

## Why Literature Matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Why do we need today to ask why literature matters? First, the humanities are suffering from a crisis. Whereas society immediately recognizes the value of science and technology, the value of literature and the humanities is less apparent to many persons. Second, even within the humanities, literature itself is neglected. There is a tendency, at least in Europe and the United States, to downplay the reading and interpretation of literature itself and instead to elevate theory. Even when literature is discussed, critics tend to focus on its broader production and reception context, not on the works themselves.

Why should we focus on the literary works themselves? Under aesthetics we traditionally consider three subfields: production aesthetics, artwork aesthetics, and reception aesthetics. All literature can be studied from these three perspectives, which might be viewed along a spectrum, as there is natural overlap in many areas. In production aesthetics we deal with those forces that contribute to the generation of a work, such as biography, including issues related to the author's gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; the social status and economic position of the artist; and the broader historical context. Artwork aesthetics analyzes and evaluates the form of the artwork, its content, and the interrelation of form and content and of parts to the whole. Reception aesthetics addresses, for example, the norms and conventions of interpretive communities as they shift over time and the history of a given work's reception.

In recent decades production and reception aesthetics have tended to dominate. Nonetheless, while every intellectual product has a sphere of production and reception, not every intellectual product is an artwork. From this distinction follows the superiority of artwork aesthetics, for only here is the artwork analyzed as a work of art. Sociological and historical methodologies are limited insofar as they focus on the external dimensions of an artwork, not its distinguishing features, not what makes it an artwork. If criticism is to focus on what makes art uniquely art, it must attend primarily not to production or reception, but to artwork aesthetics, focusing thereby on the content and form of art, their interrelation, and the connection of the parts to the whole. The excellence of an artwork depends on the quality of its idea and its form, not on its having been created by someone who lived in a given era or who had a particular background, traits common to many individuals whose intellectual products do not interest us in the least, nor does it depend on a given culture's reception of the work, as not all cultures have approached works with categories of the highest cogency. To elevate production over the work would be to find oneself arguing that a work is good because it was created by a certain genius or a person with particular characteristics or because the work emerged during a certain era. To elevate reception over the work would be to find oneself arguing that a work is good because people say that it is good instead of making the more rational claim that people find a work good because it is good, that is, because it fulfills the highest qualities of artwork aesthetics. It is of course commonly the case that the works of a great artist will be great and that the works elevated by tradition will be great, but neither is necessarily the case.

The priority of artwork aesthetics does not eliminate the value of production and reception aesthetics. Hegel showed in his grand survey the important relations between art and history, and several modern classics are oriented toward this contextual sphere. One thinks, for example, of Arnold Hauser's Social History of Art and Literature. Even to understand a work, we must often investigate its broader context, which may help us decipher a passage or understand its implications. Also our understanding of context may draw our attention to unjustly neglected works, and it may increase the use value of art and literature for other disciplines as well as permit students to see connections between literature and other disciplines. The recent emphasis on reception has been reinforced by refinements in hermeneutics and the just idea that we must be conscious of the presuppositions of our interpretive practices, creative with the questions and categories with which we approach a work, and receptive to new meanings and diverse interpretations. Certainly, when production and reception are so grossly underrated that we cannot recognize the distinguishing historical characteristics of artworks or comprehend the complexity of hermeneutic questions, the elevation of production and reception is desirable, but only as a historical corrective. In our era the pendulum appears to have swung too far in the opposite direction. The study of art and literature has increasingly given way to production and reception and thus to history and sociology.

Having suggested some reasons for the priority of artwork aesthetics, let me return to the overarching question of the normative value of literature today. I would like to present several theses.

### **1. Literature offers readers a window onto truth.**

Art deals with the basic structures of being, nature, and spirit. The German idealists Schelling and Hegel argue that art does not merely imitate what is, it reflects on a reality that is higher than so-called reality itself, in Schelling's words "the ideal is the real and is much more real than the so-called real itself" (35; cf. Hegel 13.22). Art can be viewed as higher than everyday reality insofar as it is closer to expressing truth. What we call everyday reality may have more aspects of deception, insofar as it shields us--by way of the capriciousness of situations and events, the clutter of external and superficial objects, and the immediacy of sensuous impressions--from a more essential meaning, a more genuine reality. Everyday reality is not free of this higher spirit and essence, but art, unlike everyday reality, with its multiple contingencies, emphasizes and reveals this higher reality.

