

# Conditional Goods and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again

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We literary scholars have a notorious flair for the dramatic, and I suspect that for many, the first impulse when confronted with the question “does literature matter?” is to say something like “of course it matters, and anyone who doesn’t see that is a heartless brute,” or—a more probable response these days—“of course it doesn’t matter, and anyone who doesn’t see that is blinded by the shimmering allure of cultural capital.” But things, in reality, are never that simple. It’s not just that the word “literature” has carried a variety of meanings over the years. It’s not even just that literary texts affect different people in different ways (sometimes indeed the same person in different ways at separate points in her life). It’s that they tend, very often, not to matter on their own. In order to matter, plays and poems and stories need a little help from us; they are therefore neither automatically futile (as the cultural-capital brigade would have us believe) nor automatically beneficial (as the moral-improvement brigade would have us believe), but instead something whose importance depends in part on our involvement, something we can assist in mattering. They are also something we will *fail* to assist in mattering, as long as we remain stuck in our cynical and wishful pieties. While the wishful pieties have alienated potential readers, the cynical ones have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies; against that background, we have a lot of work to do if literature as a whole is one day to matter again.

## 1

Let’s start from what I hope will be a helpful distinction. When we think about things that matter, I’d like to suggest, we tend to see them as falling into one of three broad categories: *intrinsic goods*, *constructed goods*, and *conditional goods*. Oxygen, for example, is inherently valuable for creatures like us; we don’t have to be a certain kind of person, have a given attitude, or make any effort, in order to find it necessary for our survival. A teddy-bear, by contrast, is in itself just a bundle of cloth

stitched together, but we have it in our power (if we are under the age of 7, at least) to turn it into the single most important thing in our lives. So let's call that a constructed good. But in between these two extremes—the objectively indispensable, the objectively superfluous—there is a third category, into which fall objects like blueprints.

A blueprint for a supercomputer may well be of immense value: lose it, and opportunities for immense achievements are gone at a stroke. That said, the blueprint is of value only if the materials are available, if there are skilled technicians on hand to assemble them, and—crucially—if we know how to read blueprints in the first place. (In a dystopian future, it is easy to imagine humans having all the blueprints in the world but not being able to assemble so much as a bicycle. I'm sure *I* couldn't.) Another way of putting this is to say that conditional goods require an investment on our side (unlike oxygen), but give back more than we put in (unlike teddy-bears). Now it turns out that literary texts—the more interesting ones, at least—fall under this third category, the category of conditional goods. They matter tremendously, but only if they are read, and indeed only if they are read in a certain way; they matter, in other words, only if the right kind of reader continues to exist. And that's what has started to be in serious doubt, as the right kind of reader hovers, like the Philippine tarsier, on the very verge of extinction.

## 2

To be fair, literature confers some of its benefits directly; to that extent it continues to make a difference, even for those people—and they are now many—who consider literature a waste of time and themselves as blissfully spared any contact with it. After all, while relatively few these days are reading *Jane Eyre* (or even *Harry Potter*), enormous numbers of people are watching fictions on screens large and small. Now it seems to me that if drama falls under the general rubric “literature,” then filmic or televisual fiction—another type of spectacle that generally starts life as a written script—may as well fall under it too. (All definitions of that loose and baggy term are of course controversial and possibly pointless, but I'm going to proceed on the assumption that “literature” should include the epic, lyric, and dramatic modes of “poetry,” together with their modern offshoots.<sup>1</sup>) The good news, then, is that many of those who profess to despise literature are in fact consuming it in vast quantities. The even better news is that they are not just being ruined by it. Offsetting the well-documented negative consequences are a series of moderately positive consequences that Wayne Booth, in his (in many ways sagacious, but somewhat excessive) condemnation of television did not entirely keep in mind.<sup>2</sup>

