The Pleasures of Reading

IN AN IDEOLOGICAL AGE

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INTRODUCTION

The Disappearance of Reading

Peculiar things have clearly been happening in the academic study of literature. This book is in part a response to that tide of peculiarity, though it is meant to be a good deal more than a polemic, for I am convinced that there are more interesting and more important things for a critic to do than merely to expose fashionable absurdities. It may nevertheless be helpful to the reader for me to devote some attention at the outset to the oppositional impulse of my undertaking.

A good many of the most influential currents in criticism and literary theory today can be traced back to the late 1960s. That was a time which seemed to many full of promise and intellectual excitement. In France, where most of the new trends began, the stodginess of academic criticism in that country was dramatically displaced by a bold enterprise of systematic analysis, drawing on linguistics and anthropology, that sought to situate literary studies among the *sciences humaines;* by a radical questioning of Western philosophic premises undertaken through the combined investigation of literary and philosophic texts; by scrutinizing literature through the lens of a drastically revised Freudianism or

Marxism or a "discourse"-based historicism that at once incorporated both and transcended both. In England and America, where literary criticism has by and large been meager on conceptual matters and not much interested in the systematic aspects of literature, these innovative lines of thought seemed to augur the dawning of a new era. The discussion of literature would no longer be the province of the proverbial English professor with comfortable tweed jacket and pipe luxuriating in his chatty, complacent learning. Literature at last would be studied with intellectual rigor, against the background of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics; and the most urgent issues of politics, history, personal and gender identity, would be boldly exposed through the analysis of literary texts.

All this ferment was understandable, and, at least at the beginning, had its commendable side. Anglo-American literary studies, as several observers have noted, were in fact "underconceptualized," and they also tended to be geographically parochial in their intellectual purview. Again, the intrinsic value of the literary work was generally taken as a matter of unexamined faith—in one way, by the followers of F. R. Leavis in England, in other ways, by the New York critics and the New Critics in the United States. There was surely something to be gained by looking at literature with the apparatus of different systems of abstract thought, by tracing literature's own systematic operations, and by exercising a higher degree of skepticism about the claims literature made for itself. Of these three broad modes of awareness, the one that has led to the most palpable gains is the concentration on literature as a system. Here, foreign influences have been especially fruitful: Russian Formalism, French narratology, German reader-response theory, Soviet semiotics, and the Tel Aviv School of Poetics. In many respects, however, the great promise of twenty years ago has turned to bitter ashes.

The most central failure, I think, is that so many among

a whole generation of professional students of literature have turned away from reading. In part, I mean simply that the sundry versions of what Paul Ricoeur has called in connection with Freud "the hermeneutics of suspicion" have led beyond skepticism to an attitude sometimes approaching disdain for literature. In both criticism and in debates over curriculum, one encounters an insistence that daily newspapers, pulp fiction, private diaries, clinical case studies, and imaginative literature belong on one level, that any distinctions among them are dictated chiefly by ideology. One need not argue for an attitude of unreserved adulation toward literature, but without some form of passionate engagement in literary works, without a sense of deep pleasure in the experience of reading, the whole enterprise of teaching and writing about literature quickly becomes pointless.

In fact, for many of the new trends in literary studies, the object of the preposition "about" is often no longer literature. The great prefix of the day is *meta-*: metalanguage, metatext, metadiscourse. To be sure, a discussion of the premises of discussion, talk about how we talk about literature, is necessary for the maintenance of methodological scrupulosity. What is distressing is that such discussion to the second degree should in many instances come to displace the discussion of literature itself. One can read article after article, hear lecture after lecture, in which no literary work is ever quoted, and no real reading experience is registered. Although no one has done a precise quantitative study of current curricula, I strongly suspect that many young people now earning undergraduate degrees in English or French at our most prestigious institutions have read two or three pages of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva for every page of George Eliot or Stendhal.