Fidelity to external reality is, therefore, not a criterion of great art. Already Aristotle recognized in his Poetics that art evokes a higher reality; in exhibiting the basic structures of being, it is superior to history. Art need not be accurate or correct in its depiction of a person or event, if indeed historical events have triggered the artist's imagination, but it must be true in the sense of revealing through its expression a higher essence. Thus, Hegel cogently argues that a portrait that abstracts from the contingent and reveals the essence of a person's character can be "more like the individual than the real individual himself" (15.104). An aesthetic capacity allows us to see not simply the externality already present to us, but the essence behind externality. The Swiss

artist Paul Klee suggests in this spirit: “Art does not reproduce the visible, but rather renders visible [Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar]” (118). Our reception of Macbeth, Othello, and Lear gives us great insight into psychological truth, more insight than we find in newspaper reports about “real” stories of ambition, jealousy, and suffering. Goethe’s Faust captures more of what life means than may a “real” scholar or lover. In a sense he is the original; we may appear to be like or unlike him, not he like or unlike us.

In claiming that art makes visible a higher reality, I do not in the least want to suggest that idealist aesthetics is incompatible with the value of everyday reality. In his magisterial Mimesis Eric Auerbach elaborates the ways in which the Marcan account ennobles St. Peter, a mere servant, to tragic stature (40-47). The modern era, inspired by Christianity, has had a strong democratizing potential, which might at first glance seem to be at odds with an idealist account of art as ascending spirituality, but the greatness of the idealist account is that the recipient of beauty does not simply ascend above the finite and the everyday, he recognizes the extent to which the finite itself is capable of revealing and embodying a higher truth. From the perspective of beauty the finite becomes more vivid in itself and more evocative of transcendence. The connection is not dualistic, but dialectical, and idealist art, in its highest sense, does not take us away from the everyday as much as illuminate the higher meaning implicit in the everyday.

Useful in this context would be to distinguish between two types of ideals. Certainly art will sometimes portray the kinds of ideals that Plato elevates as having normative value and transcending what is present in everyday reality, but in many cases art will, instead of transcending reality, simply render it more visible. Here we could still say that art portrays an ideal, though it is analogous not to Plato’s ideal good, but to Max Weber’s concept of the ideal type. Weber suggests that beyond the multiple phenomena and variations of reality, ideal types give us a heuristic lens to understand reality and a vocabulary to describe it. These ideal types are not always distinguished on an evaluative level: “There are ideal types of brothels, just as there are of religions” (200). In terms of literature, we may recognize something akin to ideal types in evil figures such as Shakespeare’s Edmund or Iago, or we may reflect in this way on figures who are much more difficult to evaluate, such as Cervantes’ Don Quixote or Molière’s Alceste. Literature is capable of uncovering ideal-typical norms in Weber’s sense; these acts of unveiling give us great insight into the logic of human behavior and the consequences of given positions. Of course literature portrays these insights into the essential structures of reality by way of particular stories and images and not by way of abstractions, and literature gives greater voice to the complex juxtaposition of characteristics prominent in reality than the abstract purity of Weber’s ideal types would allow; in addition, in literature, unlike the social sciences, we are fascinated not only by the content but also by the manner of presentation, which gives distinct shape and definition to the content. Nonetheless, the effort to render the essential structures and forms of reality more visible is common.

I would propose, in contrast to Georg Lukács’ famous thesis on realism, that as long as we reflect on literature as making reality visible, we must include authors such as Franz Kafka. Fantastic and disharmonic literature render visible what tends to be neglected in our everyday

relationship to reality or our everyday use of categories. Such literature arouses awareness of what might superficially be overlooked; it draws our attention to the marginal, the less readily apparent, the forgotten. Recognition of these essential aspects of reality, rendered invisible or unclear in the complexity of our everyday lives, has great value. If we recognize that also superficially unrealistic authors make visible essential aspects of reality, we needn't be constrained by a more restrictive definition of realism.

## **2. Literature offers a distinctively sensuous window onto truth.**

Beauty contains a moment of truth, but the distinguishing feature of beauty vis-à-vis philosophical truth is its sensuousness. Where Plato and Plotinus see beauty as highest when it is free of sensuousness and where Hegel believes that philosophy is higher than art because of its freedom from the senses, I argue--with Schiller and Hölderlin--that precisely this sensuous moment gives art an edge over the purely cerebral realm of philosophy. Artistic truth, in its particularity and concreteness, is more readily visible and accessible than philosophical truth.

