

Claiming the Domain of the Literary: Mourning the Death of Reading Fiction

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For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in;
it survives,
A way of happening¹

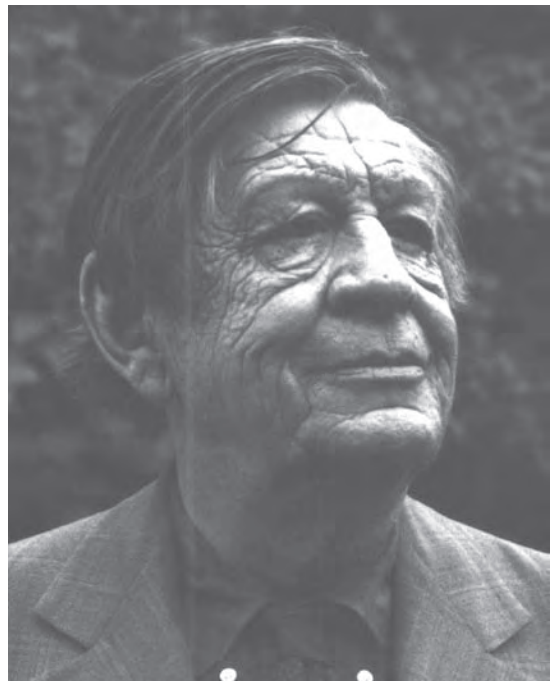
LITERATURE AS A DOMAIN of intellectual inquiry is dying since mostly what goes by the name of literature in English departments has no ‘intellectual coherence’² and ‘there is first of all the slow disappearance of literature itself from the graduate and in some places even the undergraduate curriculum. ... And for some time now, the very object of former scrutiny, the literary work, has been all but eliminated’ (ibid.).

Sadly, the works of most literary critics today are not ‘literary project[s] and will open up not a crisis *in* literature, but a general crisis and critique (social, moral, religious, political ...) for which literature or literary theory will be the privileged locus of expression.’³ Then what is it that literature majors the world over aspire to master during their time in universities? If the assumption that one studies other disciplines to become a rigorous student of literature is true, then there is no point in studying literature as an independent discipline. What is the point in majoring in English or American literature without knowing⁴ either *Emma*⁵ (1815) or *Light in August* (1932)? Literature is not a process of production and consumption. This

consumption-production idea is one of those kill-joy ideas, which destroy the desire for leading a life in letters.

One gets the idea that whatever is obscure, overtly technical—a euphemism for jargon—or incomprehensible to people at large is literature if one attends too many seminars and reads snobs like Harold Bloom. There were critics who made sense but except Terry Eagleton, that kind of a lucid writer no longer exists globally. How many can write on fiction like Mark Van Doren (1894–1972), F R Leavis (1895–1978),

W H Auden (1939–73)



Northrop Frye (1912–91), Leslie Fiedler (1917–2003), Frank Kermode (1919–2010), and Susan Sontag (1933–2004)? Gone are the days of A G Stock (see her *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought*), Tarak Nath Sen (see his *Shakespeare's Short Lines*), Rabindra Kumar Das Gupta, and Kitty Scoular Dutta. Amazon book reviewers, commentators on Goodreads, and Maria Popova are anytime more literary than say Dipesh Chakraborty or Nivedita Menon.

Contemporary professional *consumers*—a sick understanding of the immersion in good books, if ever there was one—of literature say that a new kind of critique is needed to understand literature. Is it possible that contemporary styles of writing on literature have hit such new lows that jargon spewing is preferred to clarity? Why should one care for a book if it does not make us happy and not experience *jouissance*? One reads *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) by Carson McCullers (1917–67) not to write a treatise on existential angst but one finishes the book since all of us are lonely in a *cooling universe*. McCullers gets the anxiety of growing up perfectly. Having read her one will find Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir redundant. Similarly, John le Carré is read for joy and then one realises that dogmas exist only in our imagination. Sadly, now people read various *Companions* and *Introductions* first and then may sample bits of le Carré and Graham Greene.⁶ It is not theologians or philosophers who influenced either Greene or le Carré to write; rather what the theologians and philosophers could never put down in words has been expressed with panache by everyone from Muriel Spark (1918–2006), William Golding (1911–93), Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1964) to Ian McEwan (b. 1948). Literature, as Aristotle had pointed out in his *Poetics* is superior to every known human discourse.