There is, of course, nothing to guarantee that a film or television show will deliver anything beyond entertainment. (While entertainment is arguably a good, I'm not sure it would count as making something *matter*.) But then again, there is nothing to guarantee that a novel or a play will deliver anything beyond entertainment, either. And in the meantime, a host of moving pictures *do* provide other things for their consumers, even without those consumers taking up a particularly active or sophisticated stance toward them. For one thing, they are pretty good at "defamiliarization," that technique for giving us back the world celebrated by Percy Shelley and made famous by Viktor Shklovsky:<sup>3</sup> think of the wonderful scene in *American Beauty* in which Ricky (Wes Bentley) shows Jane (Thora Birch) a film of a plastic bag blowing in the breeze, "the most beautiful thing," he says, "I have ever filmed." They are also pretty good at eliciting emotion (think here of *The Piano*, or of any number of similarly powerful works), and though emotion-eliciting is by no means without its dangers, Wordsworth is surely right that some human beings—especially the blasé urbanites among us—are in danger of losing the ability to experience the full force of events, in need of a mechanism for reconnecting us to affect; it is not absurd to think of certain films and television shows as permitting us to deepen our feelings in a given domain, perhaps even to feel them (genuinely) for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

Finally—to stop at a third effect, though there are doubtless others—filmic fictions, like fictions of all kinds, are excellent at generating micro-communities forged out of shared affection. Perhaps this feature is less apparent now, when there are so many television shows to choose from at any given moment and hence fewer "water-cooler conversations" about the latest episode; still, to the extent that the worldwide web has replaced the water-cooler, the micro-community is arguably even more widespread. (There is a fan site for just about everything.) And while such micro-communities are not about to solve all of our social problems, we might be forgiven for believing, with Ralph Ellison, that they form important (if fragile) bridges across racial, economic, and cultural divides.<sup>5</sup>

### 3

It has to be admitted, however, that to the extent that literature matters automatically, it does not matter very much. It would be naive to assume that the benefits conferred directly—defamiliarization, reconnection to affect, the creation of micro-communities, and so on—are guaranteed to outweigh the costs, such that an individual watching endless reruns of *Gilligan's Island* should be considered as leading a life worth living. In order for literature to matter in the full sense of the word, it clearly needs to do more. And in order to do more, it needs to exact more from *us*; what is required, in order to tip the scales, is a certain degree of ambition

on the side of the artwork, combined with a certain degree of industry on the side of the viewer. At its highest reaches, literature is a doubly conditional good.

Consider, here, the long-running television series *Lost* (2004-10), a meandering tale involving survivors of a plane crash stranded on a mysterious island and attempting to return home (or to be more precise, attempting to react effectively to their situation, whether this turns out to involve returning home or something else entirely). Not only did the writers do their part, by creating a fiction in which scrutiny of details and attempts to detect coherence actually paid off from time to time—not always, admittedly, yet where it counted—but the audience did its part too, creating a monumental database under the name *Lostpedia*, an extraordinarily elaborate archive which sought to establish coherence, identify causes, make connections, posit a “gestalt,” deduce an overall logic.<sup>6</sup> In contributing to *Lostpedia*, then, many viewers were giving a workout (however inadvertent) to their skills of pattern recognition, ratcheting up from an ability to detect simple patterns—X is good, Y is evil—to an ability to recognize complex arrangements, to incorporate numerous apparently insignificant details (my personal favorite: a painting of scales hanging in the office of corporate tycoon Charles Widmore), and to maintain gestalts at the level of hypotheses, continually revisable in the light of new data. (Mystery and detective stories almost always encourage the deployment of such skills, but the viewing community of *Lost* appears to have decided to make its intuitions explicit, to articulate them, and to test them against those of other viewers; and as we know from numerous studies, active engagement dramatically increases learning.) It seems to me that such a benefit is not to be sneezed at. To be sure, it is a morally neutral skill, and does not contribute (directly) to improved social relations; it is even a *prudentially* neutral skill, since it can serve conspiracy theorists as much as whistleblowers. Still, let us at least have *smart* conspiracy theorists. And let us, in general, have citizens who can connect the dots.

