Eventually our prospective majors can become busy, go into business, but I would like to promise them that although by studying literature they will gain many practical and necessary skills, they will engage also in immensely pleasant readings, in real conversations, and in the powerful experience of creative writing. Because ultimately literature is not a professional commodity; it resists becoming one more object of study. It moves you and transforms you. It is a living entity. It glows in the dark.

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Concentrating on and in Literature

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Language rustles. Its particularity can be heard and even described. When Roland Barthes first suggested this metaphor for the ways in which language is detectable per se, he offered a structuralist rejection of the mimetic and hermeneutic models of literature. Nearly forty years later, his insistence on the detectability of language suggests a defense of literary study that is profoundly humanistic. Barthes's literature, with its special discursive density, answers the claim that literature programs, which perhaps were never seen as fully practical, have betrayed the public trust through aloof hermeticism since the advent of poststructuralism in the 1970s. The case for majoring in literature either has too fine a historical pedigree or goes too much against the grain of the current institutional and political emphasis on utility and accountability in education. Thus, the imperial Roman rhetorician Plutarch felt the need to write a defense of literary education in "How a Young Man Should Hear Lectures on Poetry." Indeed, despite the successful closing of the commercial theaters in 1642 by the Puritan London City Council, new plays continued to be encouraged, written, and performed in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge without interruption. Even Glavrepertkom, instead of silencing Soviet literature, policed it and honed it into a distinctively effective system of ideological dissemination, albeit with the censorship of such luminaries as Vsevolod Meyerhold and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. My essay, with its claim that our students should continue to concentrate in literature, has thus already been written and enacted, even under strict surveillance of extremist governments. In the face of so many arguments for applied literary studies as one of "the basics," for the integration of the literary into the pedagogical, there is in the academy a sense that a literary education is at best

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supplemental. It is a pleasing option to consider, budgets permitting, after writing and analytic reasoning have been addressed. A case for majoring in literature can and must be made, and it can avoid the cultural globalism of E. D. Hirsch's arguments for an exclusionary "cultural literacy." It can also avoid taking refuge in Harold Bloom's justifications for a canon, which are centered on an Emersonian view of Shakespeare's necessity, lest "we cease to think" (41).

There is a tendency, inherited from Aeschylus's phrase "ton pathei mathos" (most accurately rendered as "learning through experience" but often mistranslated as "learning through suffering" [line 177]), to see Horace's dyad "aut prodesse aut delectare" ("either to instruct or to delight" [line 333]) as an exclusionary pair. Whether I invoke the research of Stephen Pinker or the well-known comments throughout Aristotle's *De anima* on the "hedone" ("the pleasure") of art, it is not merely language but the art of language, or literature, that most defines us as human. "The instinct to acquire an art" causes us to create language, which can be seen "not merely as a cultural artifact, but as a distinct piece of our biological make-up" (Pinker 18). Like Aristotle, Pinker sees language production as an artistic psychological faculty, which even in its everyday forms contains the traces of a literary variant. Such reconditely literary effects as rhyming are part of this instinctual phenomenon (173–75). All speech acts are potentially literary, both emerging from cognitive functions and appealing to them. Why then bother with the conventionally literary or even with such a classification as literature to designate a major? Indeed, with the increasing number of area studies programs nationwide, the academy seems to affirm, like Pinker, that all human linguistic phenomena can be assessed without a concern for what literature is per se.

Even as literature programs fight to elide the distinctiveness of literature, to suggest that literature is anything but a closed aesthetic field, English departments separate composition theory from literary analysis, and foreign language departments now often fall under the single aegis of foreign language education. Foreign language pedagogy, however, provides a crucial corrective. As any instructor implementing proficiency guidelines knows, only a fraction of proficiency is premised purely on grammatical and lexical expertise. Indeed, speakers rated at the advanced level (2, 2+), who can sustain conversation with some sociolinguistic sensitivity, are only at the midpoint of the 1-to-5 scale in a nonlinear expansion of proficiency (Lowe). The cultural component is not just that, which inspires students to learn, their reward for effort; it is the content of a proficiency-oriented curriculum. Alain de Botton reminds us that, in an unpublished essay about Jean-Baptiste Chardin's "unpretentious" art of the ordinary, Marcel Proust insists that art is constituted not by objects, a few apples and a cracked bowl, but by the way the artist dehabituates us and revitalizes daily life and popular culture in a heightened form (Botton 133–37). Literature distills culture of all registers. Thus, majoring in Hindi or Bengali requires that one both undertake complex linguistic study and acquire sufficient popular cultural expertise to understand the context and implications of, for example, Dinabandhu Mitra's 1860 play *Neel darpan* (*The Indigo Mirror*). Its presentation of British planters' abuse of Hindu workers, an exposure that triggered the imposition of the 1876 Dramatic Performances Censorship Act, is at least metonymic, and perhaps defining, of both the shape of Indian theater and a general etiquette for imperial, cultural interactions. The compression of this literary text, what Milan Kundera calls its "concentration" (226), allows it to function across the curriculum as a site of interdisciplinary discussions about gender, ethnicity, empire, and society in India at least until 1947.