How does one get to *know* a text? First is the issue of reading a text deeply.⁷ To study *Emma*

does not mean to watch the movie *Emma*.⁸ Neither does reading *Emma* mean reading critics on *Emma*. It means to pick up a copy of *Emma* and read the novel; letting the story of Emma Woodhouse seep in. One of the simplest tests of assessing whether a work qualifies as literature or not⁹ is to judge the effects it has on the reader. There is the reader before reading *Emma* and the reader after reading *Emma*. If such pre- and post-reading phases are not there then the text read, and not *accessed*, is not literature. Reading Sadat Hassan Manto (1912–55), most of Stephen King (b. 1947)¹⁰ and all of Herman Hesse¹¹ (1877–1962) has that pre- and post-reading effect on all readers. This effect should precede the access to critical scholarship on the texts to be read. Reading intellectual discussions on fiction comes at a later stage. The important thing is to allow the work of fiction reach out to the reader directly without the mediation of critics. The bane of literary studies is avoiding the reading of fiction. What is required of the literary scholar is not the knowledge of what C S Lewis¹² thought of *Paradise Lost*, but whether *Paradise Lost* illustrates the magical power of words to seduce us or it appears drab to a first time reader? Very few readers are not affected by the following lines:

They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they
dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
They, hand in hand,
with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.¹³

Lord, what fools these mortals be!¹⁴

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle.¹⁵

What deity in the realms of dementia, what
rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of

hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky worm-bent tabernacle.¹⁶

The present changes the past. Looking back you do not find what you left behind.¹⁷

As if you were on fire from within.

The moon lives in the lining of your skin.¹⁸

Literary scholarship is poisoned by cram-notes, getting by with summaries on *Wikipedia*, and the urge to be avant-garde. Along with the bathwater, the baby has already been thrown out, at least within the academic study of literature. How does knowing Jacques Lacan or Julia Kristeva or the rants of Ranajit Guha help someone enjoy George R R Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, fantasy series? These copious commentators are boring compared to Martin's series or J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Kristeva's own novels are memorable flops.

The best way to begin the study of literature is to start reading novels. One of the advantages of reading fiction is that one develops a natural understanding of what literature *is*. Beginners forget that definitions of literature come out of long engagement with literature and not through definitions put forward by other readers. One cannot begin to define the experience of riding a bicycle by reading books on bicycles! The point of studying literature is to be able to understand what literature *is* without referring to literary dictionaries and the judgement of self-proclaimed literary scions. How does it help to know that reading books constitute *acts of literature* without having read Vikram Seth, Haruki Murakami, Arthur Hailey, Wilbur Smith, Robin Cook, the *Hardy Boys* and Nancy Drew, Jeffrey Archer, Dean Koontz, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, or Lars Kepler?¹⁹

Emma and *Light in August*²⁰ were chosen to illustrate a time-tested approach for mastering literature. Generally, in starting syllabi the world

over, *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Sound and the Fury* or *As I Lay Dying* are set for study. It is evident then that Jane Austen (1775–1817) and William Faulkner are great writers, so to get a feel of their works it may be a good idea to read other works by them. This is important because the work of literary scholars is to first see the connection between various works by the same writer and then move on to critical opinions on these works by scholars. It is to be noted that some literary critics can construct a self-serving myth that the best critical work is also literature but we all know that when we speak of being in love with books, we are not in love with the works of critics. Critics are a lesser lot no matter how exalted their writings on literature. The neophyte to literature should beware that she or he is beginning to study from the masters. Philosophers, the historians, and other varieties of social scientists are too empirical and mechanical for the independent discipline called literature. In literature one values the imaginative over the prosaic, the world of Harry Potter over child psychology; the factuality of Lady Macbeth over the reality of historical crackpots.