Analogous remarks could be made about the canny deployment of moral ambiguity in *The Wire* (2002-08), another case of ambition on the part of creators (David Simon and Ed Burns, principally) calling for active involvement on the part of viewers. As with *Lost*, so here hypotheses—but this time *moral* hypotheses—are subject to extensive revision over the course of the series. (Is McNulty bending the rules to do what he knows to be right, or is he simply a loose cannon, fuelled by alcohol and adrenaline addiction? Just how guilty is Bubbles, and to what extent is his guilt a matter of what Bernard Williams calls “moral luck”?) The resultant ambiguity can serve as the catalyst for self-understanding, for a clarification of one’s own intuitions about hierarchies of value, means-

ends relationships, the tolerability or otherwise of low-level infractions, and so on—not to mention as a catalyst for the imaginative inhabitation of antithetical viewpoints, a process so essential to the health of a democracy.<sup>8</sup> But again, it will only do so if we take the time to reflect, if we patiently test out our theories against our (initial and subsequent) reactions, and if we bring our ideas into what Michael Saler has called the “public sphere of the imagination.”<sup>9</sup> And this can only happen if we invest time and energy (the more we consume the less we produce, even at the level of thoughts), which in turn can only happen if we recognize it as *worthwhile* to invest time and energy, which in turn, as I will explain in a moment, ironically depends on us ignoring much of what we have been told by prominent members of the literary establishment.

## 4

The same is true, a fortiori, for the most valuable works of literature, the ones whose mattering is rapidly becoming unavailable to the vast majority of the citizenry. I am thinking, here, of texts like Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, one of whose primary functions is to set before us a choice of genres (picaresque, quest, detective story, Bildungsroman), each subtended by a different top value and each involving a different shape given to a life; absent some familiarity with the notion of genre, and absent the awareness that generic questions can be at the heart of narrative explorations of lives, that function is simply out of reach.<sup>10</sup> I am thinking, too, of texts like Mallarmé’s “*Ses purs ongles*,” Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, Fellini’s *8 ½*, Kafka’s *The Trial*, and Plato’s *Gorgias*, works which, as I have attempted to argue elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> have as their central aim the *fine-tuning of the mental capacities*. (Follow me to the footnotes if you want to know why Platonic dialogues could be considered works of fiction and hence works of literature under most definitions.<sup>12</sup>) Thanks, in each case, to the deployment of a particularly salient formal device—authorial irony in Plato, antithesis in Beckett, reflexivity in Mallarmé, titration of usable clue and dead-end in Kafka—novels and poems and films and dialogues like these function as training-grounds for skills of logical reasoning (Plato), of judgment-formation under conditions of uncertainty (Kafka), of Zen-like detachment (Beckett), of the maintenance of necessary illusions (Mallarmé, Fellini), even of the transcendence of the worldly (Mark). But the opportunity, in each case, is restricted to those who recognize it for what it is, and who take the relevant text up on it: arguing with Socrates in Plato (rather than just accepting his often unsupported claims); wrestling with uncertainty in Kafka (rather than just leaving it where it is); coming to a point with Mallarmé where one can hold the semantic levels in one’s mind at once (rather than just being excited at how difficult that is); or

extending metaphors with Mark (rather than just seeking a “meaning” for the often obscure pronouncements).<sup>13</sup>

It is at these highest reaches, to repeat, that literature becomes a maximally conditional good. If the defamiliarization of plastic bags results more or less automatically from watching *American Beauty*, and if moral clarification in *The Wire* requires the addition of the right kind of mental (and social) effort, with Mallarmé and Morrison the necessity of effort is coupled with an additional barrier, the barrier this time of literary proficiency.<sup>14</sup> (The same is true, incidentally, for that contact with other minds of which Simone de Beauvoir so eloquently speaks: without an adequate understanding of the materials, it is impossible to see what is being done with them, impossible to see where convention ends and innovation begins. Literary writing, as Frank Farrell has powerfully argued, lives at the intersection between self and world, between language as personal property and language as *Gemeingut*; no way, then, for us to follow an author’s renegotiation of her relationship to the world, let alone to perform our own acts of linguistic renegotiation, if tropes and figures and structures and traditions remain a closed book to us.<sup>15</sup>) So, while the likes of Mallarmé and Morrison matter the most—or rather *can* matter the most—they are, as it stands, in serious danger of ceasing to matter very much at all.<sup>16</sup>