Artistic masterpieces are possible of various kinds and from various traditions--where one philosophical truth excludes competing truths, one sensuous representation does not exclude another. There are infinite ways of instantiating the ideal through beautiful expression. Therefore a variety of works can address a multiplicity of needs without limiting one another in an exclusive competition. The universal principles of art are not only compatible with a diversity of expression, they are enriched by this diversity. Each age will seek newer, more diverse manifestations of beauty, which harmonize universal principles with the particular needs of the age. Similarly, our experience of beauty can be analogous to our experience of the diversity of expression of different cultures, which seek to realize in different ways some of the highest ideals of humanity. Literature opens up for us the value of diversity, the richness of different stories and multiple traditions, even as we recognize through these works certain common aesthetic principles. Through its variety literature covers a range of models and addresses the personal orientations of multiple readers. As such it is an especially welcome feature of a democracy; its citizens may find through literature a range of engaging experiences and alternative perspectives that stretch and refine the imagination.

Whereas insight into overarching and specific ethical issues follows from literature's moment of truth, the primary ethical consequence of literature's moment of sensuousness is its power of motivation. Literature addresses the imaginative, emotional, and subliminal parts of the self that motivate the soul more than mere argument does. Where reason sometimes falls short of motivating persons, literature often succeeds--because of its examples and models, its sensuous patterns and its imagery as well as its resulting appeal to the emotions. Literature gives us an intensity often lacking in merely conceptual experience. Literature is more of a bridge than philosophy, particularly insofar as it conveys concrete truths that grip the imagination, particular expressions and images that say more and awaken more sympathy than any argument or citation of statistics. In doing so, art also offers prolepses of yet to be articulated moral dilemmas and positions.

Among the moral categories that tend to be neglected in a Kantian framework are precisely those cultivated through literature and the imagination--empathy with troubled individuals, sensitivity to the needs and challenges of others, and admiration for characters who embody virtues. Such encounters give us new moral perspectives, deepen our sensibilities, and expand our emotional richness. Literature brings our abstract concepts into play with concrete situations and vivid examples. This richness of examples is no less important than the validity of our abstract moral rules. As a result we may extend our sympathies to persons or groups whose claims for justice may have previously been less visible to us, and we may clarify through specific narratives, our moral beliefs and their applicability to new spheres.

Finally, though accessible to conceptual analysis, the sensuous dimension gives art a complexity that, much like the human subject, is not exhausted by conceptual analysis. Even the most conscious author of a literary work is frequently unaware of the full complexity of his linguistic creations. Readers are influenced by aspects of a literary work that we are as yet unable to recognize or articulate. This moment is at play when we recognize that even after reading a work several times, even after writing about it extensively, the work still attracts us and can sustain rereadings that generate in our mind new connections, new affects, and renewed delight in ways that we cannot fully formulate. Indeed, sometimes literature attracts us precisely for those reasons we do not comprehend. By affixing us in a part of the soul that is removed from clear comprehension, literature is able to bring us into areas that our mind, limited by conventional categories and expectations, might not otherwise take us. In this sense the truth of art is very much linked to its sensuousness.

### **3. Literature counters today's dominance of technical rationality with an emphasis on intrinsic value.**

Few persons would disagree with the claim that technology is one of the dominant principles of our age. The technological transformation of the world has been the defining feature of the twentieth century, both in the strict sense of the harnessing and transformation of nature and the creation and application of tools, machines, and information and in the broad sense of an elevation of means-end rationality. Our daily living presupposes constant interaction with the products of technology, such that we have as steady a relation to these products as we do to nature or to other persons. Also the most dramatic events of our era are defined by technology, new inventions that change our lives dramatically, for better and for worse. In the words of the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "technology is the thought of our age in visible, pictorial terms" (26.63).

The ascendancy of technical thinking and of means-end rationality is a reason to preserve, against all attempts to reduce literature to the socio-political and the ideological, that aspect of literature which is purely without purpose. In an age where our use of technology empowers us to control others, we need experience with something that is not purposive in quite the same way. Our experience of the artwork is of value for its own sake. As Kant has shown in his Critique of Judgment, art is purposeless in the sense of being its own end. When we appreciate an object of

beauty, we do not desire to possess it or transform it, to consume it or use it; we leave it free as it is. Nor do we metamorphose the object into abstract theoretical reflection without retaining further interest in the object. As aesthetic, the object is a combination of the sensuous and the spiritual, neither just sensuous, as is fit for desire, nor just spiritual, as is fit for thought.

In being its own end, literature is higher than many values we elevate on a regular basis, yet which are themselves mere means to other values. Aesthetic experience contrasts with so-called useful endeavors, which, however, are useful only insofar as they serve other ends. But what is most useful, Brand Blanshard suggests, is what is valued as an end in itself, that is, what is often passed off as useless: instead of helping us reach some higher goal, it is itself a most worthy goal (32).

