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## INTRODUCTION

# *The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing*

We go to literature because it houses human lives. The books one most remembers deliver their quarry so wonderfully that those (fictional) lives actually exist in people's minds alongside the "real" people one knows. Oedipus, Hamlet, Don Quixote, Faust, Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, Ahab, Emma Bovary, the brothers Karamazov, Huckleberry Finn, Gregor Samsa, Marcel, Leopold Bloom, Mrs. Dalloway, Gatsby, Quentin Compson, the Invisible Man, Yossarian, Celie, Sethe—among many others—occupy a good bit of human real estate, and some have claimed that we may know them better, more fully, than we know the "actual" people we know.

Further: one actually sees the arc of those fictional lives: Oedipus's transition from proud King back to cast-out infant and closing as blind exile; Lear's trajectory from estate magnate to madman on a heath; Jane Eyre's arc from unloved and abused child to monied, married woman; Gregor Samsa's trip from "bug-hood" to garbage. This, we say, is the work of plot. But consider the true magic here: how all these transformations (which can take weeks, months, years, even a lifetime to happen, which therefore escape our vision, our knowing) are compressed, contained, or delivered in the scope of a few hundred pages, requiring mere hours to access, to process. We enter the bookstore, see all the books arrayed there, and think: so many books, so little time; but the truth goes other way: books do not take time, they give time. They

enable us to see the dimensions of life, a gift and a vision that are unavailable to us as we live day to day. *Reading lives*, in every sense: literature brings us, virtually, into the experiences and fates of its characters, but it is the act of reading that turns long-ago and faraway printed words into life, our life.

“Long ago and faraway” might seem like forbidding barriers, but the books we love crash right through, and into us. Why does this matter? When a friend of mine who’d devoted her life to Shakespeare was asked how much she knew about him, she replied: “Not as much as he knows about me.” Isn’t this why we turn to art and literature? It’s more than curiosity or even education. We sense that they are intended for personal use, not in the self-help sense but as mirrors, as entryways into who we ourselves are or might be.

Our own trip through time and space, even for the oldest and most far-flung of us, is limited. And then over. Unlike real people, literature’s people live on, over the centuries, through the act of reading. This is amazing: you cannot go back to fifth-century BCE Athens and “meet” Oedipus, and yet Sophocles’s play takes you there. And no less remarkable: they change. Not only does Coleridge’s Hamlet have little in common with Freud’s, but you, too, can experience this. A second reading of a classic can astonish. It hasn’t changed, but you have. And it will read more differently still when your spouse or child or grandchild reads it and sees in it things you never imagined. But books cannot speak: reading brings them to life.

They live through us. And we live—other—through them. That is literature’s gift. That is what a lifetime of teaching has taught me, and it is what I have taught.

This will sound strange: I was born to do this.

In a letter of 1871, the poet Rimbaud uttered a phrase that announces the modern age, “I is someone else” (“Je” est un autre). Some sixty-nine years later, I entered the world as an identical twin, and Rimbaud’s claim has an uncanny truth for me, since I grew up being one of a pair. Even though our family and close friends could readily tell us apart, most people could not, and I started the world with a blurrier, more

porous, more fluid sense of my contours than most other people have. This iffiness shaped me, in ways I'm still coming to understand. I have never lost my conviction that one's outward form—the shape of people, but also of surfaces and things—may not be what it seems.

This applies especially to feelings. I remember little from the visual fare provided in the 1940s and 1950s, but the 1941 film *The Corsican Brothers*, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr., derived from a Dumas novel, conveyed something that seemed intimately true to me: each of the “separated” twins (who'd been conjoined at birth) was doomed to *feel* whatever happened to the other. Later films such as *Dead Ringers* and *Face Off*, each about glued-together doubles, spoke to me the same way. At some level, I believe my twin brother and I do have this extrasensory bond, this connective tissue.

That personal intuition goes a far piece toward explaining my career as literature professor, and also the views you'll encounter in this book, since I am convinced that great works of art tell us about skewed vision and shape-shifting and secret sharing, about both the world and ourselves as more mobile, more misperceived, more dimensional, more “spread out” than science or our senses would have us believe. Feeling—the actual motor force triggered by reading—is more promiscuous and outward bound than we think. On this head, all literature can be construed as a form of science fiction, since the very act of reading a novel or poem or play is a mix of time travel and space travel, constituting the finest cultural bargain ever to come your way. And most significant of all: it is how you become—even if momentarily, vicariously, “exitably”—someone else.

