Why Literature Now?

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Not being an evangelist, I wasn't sure how to respond to the question "Why major in literature—what do we tell our students?" In over twenty years of teaching and advising, I have never sought to persuade students to major in any field. Occasionally, when a woman advisee who came to Brown to major in physics or engineering has decided to shift to literature, I have tried to talk about the difficulties women face in the sciences, the science classroom's chilly climate, and gender competition to persuade her to stick it out and become the engineer or physicist she wanted to be. But proselytize? Never.

But since I believe passionately in the power and significance of literature, I determined to try to write about why. There could be no moment more appropriate to such a task than now. I write these words in the weeks following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York; I write as an intellectual and an academic, on sabbatical in Paris, where I have come to finish a book on early modern London and Paris and the impact of urbanization on cultural production: on theater, the book trade, reading practices, urban representation, urban genres. Distracted by death, terror, anthrax, the bombings in Afghanistan, and the news, compelled to "read" these events as they are reported and presented, I am as certain as I have ever been of the power and significance of literary study.

Why literature now? Because literature insists emphatically that we read and interpret, that there are no easy answers, never only one meaning or perspective. Literature insists on interpretation, on point of view, on polysemy. How do we address the question of meaning in today's global world? What is rhetoric, and how does it persuade? Rhetoric, writes Roland Barthes, in "The Old Rhetoric: An Aide-Mémoire," one of his most powerful and erudite essays, is a vast empire. Though Barthes writes specifically about rhetoric in the West, its imperial ambitions and reach, the power of rhetoric is starkly displayed in our current global impasse. How do we understand and interpret words like *pro-choice*, *pro-life*, *unborn child*, *fetus*, *author*, *text*, *terrorist*, *freedom fighter*, *civilian*, *war*, *crime*, *crusade*, *terrorism*, *martyr*, *suicide*, *propaganda*, *news*, *fundamentalist*, *fanatic*, *God*? These words and how we understand them and thousands of others are critical in the root sense—they bear on the crisis in which we find ourselves.

The philosopher and cultural commentator Richard Rorty has attacked literary studies over the last several years, claiming that literature is in danger of a fall into knowingness, "a state of mind and soul," according to him, "that prevents shudders of awe and makes one immune to enthusiasm." Those of us who teach and study literature, he argues, have abandoned inspiration for knowingness. But knowingness matters: it makes reading and interpretation possible.

While I drove my college-age daughter to the airport not long ago, she asked me if Shakespeare really wrote his plays. She was reading Shakespeare in a class in which the question of his authorship had been discussed. On planes, in dentists' offices, waiting in lines, when asked what I do, if I say I teach Shakespeare, almost invariably the first question anyone asks is, Did Shakespeare really write his plays? What I answer, and what I said to her, is that theater in Shakespeare's day was collaborative, that he wrote plays with other people, that readers and editors since have rewritten the plays as well,

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but that yes, the man we call Shakespeare did write much of the plays we call his. Virtually every case made for putative authorship of Shakespeare's plays is on behalf of a member of the educated Tudor elite—Francis Bacon, Viscount St. Albans; the earl of Southampton; Edward de Vere, the earl of Oxford. What makes Shakespeare's authorship suspect is what we would now term his class, or as *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* puts it in describing the authorship debate, "[S]uch profound and wide-ranging works could not possibly have been written by an ill-educated man from the country" (Campbell and Quinn 115). Generations of bardolators have not wanted to admit that a man of the middling sort with no university education could have been the author of *Hamlet*. I explained to my daughter that grammar school in Shakespeare's day was different from our modern counterpart—in a Tudor grammar school Shakespeare would have learned Latin and read the classics. Many fewer men and no women went to university then, and there were many other ways of becoming educated in late-sixteenth-century London.