When we read non-artistic works, we tend to focus solely, or at least primarily, on the information we take from them, reading such works for practical purposes. The experience of literature differs: relevant here is the personal experience of reading itself, including the affective response triggered by the work's sensuous structures and components, which are not reducible to what we carry away from the work on the level of information. The reading of great literature places extraordinary emphasis on what the reader lives through during the reading process. Such an experience is defined by intense concentration of attention, a lingering over the complexity of formal structures, patience in exegesis. Ironically, precisely this preservation of the aesthetic as what is intrinsically valuable, neither to be consumed nor to be left behind, makes it valuable as a counter-force to the instrumental, giving it a privileged position within the organic field of human activity in general and especially today.

Consider within this context also the connection between the intrinsic value of experiencing a great artwork and the richness of play. Johan Huizinga argues in his classic study on play that, along with reason and making, play is central to our being. He thus proposes homo ludens as complementary to the more popular homo sapiens and homo faber. Play serves many hidden purposes: it allows us to take joy in vital inclinations; it expands the imagination; it provides balance to the more instrumental and ordinary sphere of work through its voluntary, disinterested, and extraordinary dimensions; it proffers new modes of seeing and relating; and it offers us an experience of ritual. Schiller reverses the tendency to disparage mere play. He counters: "the agreeable, the good, the perfect, with these a person is merely serious; but with beauty he plays" (105-107, translation modified). Schiller states more fully: "But how can we speak of mere play, when we know that it is precisely play and play alone, which of all our states and conditions is the one which makes us whole and unfolds both sides of our nature [that is, the rational and the sensuous] at once?" (105, translation modified). Play is done for its own sake, as an end in itself, and yet this experience enriches, it does not impoverish. Play may also be a means to an end, but that is incidental; it is primarily an end in itself, and as such, it becomes a means to an end--it enriches our sense of the value of what is done for its own sake.

Literature is adept not only at embodying, but also at thematizing, the realm of the non-instrumental. Consider, for example, the comedy of coincidence: the individual character

seeks certain finite goals, is thwarted in the process, but in the end reaches his larger goal, which matches truer intentions of which he was scarcely aware (Roche, Tragedy and Comedy 140-150). The hero imagines himself to be a significant agent, but his subjectivity is revealed to be illusory; other forces are at play. Works belonging to this genre such as Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream evoke images of nature to suggest that the individual is not as purposive or as powerful as he thinks; external forces, whether fate or providence, nature or other individuals, limit his particular intentions--and all for the good.

#### **4. In contrast to the contemporary elevation of subjectivity, literature offers an opportunity for self-transcendence.**

Subjectivity has extraordinarily positive dimensions. We admire autonomy in its relation to freedom of thought and expression. Only through subjectivity and reflection are we able to grasp the deficiencies of what is given and gain distance from the arbitrary elements of our age. Moreover, without a strong sense of subjectivity, technological inventions and an efficient market economy, which have done so much to address the modern challenges of humanity, would not have been possible. Problems arise, however, when subjectivity is severed from the sphere of value rationality or when subjectivity recognizes nothing of value beyond itself or nothing of value beyond what it itself posits.

Great literature complements subjectivity by helping us gain a broader perspective on life and enriching us through the stories and language of others. Literature reveals new worlds, stretches our sensibilities, including our sympathies, and draws our attention to alternative frames. One of the best ways to overcome oneself and one's subjectivity is to immerse oneself in another culture, to recognize thereby those aspects of one's culture with only contingent validity, to encounter alternative models, and to free oneself of the narcissistic impulse to reflect constantly on one's own private world. Denis Donoghue suggests that the "pleasure of reading literature arises from the exercise of one's imagination, a going out from one's self toward other lives, other forms of life, past, present, and perhaps future. This denotes its relation to sympathy, fellowship, the spirituality and morality of being human" (73).

A classic metaphor for literature is the mirror. Through literature we come to see ourselves in ways we did not earlier recognize. So, for example, the hero of Ferdinand Raimund's The King of the Alps and the Misanthrope, who sees himself through magic, itself an analogue of the literary enterprise, recognizes his faults and improves. Shakespeare's Timon and Molière's Alceste are not privy to such self-reflection, but their readers are. This traditional image of art as specular carries with it a two-fold idea: first, that we see ourselves more clearly through literature, as we identify with the players in the work; and second, that we draw existentially on this reception as an experience of self-knowledge, overcoming weaknesses in ourselves. The frequent role reversals in literary works, including also reversals of gender or social status, are often designed to help a character gain a fuller sense of other and thereby of self. Through the role-playing of literature--our identification with and distance from the characters on the pages--we are likewise aided in our search for identity. Our disjointed age does not easily lend

itself to a sense of coherence, but in reading literature and understanding the unfolding narrative of a human life and the developing whole of an artwork, we are encouraged to gain a deeper sense of coherence that may be transferable to reflection on our selves, on the hidden logic of our own development.