## 5

One often hears that the blame for this newfound precariousness attaches to shifts in economic conditions (outsourcing, changes in hiring trends, and periodic crises) as well as to certain technological developments (text-messaging, internet-surfing, the blogosphere<sup>17</sup>). But while there may be something to all of that, the fact remains that we ourselves haven’t helped. With some important exceptions, we have not made a particularly good case, over the past forty years or so, for why people should be mulling over Morrison and ploughing their way through Proust. Quite the contrary—some of us have denied that there is any reason at all for such strange behavior: “to the question ‘of what use are the humanities?’,” wrote a Very Famous Theorist a few years ago, “the only honest answer is none whatsoever.”<sup>18</sup> Others have informed would-be Austen-readers that works like *Pride and Prejudice* are merely avenues to the acquisition of “cultural capital,” otherwise known as the ability to show off at cocktail parties.<sup>19</sup> A third group has gone further still, insisting that such novels are instruments of ideological oppression. (In the astonishing words of another Very Famous Theorist, Jane Austen’s novels were exclusively designed “to keep the empire more or less in place.”<sup>20</sup>) And a fourth group has suggested that literary works are mere “rhetorical

mystifications" (to quote yet another Very Famous Theorist), inevitably failing in whatever intentions they may have.<sup>21</sup>

The alternative to such dour pronouncements has generally been a series of equally extreme statements in the other direction, claiming for literature the kinds of benefits it couldn't possibly deliver. Thus we hear that it yields Important Truths about the Human Condition (yes, some people are still arguing for that, especially where the "truths" in question are properly demoralizing<sup>22</sup>); it catalyzes mystical insight into the oneness of being; or it improves readers morally, whether via "messages," empathetic engagement, or the honing of our social sensitivities.<sup>23</sup> Our arguments have veered from the hopelessly optimistic to the absurdly cynical, leaving would-be readers with a choice between a scarcely credible rationale on the one side and a crushing sense of futility on the other. A few brave souls—such as Rita Felski, Alexander Nehamas, and Lisa Zunshine<sup>24</sup>—have offered robust counter-accounts, with the crucial combination of plausibility and optimism, but it has been hard for many to hear their moderate voices against the trumpets of triumph and the din of doom: shiny objects, to change the metaphor, have a way of drawing all eyes in their direction.

Unfortunately, both the Pollyannas of ethical criticism and the Eeyores of High Theory have done serious damage to literature's conditional capacity to matter.<sup>25</sup> As long as it is generally assumed that "messages" are all we stand to gain from reading novels, for example, we shouldn't be surprised if many emerge from the novel-reading experience with no better sense of who they are as individuals: to the extent that they take a given work as "saying" something, they are less likely to see that the real source of the belief in question is in fact their own set of commitments, and less likely therefore to be able to learn something about themselves.<sup>26</sup> (Indeed, we shouldn't be surprised if many simply don't bother with novels at all. Why spend all those hours immersed in a fictional world when one could simply read the "message" on the internet?)<sup>27</sup> And as long as readers are looking for failure, we shouldn't be surprised if their mental capacities do not end up fine-tuned at the end of the process. (Recall that Plato's *Gorgias* does its work thanks to a layer of authorial irony; under a reading strategy devoted to the exposure of inadvertent error, such irony is practically invisible.<sup>28</sup>) Today's educated adults could be forgiven for thinking that if the most famous experts say novel-reading is essentially pointless, and the second most famous experts promise improbable outcomes, they might as well stick with the *Wall Street Journal*.

As I see it, then, denials of the value of literature have turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy: given the special status of sophisticated literary texts, it turns out that if you keep on saying long enough that they have

no value, they really *will*, in the end, come to have no value. The cynical pieties we established in the seventies and eighties have been extremely effective, in ways their inventors arguably did not anticipate. (They probably envisioned an endless stream of naively enthusiastic undergraduates, just waiting to be *épatés*.) These days, for all the cultural centrality and genuine ambition of film and television, literature as a whole does not matter, because—like the imaginary blueprint for which there are no engineers—it has been *made* not to matter.

The good news is, of course, that the same process can in principle be reversed. It's not certain that we can succeed (note to suspicious hermeneuts: it is vastly easier to destroy than to rebuild), but it is at least not inconceivable that we might, in the long run, turn the vicious circle into a benevolent spiral. We can start by joining the chorus of moderate voices pushing for a positive, reasonable, and pluralist understanding of literature's effects, such as clarification, training, formal modeling, and reconnection to affect.<sup>29</sup> We can start by reworking the canon of literary theory, so that more attention goes to the moderates and less to the extremists. (A few explicit retractions, like that of Bruno Latour, wouldn't hurt either.<sup>30</sup>) Who knows, perhaps literature as a whole—even Mallarmé, even Kafka—may matter again in another forty years. In the meantime, while there are still some readers left (three cheers for electronic books), we may as well tell them why they are not wasting their time, and why they could be wasting it even less if they were reading Toni Morrison. At the end of the day, we'd be doing them all a favor.<sup>31</sup>