When I teach *Macbeth*, we discuss how Lady Macbeth is made accountable through her language for Macbeth's actions. We study expectations for women in Shakespeare's day. We look carefully at the poetry, at how Lady Macbeth's speeches produce her character and make us judge her. My knowingness, as Rorty calls it, enables students to see that class and gender, race and nationality, sexuality and religion matter, that there are no easy universals. To imagine that reading knowingly precludes what Rorty terms inspiration but what I would call aesthetic pleasure is mistaken. Rorty advocates that we literature professors remain in a kind of perpetual adolescent crush, gushing over the beauties of the great canonical authors, but any reader of Proust knows that the recognition of blemishes and faults, venality and error thwarts neither passion nor love.

Nor is interpretation simply a rational choice or a smorgasbord where, as readers, we get to take our pick and fill our plates with whatever we choose. Literature dramatizes precisely how choices are shaped and determined for us through words. Late in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether is confronted by Chad Newsome's sister Sarah Pocock, who has come to Paris to bring Chad—and Strether—back to Woollett and "save" them from French vice. Strether asks her if she has not found Chad changed: "You don't, on your honor, appreciate Chad's fortunate development?" Mrs. Pocock exclaims, "I call it hideous" (279–80). Hideous or fortunate? Like Strether, we are called on to judge and interpret, to read signs and persons; we learn about the limitations of judgment as we watch Strether see and not see. James's novel dramatizes the limits and difficulties of thinking and interpreting, but it does not allow us to choose Mrs. Pocock's view. The reading of literature teaches how interpretation is shaped and produced by nation, religion, class—in short, discriminations of all kinds.

Rorty is right that some would make of literature and cultural studies "one more dismal social science." But there have always been bad readers, and in my experience they are often those most prone to enthusiasms. What professor of literature hasn't been approached by a scientist of one persuasion or another—life, physical, or social—and been confronted with charges similar to those Rorty mounts: "I loved literature in college, it inspired me, so why can't I understand what you are talking about?" "What's wrong with the humanities today?" "Jargon is everywhere." I don't expect to be able to understand the most recent work in visual perception or molecular biology or applied math, fields in which a specialized vocabulary and analytic precision are presumed. Producing the study of literature as inspiration and mere appreciation helps to justify inequities in the allocation of resources in a global culture where inspiration, strong feeling, and belief without knowingness seem everywhere to lead to inequity, bigotry, hatred, and death.

By "knowingness" Rorty means to invoke what he judges a fallen knowledge and to im-

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pugn what is sometimes united under the heading "political criticism." Perhaps no text I know better exemplifies the refusal of the opposition between knowingness and aesthetic pleasure than Toni Morrison's brilliant *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Her readings of Willa Cather and Mark Twain, of Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allan Poe reveal with extraordinary power the significance of racialist and racist thinking in the making of American literature, but at the same time Morrison demonstrates the pleasures and intricacies of the very texts she reads so knowingly. Her book ends with these words: "All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes" (91). Knowledge is unruly, its forms inextricable one from the other, its production the result of intellectual labor as well as of the pleasures of reading. If we are to educate and be educated, to open the minds of others and to be open to new knowledge, we must refuse simplistic oppositions: politics or aesthetics, knowingness or inspiration, cultural capital or great books. Read literature now.

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Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students?

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THE PROGRESSION FROM LANGUAGE instruction or composition to the higher discipline of literature is no longer the only or even preferred path everywhere. For example, MIT stresses that its literature program goes beyond the traditional:

> The program in Literature leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science in Literature is equivalent to the curricula in English (or literary studies) of the major liberal arts universities. The Literature curriculum is notable also for its inclusion, along with traditional literary themes and topics, of materials drawn from film and media, from popular culture, and from minority and ethnic culture. ("Major")

There is only a fuzzy agreement about what we recommend when we invite a student to major in literature. The pitch is usually straightforward: the study of literature provides a superb way to think about the world; to study societies, one's own and others; to improve one's capacity to express ideas concisely and effectively; and to gain access to a shared knowledge that is

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