One has to emphasise the categorical difference between literature and other social sciences. The historian begins from the verity that she or he was born on a particular date at a particular

J R R Tolkien (1892–1973)



place. The job of the historian is grounded in facts and documents.²¹ The philosopher is convinced of a particular philosophy being the best, albeit that her or his philosophy means that there cannot be a monolithic system;²² the political scientist²³ is a nation's think tank—she or he knows that a particular system of governance is good: 'The cultivation of political understanding means that one becomes sensitized to the enormous complexities and drama of saying that the political order is the most comprehensive association and ultimately responsible, like no other grouping, for sustaining the physical, material, cultural, and moral life of its members.'²⁴ The members mentioned here are citizens; the traditional occupants of the *polis*.

What is dangerous in political science is that as a *praxis* oriented discipline it advocates 'order' over the *carnivalesque*. Literature on the other hand has no place for perfection and order. These two latter qualities are repressive and indicate a mediocrity detested by writers as separated in time and locale as John Milton and JM Coetzee (b. 1940). Milton's demons are orderly and perfect in their building of Pandemonium; Coetzee's English professor²⁵ defines *being* human by being abject.²⁶ While other disciplines have their *telos* in coherence; literature students should understand that they will be taught over the years the need to be broken and imperfect:

I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness ...

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient
heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in
the machinery of night ...

who passed through universities with radiant
cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-
light tragedy among the scholars of war,

who were expelled from the academies
for [being] crazy ...

who wandered around and around at

midnight in the railroad yard wondering
where to go, and went,
leaving no broken hearts ...

who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the
Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because
the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet
in Kansas.²⁷



Notes and References

1. W H Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*.
2. Edward W Said, 'Restoring Intellectual Coherence' *MLA Newsletter* 31 (Spring 1999), 2–3. Edward Said remapped literary studies and yet as this essay proves, he had his priorities right. How is it possible for someone to be interested in literature if she or he is not in love with narratives? Literary scholars are not called to be historians, ethnographers, or sociologists. The objective of the academic study of literature is to inculcate a healthy scepticism of the social sciences, the logical turn to empirical methods, and the need to be coherent. For instance, neither Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) nor Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1955), quoted in this article, celebrate perfection. The American Beat writers hated coherence as much as did Oskar Matzerath in Günter Grass's novel, *The Tin Drum* (1959).
3. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Phillip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 5. This book has some very important observations to make on Romanticism and the careful student will refer to this book while studying the Romantic Age in English Literature. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are professional philosophers and thus are useful to our demarcations of literary territory. These two thinkers know what is not the proper domain of philosophy and thus they assert what is the literary. Literary scholars often mix up literature with philosophy. We study literature because we find more value in fiction than in the works of Martin Heidegger or Giorgio Agamben. Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus* (1939), *In This House of Brede* (1969) and Nancy Maguire's *An Infinity of Little Hours* (2006) has more to

say about Catholic religious life than both the Rahner brothers—Hugo Rahner SJ and Karl Rahner SJ—Hans Küng, and Jacques Dupuis could ever pen. More Christian theology can be found in the novels of James Joyce and Umberto Eco than in the entire *Summa Theologica* of St Thomas Aquinas. More about evil can be understood by reading John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952), the novels of Ramsey Campbell, Clive Barker, and Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) than by reading the *De Malo* or other tomes on theodicy. The recently deceased Eco will be remembered not as a semiotician but as a novelist who understood the medieval world better than the historian Johan Huizinga. One gets to know more about neo-fascism by reading Stieg Larsson's (1954–2004) *Millennium* trilogy beginning with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) than by sifting through volumes of sociological data to find out why Anders Behring Breivik opened fire on so many innocent vacationers at Norway during 2011. Anti-psychotics are in vogue from 1954; we really do not need psychologists and psychoanalysts. The nearly incomprehensible Lacan and his type have no place in literary studies. Reading Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* (2003) or Patrick McGrath's *Asylum* (1996) shows the uselessness of the various talk-therapies.

4. 'The reality presented for interpretation has an objective, real, ontological exigency, as intelligible, for representation by intellect through the instrumentality of such relations: these have their foundation in the presented reality; they are in it fundamentally, potentially; and it is precisely because of this that reality is intelligible, i.e. capable of being known or understood through our human modes of thought. We may err in judging, interpreting, representing the real; but when our judgments are true it is with reality that they are in conformity.' (P Coffey, *Epistemology Or The Theory of Knowledge—An Introduction to General Metaphysics*, 2 vols (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 2.254). This is exactly the kind of knowledge literature as a discipline rejects. Literature celebrates the wisdom of 'the tigers of wrath' (William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Literature cannot be understood through our 'human modes of thought'.