By way of this self-transcendence, which often includes the integration of works of other cultures, not only do individuals enlarge their horizons, cultures, too, expand their options. Hegel elevates the West-Eastern Divan as Goethe's greatest work: instead of embodying subjective inwardness, it is a work of "objective cheerfulness" and evokes a readiness "to enjoy also works of foreign and rather distant nations" (unpublished transcription, quoted in Gethmann-Siefert 234). Instead of immersing himself only in his subjective reflexivity or immediate surroundings, Goethe finds a higher form of objectivity in the mediation of cultural alternatives. The importance of experiencing other cultures derives not only from the idea that we have a moral obligation to search out others. Precisely when a culture reaches a point where its artforms lack the ability to address contemporary concerns satisfactorily, when its art becomes repetitive or narcissistic or unable to gain a grip on the problems of the age, impulses from another culture can regenerate it.

Art then contributes to the collective identity of a culture. Through art we learn to recognize, confront, and overcome our past and contemporary crises. We also learn to articulate our ideals for the future. Virgil's Aeneid performed this function for the age of Augustus. For other eras, the works of Dante, Shakespeare, Schiller, Dostoevsky, and Brecht performed similar functions. The collective power of art depends not only on the common appeal of its themes but also on its sensuous aspects, its symbols, its emotional appeal. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico argues that it is not enough to ground philosophically the institutions that give societies and cultures stability; we must also feel strong emotional bonds to these institutions. As we distance ourselves from the institutions of the past, as the modern world becomes increasingly rationalized, art and literature can help bring us closer to tradition and to one another. In an age in which collective identity is less and less formed by tradition or community, art may foster a stronger bond to broader cultural institutions. Collective identity tends to be ignored or disparaged by many contemporary critics, but if literature and art do not play roles here, the vacuum will be filled by a collective identity defined by marketing and consumption.

##### **5. Literature counters the contemporary emphasis on quantity and the proliferation of autonomous value systems with its organic integration.**

Like subjectivity, quantity emerged as a dominant category in the early modern era. Science became increasingly quantitative, and function and causality, not essences, formed the primary foci of scientific research. Science, as articulated, for example, by Francis Bacon in the New Atlantis, has as its telos the maximization of strength, efficiency, and speed; normative or qualitative questions begin to recede from view. This shift from essence to function has led to more detailed relational knowledge and extraordinary increases in the quantity of products, which have addressed many of humanity's basic needs.

When quantity is separated from quality, however, as is sometimes the case, a perverse logic takes over, which lacks any sense of the organic, any relation to meaning. The computer, the symbol of our age, has two overarching principles that determine its value: its quantity of information and its speed. These two factors can solve only limited problems; more and more information is useless, unless it is of the most essential kind, unless it has an organic connection to our lives or serves a higher purpose. The computer enables us to search out data almost endlessly, to string and collect information by pressing a series of buttons, but the questions why these data should be interesting or meaningful and how they may contribute to an organic sense of self or other are not always asked. We collect facts, figures, dates, and quotes, and we produce the information because we have the technical means to do so. What we say (and what we read) is as a result often less organically related than the information received by earlier generations.

The movement from one overarching set of values to the proliferation of more and more discrete subsystems of value is part of the modern elevation of quantity. Each sphere of life has its own autonomous logic: an instrumental-functional reality replaces value reality, and one pursues with an eye to the autonomous logic of each sphere its own given end, but without an eye to an overarching purpose, so, for example, the businessman who is scrupulously precise within the rules of business but indifferent to the relation between business and ethics. Art, too, has been freed from its necessary connection to morality. Offering one of the richest analyses of the modern age, the Austrian novelist Hermann Broch discusses the concept of partial or autonomous value systems in his philosophical trilogy The Sleepwalkers. Unlike earlier eras, where one single value provided an overarching framework for the different spheres of life, as did religion in the Middle Ages, the modern world is characterized by a splintering of the spheres of life into autonomous subsystems, each of which has its own inner logic, such that any overarching meaning is dissolved.