This is not to suggest that students should be turned back to some imagined idyllic age when literature and only literature was read. By this point in time, the value of large

intellectual overviews and interdisciplinary perspectives should be self-evident. What is at issue is a matter of proportion: with the finite time granted to anyone for reading, whether in or out of the university, should a person drawn to literature be encouraged to devote more attention to Lacan than to Poe, to Barthes than to Balzac? One might further question whether the best guidance is provided by this particular cluster of speculative thinkers, who as Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut have shrewdly argued,[1] represent a reductive French rhetorical radicalization of German thought—Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and Heidegger—that may lead to an intellectual dead end.

Not long ago, a young woman enrolled in one of my undergraduate courses in comparative literature came up to me to tell me how much she had enjoyed reading *Moby-Dick*, to which the class had just devoted three weeks. Oddly and interestingly, what she particularly liked was the book's grotesque humor, which, despite the bleakness of Melville's sense of life, seemed to her quite hilarious. She went on to say that she was surprised at her own response to the novel because in the previous semester two different professors of English, her major field, had told her that *Moby-Dick* was a bore and scarcely worth the effort of reading. It is hard not to construe this as a discouraging sign of the times, a confirmation of the suspicion that literature faculties may be increasingly populated with scholars who don't particularly care for literature. I am not in the least proposing that one must be regularly reverential toward the literary work, or that it is never appropriate to question the so-called "canon" (I will have something to say about the problematic nature of that notion in my first chapter). There are arguable objections that can be leveled against *Moby-Dick*—that it is sometimes bombastic, that it is top-heavy with whaling lore, that its narrator is inconsistent or even unconvincing, that as a microcosm of human life it is drastically unbalanced because

it is a world without women. It is also, warts and all, one of the stupendous achievements of American prose, a work that, even if it may have its irritating side, haunts the imagination, is repeatedly stirring, troubling, exciting, and, as my student testifies, sometimes amusing as well. One may legitimately want to contend with *Moby-Dick*, but a teacher of literature who dismisses it as too much of a bore to read might be better off teaching computer science or selling insurance.

Or perhaps, to give the new academic trends their due, such a person might be better off teaching sociology or history, psychology or political science, whatever the departmental aegis. That is to say, there is real intellectual interest in using literary texts for the investigation of social, cultural, philosophic, or economic issues, and though one may have serious qualms about the ideological tendentiousness with which these issues are sometimes now pursued, such investigation surely has a legitimate place in the university. To examine literature as a symptom of something else—say, high feudalism or late capitalism—requires neither a special liking for literature nor an ability to discriminate between derivative and original, second-rate and first-rate writers. Analysis of this sort may have its own compelling character, but it is disquieting to contemplate the prospect of literature programs in which such analysis is proffered not as a complementary alternative but as the predominant, or even the "correct," approach. The neo-Marxist critic Terry Eagleton shows admirable candor and consistency in proposing that a curricular move be made from literature to "discourse studies," so that instructors would be free to teach Shakespeare, television scripts, government memoranda, comic books, and advertising copy in a single program as instances of the language of power. What is regrettable, though also characteristic of a certain prevalent ideological coerciveness, is that Eagleton also proposes the abolition of departments of literature, having demonstrated, at least to his own satisfaction, that

there is no coherent phenomenon that can be called literature.

I will have a good deal to say about this last proposition in my first chapter, but let me emphasize here that the burden of this whole book is that there is a great deal in the intrinsic operations of literature vitally calling for our attention, however much we may also want to look beyond the literary text to its multifarious contexts. Attention of this sort, moreover, by no means implies a commitment either to "monumentalize" the texts under consideration or to regard them as pure aesthetic objects. On the contrary, many—perhaps even most— original works of literature, as I hope more than a few of my examples will show, are themselves powerful vehicles of subversion, variously directed against prevalent beliefs and ideologies, received social and moral attitudes, literary tradition, against the very conception of what literature is. The minute attention to how literature speaks through its own complex and distinctive language is an indispensable step in the process of fully realizing the subversive power of the text, and one could scarcely find a better example than *Moby-Dick*, with its extraordinary deployment of imagery, symbol, allusion, scene, and even rhythmic movement to effect a radical redefinition of nature, historical time, meaning, and value.