5. 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.' (This is the first line of Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York: Knopf, 1991)). Notice the sparkle of the words, and readers should be ready to be vexed by literature. Literature among other things, is a very 'vexing' matter. If one is not vexed reading a novel, then that text does not qualify to be literature. Literature is that domain of academic inquiry which unsettles a person. This is in contrast to say, the study of history or philosophy. Historians try through empirical methods to be accurate. Philosophers fight with each other over the nature of truth; often seeking the absolute truth that there can be no absolute truth. For example, this author could not have been born at various dates. Nor Catholic dogma, Islamic Sunni dogmas, and Nyaya can be all true at the same time. But on the other hand Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler* (1979) is really perplexing for empiricists and social scientists, including philosophers.

6. Reading Graham Greene one understands the difficulty of the ascetical vocation more clearly than if one were to read the later Thomas Merton or Henri Nouwen.

7. See Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 148.

8. Film Studies is integral to the study of literature. Further, literature includes the study of films. Yet how does *Gone Girl* (2012), the book by Gillian Flynn and *Gone Girl* (2014), the movie match up? Stephen King's movies have often infuriated King. The power of words—yarns, tales, and the author-reader palaver cannot be supplanted by movies. How does one make a movie out of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712)? How many movies are like *Gone with the Wind* (1939)? The movie is as good as or even better than Margaret Mitchell's original novel by the same name (1936). But this is an exception. The movie *The Man Who Knew Infinity* (2015) based on the book by the same name by Robert Kanigel (1991) is a good case study in how directors destroy literature. While the

movie will vanish from our collective memory, the biography—a type of literature which at its best is to be found, for instance, in *The Master* by Colm Tóibín published in 2004—will bring forth better movies. Why does literary study deviate into film studies? What is weak or wrong within the discipline that literary scholars turn film critics or historians of ideas or philosophers to study literature? Is it possible that literature is too unmanageable for the career academic seeking tenure and funding, being totally useless, as true art is only aesthetically pleasing? How does a university grants' committee justify awarding a chair to someone who is an expert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955)? Longinus (c. 1st or 3rd century CE) is of little use compared to Horace (65–8 BCE) now since worldwide literature professors earn little for the labour they put in. See Jim Hightower, 'The Sad Death of One Penniless Adjunct Professor Is Still Making a Surprising Difference', 26 March 2014 <<http://www.alternet.org/hard-times-usa/sad-death-one-penniless-adjunct-professor-still-making-surprising-difference>> accessed 30 April 2016. Also see Nabeela Nujhat, 'Don't Major in the Humanities', 23 February 2016 <<https://unc.freshu.io/nabeela-nujhat/f6adfdb9-5a32-4d78-a09b-d0955od76da7>> accessed 30 April 2016, for the reality of eking out a livelihood after studying the humanities. Therefore, to make sense of something which has little real-life value, one has to bring in other more apparently sombre disciplines like philosophy and psychology. Who will pay if one were to speak continually of marital-infidelity and its reality while discussing Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873–77), and J M Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)? These issues have been discussed threadbare online in places as disparate as *The Chronicle for Higher Education* published from the US and the anonymous posts regarding the Russell Group of Universities to be found in forums of anonymous professors in *The Guardian*. See <<http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/series/academics-anonymous>> accessed 30 April 2016.

9. 'Perhaps one needs a different kind of approach altogether. Perhaps literature is definable not

according to whether it is fictional or "imaginative", but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an "organised violence committed on ordinary speech". Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur "Thou still unravished bride of quietness", then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because the texture, rhythm and resonance of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning—or, as the linguists might more technically put it, there is disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds. Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like "Don't you know the drivers are on strike?" do not.' (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2003), 2). Eagleton's language is deceptively simple and studying him is the antidote to reading the likes of those who were in the *Tel Quel* group. While psychoanalytic critiques of literary texts have enriched our appreciation of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, such readings through the lens of various literary theories have made us slaves to psychoanalytic, imperialist, or philosophic jargon. The neophyte to literature will do well if she or he trains herself to write like Eagleton, at least initially.