Math, science, philosophy, history: they are invaluable but offer none of this. The works of literature interrogate and stretch us. They are surprisingly morphological. They challenge our sense of who we are, even of who our brothers and sisters might be. When President Obama said of Trayvon Martin, “This could have been my son,” he was uttering a truth that goes beyond compassion and reaches toward recognition. *It could have been me* is the threshold for the vistas that literature and art make available to us.

## Belated Knowledge

One of the oldest stories in the West is about a man who misperceived his most basic relationships: the bullying old man he killed at the crossroads was actually his father; the woman whose bed he shares and who has mothered his children is actually his mother. Only an idiot would claim such news to be good, but alongside the horror of this plot, there is a strange yet persistent and gathering “bookkeeping” imperative: Oedipus ends up knowing who he is. He ends up, we might callously say, with the right résumé. He stubbornly works his way toward a final *optic* on his life, even if it is so unbearable that it will lead to his self-blinding.

The move toward self-knowledge, toward getting your story straight—even when it may be rife with doubles and others, even if it’s fiasco-fed—strikes me as one of life’s most exigent and profound requirements. Obviously, one wants, at every stage of life, to have some grasp of how the pieces fit together and what kind of story they tell. But aging adds further urgency and point to this project, in the nature of a final harvest, a narrative duty to accomplish before dying. This is not an aesthetic injunction but an existential one. Nor need such matters be depressing and mortuary—they can be filled with humorous surprises and discoveries, as well as laden with cadavers and regrets—but this book is my bid in this direction, my effort to get that final sighting, that final accounting.

“What is the creature that is on four legs in the morning, two legs at midday, and three legs in the evening?” the Greek Oracle asks, and Oedipus answers, “man.” But Sophocles tragically scrambles time’s “natural” forward march, so that the King is at once child and adult, lover to his mother, murderer to his father, sibling and father to his children. The King discovers his many selves. Nor are there any correctives or remedies in sight. Thebes must first be dying of plague before he can learn, via the Oracle, that he is the cause. His knowledge is belated: retrospective but hardly retroactive. Could that be Sophocles’s direst message: that knowledge is always belated? If so, what are the consequences?

John Barth wrote of the *Oedipus*: “The wisdom to recognize and halt follows the know-how to pollute past rescue. The treaty’s signed, but the

cancer ticks in your bones. Until I'd murdered my father and fornicated my mother, I wasn't wise enough to see I was Oedipus. Too late now to keep the polar cap from melting. Venice subsides; South America explodes." Published in 1968, these words remain ghastly prescient. Not merely are Oedipus's "private" transgressions only knowable as such, long afterward, but other "broader," impersonal, even planetary horrors join the list: the polar cap is melting today; Venice is sporadically under water; we have polluted perhaps past rescue; countries and states across the globe are, often enough, exploding; and no signed treaty can undo the (not yet detectable) cancer ticking in our bones. Here is a terrifying system-wide purview: crime, disease, environment, and politics all obey a heinous logic of unknowable dormancy, so that we know them only when they explode, when they present the bill, when the damage is done. It is the damage that constitutes our knowing.

If you think this is unnecessarily bleak, consider further: the detective story cannot begin until there is a crime, a corpse; the heart attack and the tumor precede diagnosis and treatment; greenhouse-gas emissions occur long before the scientists see or measure their effects (and even then, the citizenry resists registering the awful cause-effect pattern because it is not "visible"); the erosion of polity and political order has roots, is the final part of a causative chain including elections and a whole welter of prior socioeconomic failings. "A man reaps what he sows," the Bible says, but this still upbeat, even if grim, model of responsibility is beset by the nasty perceptual truth that, all too often, we do not know what we have sown until we reap it: belatedness of knowledge everywhere you look, involving the fate of body, the body politic, and the planet.

The French poet Mallarmé made, in his most majestic poem, an astonishingly artisanal prophecy: "Le monde est fait pour aboutir à un livre" (The world is made to become a book). This grand claim for the book may sound like a librarian's dream—especially dubious in our high-tech world of smartphones, streaming, and other forms of evolved media—but it touches on something elemental: our ever-present and ever-foiled need to see the actual pattern, the actual meaning, the actual texture, of our own life. And he is right as well, to use the splendid verb

“aboutir”—to become, to end up as—putting us on notice that the work of time is not only the currency of our long lives but also the key to our evolving grasp of what they signify. Only late do we know.