Literature, in contrast, can offer us a window onto the organic, the relation of parts and whole. In a great artwork, all the parts of a work have a certain autonomy, which renders them interesting in and of themselves. When we study a work, its individual sections have intrinsic value and contain diverse features. In addition, however, each part is connected to the others; they fit or belong together such that no part is not expressive of the whole. Everything necessary is present, everything superfluous is absent, and all the parts cohere. Finally, the artwork has in common with the mechanical that it is a set of relations, but unlike the mechanical, it is more than the sum of its parts; every part belongs to the whole and contributes to the whole such that, despite the interest they garner as parts, their full meaning evolves only from their position within the totality of the artwork and slowly becomes recognizable in this way. The partial dimensions of the artwork are interesting in and of themselves; they appear completely independent and contingent, but in the process of exploration and interpretation, they assume an element of connectedness and necessity, such that they gain a richer identity in the whole.

Not only the parts and the whole but also the form and the content of the artwork are organically integrated. Our concept of this organic connection must of course be complex. In the epic theater

of Bertolt Brecht, for example, form and content are at odds with one another, but this very disjunction is an element of form that serves what one might call its meta-content. The diction with which Gottfried Benn's poem "Lost I" opens is not superficially organic, but heterogenic, yet this disjuncture serves, on a meta-level, the poem's theme of unconnectedness and alienation. Advocates of organic art have often failed to recognize that many seemingly dissonant and negative works are in fact organic, but organic in a complex way and on a metalevel, insofar as dissonance serves a higher meaning or insofar as an artwork may be the negation of a negation; in short, such critics often fail to grasp the complex beauty of much of modern art.

## **6. Literature offers us inexhaustible meaning.**

The term "disenchantment" has been employed by the German sociologist Max Weber to describe the effects of rationalization (250), but we owe an initial recognition of the ambiguities of rationalization to Vico. Both thinkers recognized that we progressively lose our magical or unmediated relationship to the world. Vico argues that historical processes of rationalization dilute the emotional richness and poetic mentality that great art presupposes. In addition, in an era that elevates the act of making, we tend to neglect the value of contemplation and of the leisure that makes it possible, what the ancients called otium. Technical inventions and eventually social techniques increase the pace of life; with technology the world moves more quickly. Not by chance Tommaso Campanella's City of the Sun of 1623 concludes with a description of a new invention followed by the lack of time to continue more leisurely discussion. Indeed, not only is dialogue threatened; from beepers and cell phones to television screens in waiting rooms and walkmans on the streets, meaningful solitude, is threatened. Already Pascal took note of the range of human distractions and the hesitancy to spend quiet time with one's own thoughts (e.g., 70, 165, 168, 515); more recent technological developments only exacerbate this universal temptation.

The experience of art and literature contrasts with this disenchantment and dispersion. When we are gripped by substantive works, we lose ourselves in the works and in the meanings that envelop us, but seem forever to continue to unfold. Walter Benjamin writes eloquently of the concept of "aura" (222): no matter how close we may come to analyzing and exhausting the meaning of a literary work, some moments that affix, transform, and captivate us simultaneously elude us. Martin Heidegger articulates a similar concept, emphasizing two complementary moments: the extent to which art reveals or opens a truth for us, art's Entbergung, and the extent to which our attempts to grasp the artwork always meet with a certain resistance or concealment, art's Verbergung (53). The artwork opens a world, makes possible a clearing, and yet does not reveal all.

Recognition of the inexhaustibility of art and beauty does not originate with Benjamin and Heidegger. We need only think of Plato's account of the close proximity of beauty and love (according to Plato's Diotima both the initial catalyst for love and its ultimate telos is beauty) and Plato's insight into love as a form of striving: we love what we lack or do not possess (Symposium 200-212). A beautiful work continues to attract and enchant us, even after multiple

encounters, because our reflections or analyses do not exhaust its meaning; there are always undiscovered nuances to weigh, new parts to relate to the whole. The desire to delve into the hidden aspects of a work raises to the fore art's esoteric dimensions. Hermeticism reminds us how difficult, but also how rewarding, it can be to uncover subtleties, complexities, and layers of deep meaning. Experiencing and uncovering such puzzles is part of the pleasure, the fun, the playfulness of art.

This inexhaustible richness has two temporal dimensions. First, the artwork brings together layers of meaning in history and reworks them in new ways; to exhaust the work one would have to recognize all of the past that the work contains and sublates, which is not possible in our finite frames. Second, the artwork is open toward the future; it invites readings that will become concrete only when as yet to be formulated perspectives emerge, and it seeks to earn the right to be called a work for the ages, a designation given only to those works that--as a result of their richness, complexity, and beauty--forever merit rereading. The artwork thus condenses in its particularity both the past and the future and for these reasons invites, sustains, and rewards patient elaboration.