10. Not everyone will agree that Stephen King is a literary writer. That is because most have not read him. A good place to start is his *It* (1986).
11. Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930) is one of the books that an English major should read in her or his first year, though it is a German book. Often in English literature we have to read translations of important works from other languages. One's literary training is incomplete if one has not read for instance, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924).
12. The danger with critics like Lewis is that they are overtly Christian in their commentaries. So it is natural that he will be biased while reading *Paradise Lost*. On the other extreme is the danger that non-Christians will forget that Milton was a Christian writing for other Christians.

13. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 12.
14. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3, Scene 2.
15. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Act 4, Scene 2.
16. Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (Picador: London, 2010), 156.
17. Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2006), 208.
18. Pablo Neruda, *Ode to A Beautiful Nude*.
19. This author is surprised that literary scholars have rarely read Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), or Murakami's *1Q84* (2009–10) or the Kepler couple's *The Sandman* (2015) before pontificating on literature. One does not read *A Suitable Boy* to understand 1950s' India but to understand the very essence of being Indian in 2016. Seth's novel has not dated and this is why it is literature. Contrary to Seth's novel, newspapers and historical documents from the 1950s in archives are all dated. One cannot understand Japanese culture and religions by visiting Japan; but if one reads *1Q84*, the reality or whatness of being Japanese is made explicit through the course of the novel. But these are not sufficient reasons to read these novels. The truth is that they are wonderful tales which mesmerise the reader. Those words which seduce, hypnotise, and force us to forget ourselves in the here and the now, constitute the literary. On this count, much philosophy is boring and puts one to sleep! It is easier to understand the politics of racism in Denmark by reading the eerie *Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1992) by Peter Høeg. The political opens up the public space for debate and controversy. To understand politics, one can do away with studying whether subalterns can speak or otherwise to convoluted arguments about the clash of civilisations. It is again sufficient to read Høeg's *The Quiet Girl* (2006), which created the political anew in Denmark during 2006–7. One becomes political by reading popular fiction than by pouring over avowedly political tracts penned by even Antonio Gramsci. Political science as a discipline is somewhat dull and the debate keeps revolving around whether politics is a science or not!
20. See William Faulkner, *Light in August: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage, 1990). As a student progresses in the study of literature, she or he will appreciate the fact that the most important quality for literary assessment is not a willing suspension of disbelief but rather a suspension of moralising. Literature by itself is useless except for the one trait it teaches us: to be less prudish. Good and bad as *categorical imperatives* are childish and therefore, to be discarded. *Light in August* reorients our holier-than-thou attitudes. Literature teaches us that being abject, broken, and uncertain is being human. Here one would also want to refer to Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic* (1887).
21. It is impossible that Lord Clive died in a certain year and also in another year. But in fictions of time travel, Lord Clive's death may be preponed. And it is perfectly plausible that there may be many Lord Clives in multiverses and such works are studied as reality by scholars of literature. For example, one can definitely study Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* and Stephen King's *11/12/63*.
22. Literary studies have been contaminated by too much dependence on philosophy. The latter is a different discipline altogether. Unfortunately, the philosophers we study as props during the course of our literary studies are bad writers. For example, Martin Heidegger and much before him, Immanuel Kant, are very bad writers. Hegel is nearly unreadable.
23. The word 'political' is an ideologically loaded word and the beginner of literary studies should take note of it for her or his future work.
24. Sheldon S Wolin, 'Political Theory as a Vocation', *The American Political Science Review*, 63/4 (December 1969), 1062–82; 1077.
25. David Lurie's seduction of Melanie Isaacs in Coetzee's *Disgrace* is all too human. Lurie is Everyman and his life is a sign against the times, the moral highhandedness of prudish colleagues in stifling academia.
26. Abjection as a psychoanalytic trope has been popularised by Julia Kristeva. Here it is worth noticing abjection's correlation to the trope of the Suffering Servant—the Messiah, Jesus Christ—within Christianity. To be abject is to be fully human. To desire perfection is a Freudian fixation.
27. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*.