If we return to the Shakespearean example, let us choose *Hamlet*, whose neurotic control on the modern psyche has been noted from Goethe to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. A Bloomian-Hirschian argument would suggest

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that one must know "To be or not to be" in order to be culturally literate and empowered. A more complete use of this canonical text suggests that its position in the Western canon makes it part of Michael Riffaterre's sociolectical field of possibilities available to any reader, author, performer, or native speaker. Without changing a word, the study of Shakespeare's original text forms the basis for an assessment of high British culture since 1601. Translated into Russian by Boris Pasternak, however, it becomes an index of Soviet and post-Soviet views about the recalcitrant prince. A single soliloquy can be performed to underwrite the ideality of "homo sovieticus" by Innokenty Smuktunovsky in the 1960s, the allure of the angry would-be individualist by Vladimir Vysotsky in the 1970s, and the disorientated, disaffected youth of the 1990s by Evgeny Mironov. Complex cultural material is compressed in these performances into a supersaturated piece of cultural realia, ideal not merely for interrogating Shakespeare's or Pasternak's complex textuality but also as an index of popular culture in Russia over the past forty years. Similarly, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* functions as a literary enactment and cultural translation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; ironic and self-aware insights into Caribbean cultural and sexual hybridity emerge in Cliff's novel through its syncopated prose and in its dialogue with both the Western canon and its own material conditions. Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* evokes the Texas-Mexico border and its particular intersectional complexity with the memorable and regionally exact precision of an expert cook, geographer, and linguist and with the imagistic density of a magic realist. Like the multiple Hamlets, Cliff and Esquivel exploit the vivid possibilities of the literary "parergon" of the real (Derrida). Literary texts supplement the real rather than claim to represent it, and they rustle just enough to engage our students in the critical thought so valued by current ideology, while at the same time resisting naive models of literary mimesis or literary epiphany.

It is perhaps on this last claim for literature, its resistance to being Jean Baudrillard's "simulacrum" of the real world, that the strongest argument for majoring in literature can be based. Hamlet, the quintessential student of literature, consistently finds that his reality falls short of his literary expectations. Hamlet seeks a cure through literary art at every juncture, tragedy being his most frequent recourse, and is frustrated by the invidious comparison between Greek literature and his own family. Each soliloquy raises a question of literary interpretation, and in each case Hamlet fails to understand either the literary text or the real one. In each case he seeks a clear answer, a single resolution, the absolute truth. He is a weak literature major, since literary texts rarely provide an accurate, literal image of the world. As Wole Soyinka's *The* Bacchae *of Euripides* asserts, through its embracing of Frantz Fanon's challenge to the postcolonial subject to be self-authoring, it is only with adaptation that a Greek tragedy can conform itself to the needs of a contemporary Nigerian writer's self-articulation. What literature presents, be it *Hamlet*'s nunnery scene or Haruki Murakami's hallucinatory daydreams of young Japanese female professionals in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, is insoluble situations, whose resistance to simple answers most allies them to the real situations that one encounters after graduation. Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio suggests that what distinguishes modern literature is the degree to which it provides "rassomiglianza," resemblance to the real, not a copy but an affinity. That affinity is fundamentally rough and fragmentary, exiled from the realm of the intellectual absolute that Hamlet and many other undergraduates have been promised. It is impossible to decide whether Gustave Flaubert's claim that "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" captures the essence of his novel. One cannot simply map Emma Bovary's volatility onto either Flaubert or his view of women and the material conditions of women in mid-nineteenth-century France. Majoring in literature embraces such intellec-

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tual undecidabilities and is, therefore, invaluable. The practice of analyzing and writing compellingly about uncertainties is a distinctive and crucial art well outside the academy. If only Hamlet had not sought facile answers to his very fine literary questions.

Literary study as content-based instruction is pedagogically effective. It provides the *paedia* in the intellectual management of uncertainty, which is an ideal preparation for encountering real-world considerations. And it is pleasurable. The new ambassador to Moscow needs to know how to toast colleagues, quoting "the Poet," whether Chekhov or Pushkin. The foreign entrepreneur who knows Gilgamesh's text and legacy when negotiating in Damascus today might avoid being mistaken for yet another invading Alexander or Tamerlane. A few of our students will remain in the academy, but all those who major in literature will be more than literate. They will embark on the next stages of their lives hearing the rustle of language and knowing its strengths and limitations.

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