The failure of the promise of the late 1960s manifests itself in two principal ways. One is the distancing—in the more extreme cases, an actual estrangement—from the experience of reading literature that I have just indicated. The other is the division of the academic study of literature, especially in the United States, into competing sectarian groups, each with its own dogmas and its own arcane language. Sectarianism has a perennial appeal, at least as much for intellectuals as for others, because it offers to the initiate a reassuring sense of certainty as well as a sense of superiority in relation to the unredeemed masses. The new academic

sectarianism may well be a direct consequence of the unprecedented expansion of the American university system that took place during the sixties. With scores of thousands of people teaching literature at thousands of institutions of higher learning, with academic journals and books multiplying like rabbits, a young scholar may achieve a certain calming elevation over the madding crowd by following one master, adopting one "advanced" methodology, and proving fealty on both those counts by speaking one hieratic language.

The question of language is one of the most acute and revealing symptoms of this general intellectual disorder in literary studies. The decline of stylistic standards in critical writing, though lamentable in itself, is, as an aesthetic matter, a secondary concern—I refer to the fact that in some circles it is now regarded as an intellectual virtue to write badly or obscurely, with at least one prominent literary scholar having raised the banner of "difficulty" as the very aim and emblem of critical prose. What is more pertinent to the disturbing prospect of the disappearance of reading is that the language of criticism now often reflects an emotional alienation from the imaginative life of the text under discussion, often seems in its bristling conceptuality empty of an experiential ground in reading.

Abstraction, to be sure, is a necessary instrument of thought, but the stylistic habits of much current criticism reflect a disquieting tendency to pitch critical discussion at one or two removes of abstraction from what actually addresses readers in the literary text. One symptom of this trend is the wild proliferation of verbs with the *-ize* suffix: these days, almost everything in a poem or novel is problematized, thematized, narrativized, totalized, historicized, fetishized. In certain frameworks, technical terms may have their value, but the promiscuous use of intellectual jargon all too frequently introduces real imprecision or serves as a cover for the lack of original thought, as one may readily see by

scanning the current academic journals, whose pages are clotted with "discourse," "discursive strategy," "erotics of textuality," "diagesis," "foregrounding," "signifieds," "aporia," and much more of the same.

Let me offer three examples of the way so many academic writers have come to discuss literature. The examples are taken from articles published in the last year or two; for reasons of simple decency, I will not cite the sources or the authors' names.

The first excerpt is from an article on Kafka:

> Everywhere there are moving barriers and a-signifying elements which point to desiring production outside the oedipal domain and rend apart repressive totalities, a testament to Kafka's experimental machine.

It goes without saying that the proverbial common reader would be able to make little of this, and as we shall see in a moment, even less of our next two examples, but perhaps unintelligibility is the least grave of the charges that can be directed against this mode of critical writing. After all, a small lexicon of technical terms can be mastered in a couple of hours' industrious reading, and adherents would argue that a new precision is gained thereby. The sentence may be repellent, but what is baffling about it is not hard to unscramble. "Moving" in "moving barriers" is a participle whereas the "desiring" of "desiring production" has a gerundive force and seems to mean "the production of desire." The concept behind our writer's phrase is a hybrid of Freud and Marx, and the wording also reflects a fashionable fondness for mechanistic metaphors (like the designation of Kafka's iconoclastic fiction as an "experimental machine") about which I will have more to say in Chapter Two. Lurking behind all the forbidding language is a perception about Kafka that has been often stated not only more elegantly but also more instructively by

critics who do not use this jargon of the new literary technocrats: that Kafka invents a mode of enigmatic fiction which taps an inchoate realm of the unconscious and defies conventional habits of interpretation. One wonders, moreover, whether the liberationist language ("rend apart repressive totalities") is strictly appropriate to the motive and feel of Kafka's imaginative enterprise, or whether, as happens too often in contemporary criticism, the text has been popped into a premade ideological cubbyhole that in some ways distorts its actual contours.

My next example is from a discussion of Stephen Crane:

> The becoming-visible of writing must be considered in terms of a programmatic equation or identification that, I want to suggest, underwrites realist discourse. This equation involves the perfect "fit" between the ontology of writing and the specific material—the historically specific subject-matter— of the social body-machine complex, the perfect "fit" between the (apparently nonhistoricizable) ontology of writing and a historically specific biomechanics.