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### Notes

1. These would include the graphic novel and various forms of popular music, particularly those that—like hip-hop—place a relatively heavy emphasis on the lyrics. (In other cases, the lyrics can be of such minor importance that major mishearings, sometimes known as “mondegreens,” become quite common. Michael Stipe’s mumbled articulation never hurt REM’s album sales, and even in other cases, listeners tend to give careful attention only to a small subset of lines.)
2. See Wayne C. Booth, “The Company We Keep: Self-Making in Imaginative Art, Old and New,” *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, New York: Oxford UP, 1987: 382-418, pp. 397-407; for an opposing view, see Alexander Nehamas, “Serious Watching,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.1 (1990): 157-80.
3. Poetry, according to Shelley, removes the “film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being” (Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994 [1821], 956-69, p. 967); “the purpose of art,” agrees Shklovsky, “is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’” (“Art as Technique,” trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1965: 3-24, p. 12). Related claims have been made by Boris Tomashevsky (“Thematics,” *ibid.*, 61-98, p.85); Boris Eichenbaum



- (“The Theory of the ‘Formal Method,’” *ibid.*, 100–141, pp. 113–14); Susan Sontag (“Against Interpretation,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Picador, 2001: 3–14, pp. 13–14); and Jean Paulhan, in whose view “poetry is always showing us, in strange ways [étrangement], the dog, the stone, or the ray of sun which habit concealed from us . . . poetry [is] seeing with fresh eyes what everyone always sees” (*The Flowers of Tarbes; or, Terror in Literature*, trans. Michael Syrotinski, Urbana: U Illinois P, 2006 [1941], pp. 16, 47).
4. See William Wordsworth, “Of the Principles of Poetry and the ‘Lyrical Ballads’ (1798–1802),” *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, London: E. Moxon, 1876: 79–105, p. 83, and also Thomas de Quincey, “The Poetry of Pope,” *Collected Writings* vol. 11, ed. David Masson, Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1889–90: 51–95, p. 56. In pointing to the desensitizing effect of urbanization, Wordsworth is anticipating Georg Simmel’s remarks about “Blasiertheit”; see “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, Chicago: U Chicago P, 1971 [1903]: 324–39, pp. 325–30.
  5. Ralph Ellison rightly saw his writings as bringing together readers of different races: “when [the novel is] successful in communicating its vision of experience, that magic thing occurs between the world of the novel and the reader—indeed, between reader and reader in their mutual solitude—which we know as communion” (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, New York: Modern Library, 1995, p. 696; my emphasis). Compare Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom art is a space of ideal community, in which local differences are overcome by a shared love for and/or understanding of an object. (*The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986, p. 63.) On micro-communities forged out of shared affection, see Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004 (p. 3 *et passim*) and Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007, pp. 81–82.
  6. Lostpedia is to be found at [http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page).
  7. Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1982: 20–39.
  8. For literature revealing us to ourselves, see (among others) Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1975, p. 574; Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, 126–60, p. 142; Richard Eldridge, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 4, 11, 100, 216–17, 223, 226; Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p. 25; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 194, 216, 224, 230; and Candace Vogler, “The Moral of the Story,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2007): 5–35, pp. 18–19. For the connection to ambiguity, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: U Texas P, 1981, pp. 311, 341, 345–46.
  9. Michael Saler, “At Home in the Ironic Imagination: The Rational Vernacular and Spectacular Texts,” *Vernacular Modernism*, ed. Bernard Huppauff and Maiken Umbach, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005: 53–83, p. 63. For additional thoughts on the value of readerly communities, see Simon Stow, “Reading Our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 410–22, pp. 417–20 and Nehamas, *Only a Promise*, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82.
  10. This is not to say, of course, that contemporary consumers of literature in its various forms are entirely unaware of genre categories; on the contrary, a number of recent successes—such as the *Scream* films, or the sitcom *Community*—indicate a widespread command of (and interest in) generic conventions. Readers and viewers are, however, not always aware of the *stakes* of such conventions, the distinct value hierarchy subtending each genre, or the costs and benefits of viewing one’s life under the aegis of one or another of them. I am grateful to Jennifer Fleissner for pressing me on this point.
  11. See my “Formative Fictions: Imaginative Literature and the Training of the Capacities” (*Poetics Today* 33.2 (2012): 167–214, esp. pp. 189–94) and *How to Do Things with Fictions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012 (*passim*).