Science and technology are universal; their laws are precise and unwavering; literature is diverse, variable, and singular. Technology is primarily oriented toward the general, not the individual, mass production, not uniqueness; technology is not especially culturally bound, nor do the laws of efficiency normally allow it to generate unique products. The unique artwork, in contrast, is an especially rich and different product for an age of technology, where so much is simply common. In the technological age we see the standardization and uniformity of life, the similarity of so many aspects of so many otherwise different societies and cultures, which now have common information, common technologies, common products. Already the Weimar intellectual Walter Rathenau recognized "homogeneity" and "homogenization" as distinguishing characteristics of the age (71). With increasing uniformity in chain stores and standardized products, one loses a sense of character and place. Literature counters this monotony with its diversity. Our experience of great literature gives us a recognition of what is not only unique and distinctive, but also a gift that cannot be willfully manufactured. Great literature turns our attention away from a preoccupation with what is mass-produced and collective, what is easily constructed and replaced, toward what is singular and irreplaceable.

## **7. Literature allows us to transcend the limits of our own time.**

In modernity we recognize a tendency to devalue the past as a partner in conversation and to disregard the consequences of our actions for the future. In economic matters, businesses tend not to invest for the long-term, but focus instead on quarterly profit-and-loss statements. An economic incentive also exists to create products with a short life span, so that new products will be purchased only a few years later. Expedient housing and inexpensive products do not age well: they either break or become ugly. Likewise, whenever fashion drives a sphere of the economy, material goods need to be replaced. Short-sightedness is no less evident in the strip-mining that exploits the land and leaves it barren and degraded for the next generation. The

visual and dynamic culture of television and the Web changes our perception of reality, such that our attention span is reduced immeasurably; we tend to think in terms of fragmentary snippets rather than organic wholes. The elevation of the immediate and the instantaneous weakens our bonds to traditional, cumulative wisdom. When we research the past, our perspective tends to be antiquarian and disengaged.

More and more works of literary criticism are devoted to contemporary authors, who have yet to become the subject of immense quantities of research, making it easier for critics to say something original, and more and more works of meta-criticism discuss the scholarly publications of the past few years. With a stress on quantity and originality, the slow effort to write a major work gives way to multiple small efforts that discuss either what has not yet been covered and may therefore be very specialized or what is simply on the immediate horizon in terms of the profession at large. Specialization is a form of short-sightedness. Fewer and fewer works address the broader dimensions of literary history in their overarching scope, much as fewer and fewer works discuss the normative presuppositions and essential principles of the discipline. The postmodern abandonment of the search for meta-narratives, as espoused by Jean-François Lyotard, and postmodernism's embrace of the particular and local at the expense of the universal have given strength to this development.

Literature, in contrast, opens up broader horizons. Every great work of literature belongs to a tradition that it invokes, reworks, or overcomes. Studying past literature is an immersion in times that transcend our own. If we recognize the achievements of the past and the possibilities of coming generations, then one of our duties is to sift through the works of the past, to preserve them in their integrity and with the richest possible interpretations, primarily because of their intrinsic value but also with an eye to the past and the future. In meaningfully preserving great works, we exhibit respect for the past, the originators of the works and the tradition that cultivated their interpretation, and for future persons who will likewise participate in the wonder of these works and benefit from the richest interpretations they have garnered. One of the beautiful aspects of a frame narrative such as Theodor Storm's The White Horse Rider that tells a story through several generations is its embrace of continuity, one might even say, its recycling of meaning.

Moreover, our encounter with the literature of other ages gives us distance from the clichés and biases of the present. Familiarity with another culture creates a critical distance toward one's own and frees us from the tyranny of the age. Indeed, our relation to the past gives us not only alternatives to motivate critique but also impulses to help us expand our identity. This goal can be attained only if we recognize, beyond obvious historical differences, certain supertemporal constants, so that our engagement with works from earlier eras is not merely antiquarian, but an earnest effort to learn from the works of other ages. The works of earlier eras, for example, can teach us specific virtues that have been lost in the present, but which represent alternatives to contemporary weaknesses. Certain virtues are more prominent in given historical circumstances than in others, and reading older literature reminds us of virtues that are less visible today but still of great value. The elevation of instrumental reason, to cite an obvious example, leads many

to think of grace as antiquated. Similarly rare today is an indifference to one's economic position or status within society, an ability to remain autonomous. Loyalty is also less visible--partly because we have become so mobile, partly because our relationships have become increasingly driven by utility. Similar factors contribute to the erosion of generosity and hospitality.