In this writer, the common machine metaphor is entirely explicit and, indeed, a conscious element in the conceptual argument. Whether this neat correspondence between nineteenth-century biomechanics and realist fiction actually exists is a question that lies beyond our present concerns, but the sweeping departure from literary text to large historical context is surely facilitated by this ponderous language so utterly removed from the fiction. One suspects an influence of Heidegger, perhaps mediated by Sartre ("the becoming-visible of writing") in the rebarbative style. The syntactic collapse and terminological tangle of the second sentence are so egregious that one wonders what its author could possibly make of the prose of Stephen Crane. Realism is swollen into

"realist discourse" perhaps under the influence of Foucault, for whom devious and oppressive discourse determines most of what happens in culture, and it should be observed that "discourse" is a prominent general offender in contemporary criticism. As a binary opposite to narration (*récit*), "discourse" has a definite utility, but nowadays one finds it used instead of style, rhetoric, speech, diction, narrative technique, narrative structure, fictional representation, language as a formal system, and a good deal else.

My final example is from an essay on J. L. Borges:

> What seems to me important are the correspondences between Borges and midrash in the idea of intertextuality, in the concept of reading not as lineality but as a configuration of textual space, in the notion of the destructurization of the text as a condition for deciphering it, and in the arch principle, as I have said, of interpretative metatextuality as the basis of decentralization.

This single sprawling sentence is a veritable anthology of jargon and voguish imprecisions. In this instance, the addiction to sectarian cant leads to something close to nonsense. It is a loose and misleading approximation to say that the reading experience of, say, "Death by the Compass" or "The Garden of Forking Paths" is "a configuration of textual space," and that peculiar metaphor simply doesn't apply to midrash, the early rabbinic homiletic commentary on the Bible. "Interpretative metatextuality," once the lingo is deciphered, is in fact a preoccupation of Borges, though not at all of midrash, but even in the case of the Argentine writer, it has very little to do with the destructurization or the decentralization of the text (the fondness for the *-ize* suffix, it will be seen, is often complemented by an attachment to the prefix *de-*, with its presumably salutary suggestion of taking things apart). This observation, in sum, on Borges and the rabbis, like the ones

on Kafka and Crane we considered before it, is a symptom of the disappearance of reading, for it reflects an inclination not to engage the literary work in its subtle and compelling specificity but rather to use it as a prooftext for preconceived, and all too general, views.

What I try to do, then, in the chapters that follow, is not merely to question a few of the fundamentally misleading dogmas of the new critical sectarians but to propose a set of concepts that will point toward a return to reading. I argue that the language of literature is distinct from the use of language elsewhere in its resources and in its possibilities of expression (Chapter One); that literature is not just a self-referential closed circuit but is connected in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world of experience outside the text (Chapter Two); that there are modalities of literary expression accessible to analytic attention that can give readers clearer insight into the text (Chapters Three through Six); and that there is a crucial difference between interpretive pluralism, which I espouse, and interpretive anarchy (Chapter Seven). The core of the book, Chapters Three through Six, which is also the part most free from polemic, works on the assumption that there are actually certain transmissible skills of reading. This is not to say that there is ever one correct way of reading a literary text but that there are formal resources of literary expression, susceptible to analysis and to critical definition, worth attending to, for the attention may actually sharpen our perception and heighten our pleasure as readers. In contrast to the various critical trends that presume the time has come to move on from literature to some form of politics or metaphysics or politics and metaphysics combined, my argument is that there remain many challenging and useful things to do in the actual study of imaginative literature, both in the classroom and in critical writing.