12. There is, of course, no word for “fiction” in ancient Greek, but that did not prevent fourth-century Athenians (or their fifth-century predecessors) from understanding and enjoying plays involving invented characters and situations. (They did not, for instance, imagine that the sex strike depicted in Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* had actually taken place in their own homes.) And it seems to me that fourth-century Athenians may well have understood at least some of Plato’s dialogues along similar lines. Several of those dialogues, after all, feature a Socrates whose opinions depart from those that are traditionally ascribed to the historical figure. And in certain cases, there are blatant anachronisms—such as the combination, in the *Gorgias*, of Pericles having just died (503c) and of Archelaus’s reign being in full swing (470d)—which would have been immediately apparent to contemporary readers. On the implicit understanding of fictionality in ancient Greece, see Margalit Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 26–27 and Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 230–31.
13. The above list of potential effects should not be taken as exhaustive; see my “Formative Fictions” (pp. 169–77) for a fuller list. To be clear, the claim is that different (groups of) texts perform different functions, not that all texts perform all functions.
14. Strangely, the anonymous reviewer for this issue feels that “with the insistence on tuning and training, we miss the seduction of complexity [and] opacity.” Many of the authors I mention above (Kafka, Beckett, Mallarmé) are positively famous for their opacity, and in the case of those who aren’t (Mark, Plato), I often find myself arguing that they *should* be. Opacity is in no way antithetical to training; on the contrary, it is often an essential component.
15. See Frank B. Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004 (pp. 159, 187–89, *et passim*), and Joshua Landy, “Philosophy to the Rescue,” *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 405–19. Simone de Beauvoir’s beautiful formulation—“et c’est ça le miracle de la littérature et qui la distingue de l’information: c’est qu’une vérité *autre* devienne mienne”—is in *Que peut la littérature?*, Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1965, p.82. (A rough translation: “that is the miracle of literature, the thing that distinguishes it from information: an *other* truth becomes mine.”) For further thoughts on style as indicator of perspective, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953, pp. 226–31; Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981, pp. 198–207; Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust*, New York: Oxford, 2004, chap. 1; and Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, New York: Vintage, 1951, pp. 120–23.
16. Maybe I need to insist on this point, since the anonymous reviewer seems not to have noticed it. He or she complains that my warm words for television and film (which, for her or him, do not count as literature) constitute an injustice toward novels, poems, and plays. “If non-literary forms of fiction today are more successful than literature in providing this ‘mental training,’” s/he asks, “then why do we even care about literature?” I am, however, not claiming that all forms of mental training are available via films and television shows. There is, for instance, no moving-picture equivalent of *The Unnamable*. But there is, conversely, no novelistic equivalent of Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation*; as is well known, certain effects are far more difficult (if indeed possible) to produce in a novel, and certain effects are far more difficult (if indeed possible) to produce in a movie. We do not have to be uncharitable towards ambitious filmic and televisual works in order to recognize the genuine value of ambitious novels, poems, and plays.
17. On the last-mentioned, see Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, New York: Norton, 2010.
18. Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?” New York Times, January 6, 2008, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>. Fish’s

statement becomes all the more shocking when one considers that he is tarring not just literary study but the entirety of humanistic inquiry with the same brush. Even those who consider *literary* study pointless (whether gloriously pointless or just pointless *simpliciter*) must surely accept that *philosophical* training has clear and measurable effects on minds, over and above its contribution to the richness of experience. This fact is not lost on management consultancy firms, which have a soft spot for philosophy BAs: see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/20/choosingadegree.highereducation>.