Finally, great literature, as Anton Chekhov shows in his story The Student, addresses themes of universal interest. On a cold, gloomy, and windy Good Friday, a student retells the Gospel story of Peter's anguish at having betrayed Christ. The widows who listen to the story are moved, and the student reflects: "it was evident that what he had just been telling them about, which had happened nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present--to both women, to the desolate village, to himself, to all people" (108). He senses that the chain of meaning is not broken between the past and the present. This connection, which is enchanting and full of lofty meaning, gives the student in his desolate material condition a sense of great joy: "he thought that truth and beauty, which had guided human life there in the garden and in the yard of the high priest had continued without interruption to this day, and had evidently always been the chief thing in human life and in all earthly life, indeed" (108).

## **8. Literature educates readers to hermeneutic virtues.**

Some artworks require the reader to think through various interpretive possibilities. Students who argue for or against a particular interpretation learn how to weigh and marshal evidence, how to understand the types of evidence one can employ and their strengths and limitations. In arguing for and against an interpretation, they delve further and further into the relevant parts of the work. This process develops the students' aesthetic sensibilities and eristic capacities. It also cultivates an awareness of the need to be ever open to new perspectives and arguments. Ideally, the interpreter looks for counter-evidence to the very interpretation he has developed, integrating the evidence proleptically, clearly demarcating the limits of his interpretation, or developing a complex meta-interpretation that emerges from a series of possible interpretations. Attention to contrasting moments is a privileged dimension of interpretation. We don't want overly simplistic readings, inattentive to the work's many layers, or one-sided readings, neglectful of those moments not easily assimilated into the primary reading. Students might therefore be encouraged to develop what might be called a strong reading (for which there is dominant evidence) and a weak reading (for which there is some evidence to counter the strong reading, yet not enough to overturn it). This results in an honest relationship to the work and has the side benefit of helping us guard against dogmatism.

By teaching students the content and form of literary works, by confronting them with great and different traditions, but also by teaching them the mode of thinking associated with this process, they are better able to analyze problems in the world as well. Because we must receive complex artworks with greater care and effort than much of what otherwise occupies our consciousness, the reception of art sharpens our cognitive capacities. We learn a sensibility or sensitivity to subtle differences. At the same time the study of literature teaches us to look at the whole and not just at parts, to synthesize the parts into a whole. It allows us to recognize that meaning may

unfold slowly and that the whole may be disclosed to us only as we recollect diverse parts and begin to discern patterns. It teaches us to weigh the significance of an event or occurrence or an encounter and to imagine alternatives. It enhances our awareness of structure, form, language, nuance. It teaches us how to synthesize evidence, articulate a complex view, and draw appropriate conclusions. It teaches us to respond to life with emotion and sympathy as well as analysis and judgment, and it teaches us the importance of reason and evidence in an emotionally charged arena. To understand ever new facets of a work contributes to flexibility of mind and an awareness of the need for breadth and balance.

The meaning of art for life—both the enrichment of self through its meanings and the refinement of the interpreter’s formal capacities—is not unrelated to a full understanding of hermeneutics. An important dimension of hermeneutics beyond the concepts of understanding (subtilitas intelligendi) and interpretation (subtilitas explicandi) is application (subtilitas applicandi). Application remains prominent in two other domains where hermeneutics is central: in jurisprudence the meaning of the law is not a dry lesson in interpretation but has consequences for individual cases; in theology the scriptures are not explicated simply as historical documents, but are to be read for spiritual edification, with an eye to their relevance for life, made apparent in the explication of the homily. Historicism and value-free science have led in philology and now in literary criticism to the neglect of this important hermeneutic principle. The question, what does literature tell us about life, has disappeared from the forefront of our concerns; in some cases it has receded entirely. Without this integrative moment, criticism cannot overcome a kind of inner emptiness: not to bridge the subject at hand with the existential questions of the day is to open the door to cynicism and disregard for the value of the discipline. However refined the intellectual gymnastics of our interpretive efforts might be, they are complete only when a bridge is drawn to the existential sphere. When this connection is accomplished, literature is not only of intrinsic value, but also of value for life.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This essay draws on some reflections that are further developed in my book Why Literature Matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), where one will also find a full engagement with other critics. The structure of this book has three parts. First, a normative section, which asks the questions, what is great literature, and what are the qualities of a great interpretation of a literary work. Second, a descriptive section, which explores the questions, what are the dominant categories of the age, and what is the impact of modernity and modern technology on production aesthetics, artwork aesthetics, and reception aesthetics. Third, combining the normative and descriptive parts, I conclude with reflections on the distinctive value and possibilities of literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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