Since the title I have chosen may sound excessively general, I want to emphasize two basic ways in which this is

a study that is intended to be kept within modest limits. In the course of highlighting the various pleasures of reading, I have not tried to provide a comprehensive lexicon of the language of literature. One could readily conceive chapters on rhetoric, genre, convention, tone, and other topics; and I actually contemplated including a chapter on imagery but decided against it after devoting a good deal of space to figurative language in my discussion of style. Any attempt at comprehensiveness would produce a volume three or four times the length of this one, which would inevitably be a reference work rather than a book readers might be likely to read from beginning to end, as I hope they will do in the present case. In order to convey a coherent general sense of what is involved in reading literary texts, it seemed to me sufficient to try to throw a little light on some, but by no means all, of the major aspects of literary expression.

The other self-imposed limitation on the scope of this study is more far-reaching. I in no way claim that the perspective I offer here is the only one warranted for the study of literature. This is a book about the *language* of literature and how it provides rich pleasures for readers, not about the origins of that language, its sundry contexts, its precise relation to other languages. Thus, I make no attempt to deal with the roots of the literary work in the psychology of the writer, or with the ways the reader's response may be dictated by the reader's own psychology, though those seem to me compelling questions that have so far eluded satisfactory answers. Similarly, I do not address the complex anchorage of the literary work in its historical setting, though the neglect of history, or, at best, the eccentric and at times tendentious use of history, is one of the principal weaknesses of contemporary criticism. I do not in the least assume that the literary text is autonomous, absolute, divorced from its specific cultural contexts; but one can't very well talk about everything that needs to be talked about all at once, and it seemed enough to grapple with in one book to try

to parse the inflections and syntax of literature's intrinsic language, leaving aside at least for the time being the questions of where that language comes from and where it is directed in historical and psychological space.

Especially because of my conviction that all study of literature must emerge from and return to reading, I have made my case throughout this book by the analysis of examples of literary texts. I have drawn most of the illustrations from English and American writers, despite my own keen interest in other national literatures, in order to avoid the difficulties of dealing with translations when precise discriminations had to be made about features of language, and also because I assumed these texts were likely to be more familiar to readers than works composed in other languages. Choosing examples I knew intimately from teaching and rereading, I have ended up scanting dramatic literature, which I enjoy without professional involvement, and have not represented the medieval period, for which I have no competence. I did make some conscious effort to include a variety of different styles, sensibilities, historical eras, and formal orientations from the many works that have given me pleasure, but I have in no way sought to strike any numerical balance in regard to the period, the politics, the gender, the beliefs, the sexual orientation of the writers. Affirmative-action quotas do not strike me as the most useful point of departure for a study of the language of literature. And since all that is at issue here is the convenience of illustration, no inferences are warranted about my viewing any writer not included as "extracanonical." I could have used the wonderfully resourceful Argentine novelist Manuel Puig in my discussion of allusion instead of Faulkner or Virginia Woolf, but that would have involved a problem of translation; I could have used the brilliant Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie instead of Dickens in the chapter on style, but he would have been unfamiliar to many readers.

In proposing a critical account of some of the principal aspects of literary expression, this study aspires to a certain systematic descriptive character. At the same time, through the abundant discussions of illustrative texts, I have tried to stay in touch with reading as a lively experience, a source of complex pleasure and insight. As readers, we live in constant unfathomable intercourse with the written word—that mere artifice which ensconces itself in the inner sanctum of our imagination, delights us in odd and unpredictable ways, even affects our perception of the world. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," Eliot's Prufrock says in the midst of confessing the tedium, the triviality, the timidity of his existence. The image itself is a borrowing from the French poet Jules Laforgue, but in its achieved formulation as a line in an English poetic monologue, what is it about these words that arrests our attention, suggests multiple implications, binds the rhythm (a regular iambic pentameter with an extra initial syllable) with the meaning of the image? Prufrock is a sad character in a sad fix, but a reader may find something quite pleasurable in the coffee spoon metaphor, the rhyme of "spoons" with "afternoons" at the end of the preceding line, the subtle and elusive interplay between coffee spoons and toast and tea, pins, butt-ends of days, the pipes of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, and other concrete elements in the poem. Literary language is an intricate, inventively designed vehicle for setting the mind in restless pleasing motion, which in the best of cases may give us a kind of experiential knowledge relevant to our lives outside reading. In all that follows I will try to explain what it is about the properties of the language of literature that enables it to involve us in this endless, fascinating process.