19. The situation with Bourdieu is complicated, and it is frequently possible to interpret him simply as saying that works of art gain an *added* value thanks to their social status, a spurious cachet to overlay across their own inherent worth. That would be an eminently reasonable claim, especially given the fact that popular forms (like television) are just as capable of yielding important works as forms with more restricted audiences. Consider, however, the following famous passage from *Distinction*: “the value of culture, the supreme fetish, is generated in the initial investment implied by the mere fact of entering the game, joining in the collective belief in the value of the game.... Distinction and pretension, high culture and middle-brow culture—like, elsewhere, high fashion and fashion, haute coiffure and coiffure, and so on—only exist through each other, and it is the relation... of their respective production apparatuses and clients which produces the value of culture and the need to possess it. It is in these struggles between objectively complicit opponents that the value of culture is generated, or, which amounts to the same thing, belief in the value of culture” (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 250). Here, the choice between reading *Song of Solomon* and reading *The Da Vinci Code* (or between watching *The Wire* and watching *Gilligan’s Island*) is no more significant than the choice between a fancy haircut and a functional one. Just as a twenty-dollar handbag does the job of holding my stuff every bit as well as a three-thousand-dollar handbag, so, presumably, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is a perfectly adequate substitute for *Hamlet*; the notion there might be anything inherently valuable or even interesting in *Hamlet* and *Song of Solomon* is an illusion, a fetish, a social construction. (In the same paragraph, Bourdieu goes on to suspect “that culture might be devoid of intrinsic interest, and that interest in culture is... a simple social artifact, a particular form of fetishism” (*ibid.*)) Cultural capital is *all* we gain, then, from reading Shakespeare and Morrison. This is a deeply unfortunate view.
20. Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 74.
21. That theorist is of course Paul de Man. For de Man, criticism is essentially “the deconstruction of literature, the reduction to the rigors of grammar of rhetorical mystifications” (*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1979, p. 17). Proust’s novel, for example, speciously presents metaphor as superior to metonymy but inadvertently reveals that there is no real difference between the two: “the relation between the literal and figural senses of a metaphor is always, in this sense, metonymic, though motivated by a constitutive tendency to pretend otherwise” (*ibid.*, p. 71; for reasons why this analysis of Proust may not hold up, see my *Philosophy as Fiction*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73). De Man then extrapolates from this case to the entirety of world production, writing that “the whole of literature would respond in similar fashion” (p. 16). It is true that de Man sometimes views the “deconstruction” as *deliberate*, so that the works in question would actually be *succeeding* at something, albeit something negative and highly circumscribed (*ibid.*, pp. 17, 78). But in many places he sees that “deconstruction” as the work of language, against the intentions of the author. “Proust can affect such confidence in the persuasive power of his metaphors,” writes de Man, “that he pushes stylistic defiance to the point of stating the assumed synthesis of light and dark in the incontrovertible language of numerical ratio” (*ibid.*, pp. 60-1): in this

