long as literary academics disregard the relation of literature to life and remain isolated from the general culture (as even presumed social activists like academic feminists and cultural studies theorists largely do), they lack the kind of confrontation with reality essential to debates about how society ought to function.

Posner, Nussbaum, and Booth assume for their arguments readers of literature who are “attentive,” “sensitive,” and “fully engaged.” But a significant consequence of literary instruction according to the methods and assumptions of postmodern theory is students unskilled in such reading. They are taught to “do theory” rather than to read literature. Contemporary approaches to literary study tend to appropriate literary works for nonliterary ends. Students are instructed to begin with a theoretical conception, which naturally orients and determines their responses and perceptions while reading. This is why Frank Lentricchia, in renouncing literary theory to read literature with his undergraduates and to write novels, complains that most literary criticism is not literary at all. Booth speaks of inductive, deductive, and coductive approaches. The approach of “doing theory” is most often *reductive*. And if close, thoughtful, emotionally engaged, unprejudiced reading is not thought about and taught in the schools, it is bound to atrophy in educated citizens. Literary study must, after all, be the study of literature—literature as its own best teacher—in order for the impact of literature in its uniqueness to be properly assessed.

Literary study used to be a repertoire of often compatible approaches (formalistic, biographical, psychological, philological, archetypal, moral, etc.). These approaches shared the fundamental

assumption that authors are human beings capable, within broad linguistic possibilities, of describing and interpreting in meaningful ways to others the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual range of human experience. Movements in literary theory now come congealed with exclusionary ideological and anti-metaphysical worldviews that call into question human nature, agency, and communication. Before we continue the interminable but ever necessary debate regarding the relation of literary study—as *literary* study—to the social order, we need to confront more deliberately the full implications of postmodern literary-intellectual opinion for the social and moral order.

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