- passage at least, the text is presented as simply mystified, undermined in spite of itself by “semi-automatic grammatical patterns” (*ibid.*, p. 16).
22. René Girard, for example, believes that literature is only valuable when it transmits what he takes to be the Deep Truth of Human Existence, namely that no desire is ever spontaneous. (For reasons why we should not believe this “truth,” or even see Girard’s favorite writers as endorsing it, see my “Deceit, Desire, and the Literature Professor: Why Girardians Exist,” *Republics of Letters* 3:1 (2012), <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/108>.) Iris Murdoch agrees that literature has something to tell us, though in her case the “truth” in question is that “nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous” (*The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge, 2001 [1970], p. 85). A truly dispiriting, if infinitely well-meaning, view of human existence.
  23. I have argued at some length against these three variants of moralism in “A Nation of Madame Bovarys: On the Possibility and Desirability of Moral Improvement through Fiction,” *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Garry Hagberg, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008: 63-94 and in “Corruption by Literature,” *Republics of Letters* 1.2 (2010). Briefly, the trouble with the message position is that readers typically “learn” only what they already believed going in (and it’s not clear, all things considered, that we should want them to do otherwise); the trouble with the empathy position is that warm feelings for fictional characters may well not translate into real-world pro-social behavior (indeed, a keen understanding of other minds can be used for ill as well as for good); and the trouble with the fine-tuning position is, relatedly, that skills of social awareness can easily be pressed into the service of Machiavellian ambition. For the message position, see e.g. Mark William Roche (*Why Literature Matters in the Twenty-First Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 84); for the empathy position, see e.g. Richard Rorty (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989, 192 and *Critical Dialogues*, ed. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 132-3); for the fine-tuning position, see e.g. Martha Nussbaum (“‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987: 167-91); for the Machiavellian intelligence approach, see Blakey Vermeule (*Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009, pp. 30-34); and for the lack of evidence indicating a connection between narrative empathy and altruism, see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, pp. xxv, 15-26, 105, 146, 168, 15-26. A new theory has been proposed by Jonathan Gottschall, according to whom the rewards allotted to sympathetic characters and the punishments meted out to unsympathetic characters fill us with a spurious belief in the justice of the world, thus giving us an incentive to behave pro-socially. (“Fiction’s happy endings,” writes Gottschall, “make us believe in a lie: that the world is more just than it actually is”; “believing that lie has important effects for society.” See Gottschall, “Why fiction is good for you,” *Boston Globe*, April 29, 2012, [http://articles.boston.com/2012-04-29/ideas/31417849\\_1\\_fiction-morality-happy-endings](http://articles.boston.com/2012-04-29/ideas/31417849_1_fiction-morality-happy-endings).) This view seems to assume that tragedy, which at various moments has been the central cultural form, simply never existed. Or indeed film noir. Or realism of the Flaubert (let alone Céline) variety. Or all kinds of other things.
  24. See Felski, *op. cit.*; Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise*, *op. cit.*; Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006.
  25. The deleterious effects of ethical criticism are more pronounced outside of the academy, where it so often focuses on (a) supposedly harmful or edifying “messages” and (b) characters for emulation and avoidance. As Francine Prose delightfully puts it, “the new model English-class graduate values empathy and imagination less than the ability to make quick and irreversible judgments, to entertain and maintain simplistic immovable opinions about guilt and innocence. . . . What results from these educational methods is a mode of thinking (or, more accurately, of *not* thinking) that equips our kids for the

- future: Future McDonald's employees. Future corporate board members." (Francine Prose, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read: How American High School Students Learn to Loathe Literature," *Harper's* September 1999: 76-84, pp. 83-84.)
26. As Hervé Pichérit has demonstrated, Proust's narrator gives Swann's love for Odette a variety of mutually incompatible explanations. Most readers simply pick one and attribute that to Proust, deciding, for example, that Proust sees all love as driven by anxiety. More astute readers notice the range of options. And the ideal reader, Pichérit persuasively argues, is the one who takes the further step of inferring something about her own psychology from her initial choice. (See Pichérit, "The Impossibly Many Loves of Charles Swann: The Myth of Proustian Love and the Reader's "Impression" in *Un Amour De Swann*," *Poetics Today* 28.4 (2007): 619-52.) That kind of insight is well-nigh unimaginable under a régime of "messages."
  27. In *Reality Hunger* (New York: Knopf, 2010, sec. 379), David Shields complains that with some novels "you have to read seven hundred pages to get the handful of insights that were the reason the book was written." That's pretty good evidence, I think, that presenting novels as incredibly inefficient insight-delivery mechanisms is an excellent way of deterring at least some people from reading them.
  28. The same, of course, is true for Proust: since, as we just saw, several of the aphorisms produced by his narrator conflict with one another, they cannot all be the author's considered opinion.
  29. It is worth stressing the importance of effect-pluralism in successful accounts of literary mattering. One of the problems with "literary Darwinism" is that it tends to assume—as it rather has to—that all literary texts serve an identical set of purposes. For powerful critiques of literary Darwinism (on these and other grounds), see William Deresiewicz, "Adaptation: On Literary Darwinism," *The Nation* (2009) and Jonathan Kramnick, "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 315-47.
  30. Bruno Latour works in science studies, not literary theory, but I still think his retraction is exemplary. Writing in *Critical Inquiry*, he acknowledged in 2004 that his and others' hyperbolic attack on science had been gleefully seized upon by global-warming deniers. (No surprise, perhaps: consider the disdain with which the Bush administration treated "the reality-based community.") "Entire PhD programs," wrote Latour, "are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always the prisoner of language, that we always speak from one standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said?" ("Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-48, pp. 226-7.) Whether or not it's enough, I for one think it's a really good start.
  31. This essay was written during a period of leave at the National Humanities Center; I am grateful to the Center and to the Florence Gould Foundation for their extremely generous support.