A phrase you’ll often come across in this book is Paul’s famous utterance in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.” Paul has no interest in art or literature: he is referring to our ultimate encounter with God, presented as a moment of final knowledge, of truth (as indeed the remaining verse makes clear: “Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”). One is familiar, as well, with the notion that the end of our lives produces its own final light. One might argue, more gently and generally, that all traditional societies saw *wisdom* along these lines, as the precious residue of experience garnered by the old—but that scheme has little play in the modern world. And science itself—with its cargo of ever-increasing facts and data—rules out such a model. The old are more likely to be seen as outdated rather than wise.

And please note as well: culture cannot structure its arrangements differently either, according to this time-release model. From the moment we draw breath, we are absorbing information, inscribed in a programmed forward trajectory that can last decades, even longer. The entire project of *school* hinges on the belief that we can and must acquire knowledge from the very earliest stages of life.

How does one get it?

“Aboutir à un livre,” Mallarmé wrote. *Livre*. Life’s experiences eventuate finally into a book. And books are what we serve up in school, to those who have little life experience. This is one of culture’s most intriguing equations. Can pages with print deliver—seed—experience? Books are of course used in all fields, including the sciences and social sciences, but the ones I’m making my most extravagant claims for are what we know as *literature*. I am not speaking of “wisdom literature”: the kind of things one finds in so many religious texts, where all the required dos and don’ts are posted. Great literature does not behave this way, does not sermonize, and if critics use the term “didactic,” it is almost always pejorative. No, literature is precious for a different reason altogether: because of how we engage it, how we process it, what it brings to us, what it demands of us. Here would be its gift, its price.

## Literature vs. Information

I have come to see literature as an alternate (invaluable) source of knowing. Alternate to what, you may ask? Alternate to *information*. Information surely seems to be our modern guide. Its delivery system has, of course, evolved. Everywhere I go, people stare into small phones, experiencing connectivity, linked to data and to others, networked. This has been a long time coming, extending back at least to the telegraph and its successors, as McLuhan argued, but perhaps ultimately to the arrival of print itself in the Renaissance. Big data would seem in the driver's seat today.

But my focus is on the actual status and reach of facts and information, located in archives and libraries as well as provided by today's high-tech devices, and I want to claim that literature's "testimony" is of a different sort. My quarrel may seem quixotic. Rationality and information seem, after all, to be more than ever in demand, insisting on their due, if we are to understand our world. And I agree entirely.

But life is more than reason or data, and literature schools us in a different set of affairs, the affairs of heart and soul that have little truck with information as such. Your heart is understood differently by your lover and your cardiologist. It is not sentimental to state that literature and art illuminate—engage, constitute—our experience in ways that other fields do not. The terrible deeds and punishments on show in Greek tragedy do not cheer us up, but Aristotle claimed that "watching" them unfurl onstage was a purgative, cathartic experience for the audience.

Aristotle's focus was on spectating—some ten to fifteen thousand people attended the performances of the Greek tragedies, constituting a media event closer to the Super Bowl than to our seeing an off-Broadway play—but I want to apply his insight to the experience of reading. After all, the Greek philosopher was drawn to the very mechanics of how we negotiate stories, and he was struck by their seminal, engendering effects, in his words, "pity" and "terror." Useful pity and terror. What I see here is a remarkable dialectic between the doom-ridden stories of tragedy and the potential social benefit they might provide: the "afterlife" of the text. Something beyond information or even exhortation was sensed and became real, was triggered and passed on, "live,"



big with its own futurity. Aristotle thought this to be purgative, but it is arguably more than that, and it can happen via reading as well as via performance. The *huis clos* of tragedy—no exit, caughtness, entrapment—spells eventual death for its people but also potential life for its readers and spectators. Those readers and spectators grasp more than a lesson: they grapple with the birth of knowing. The performance is over, the book is closed, but something has been seeded.

### The Cost of Knowing and Life Writ Large

Remember Oedipus again. The middle-aged man realizes—*realizes*, makes *real* to himself—late in life, as omnipotent King, who he (plurally) is and has been, and what he has done. Hindsight, retrospect, belatedness, corrosive surprises: I have come to believe that many of the books I love most stage exactly these types of reversals. Wreckage of prior assumptions, emergence of new knowledge, would appear not just to be the very pulse of Sophocles's *Oedipus* but to be found at the core of *King Lear*, in poems of Emily Dickinson, in tales of Melville and Kafka, bringing to light both personal and political trauma in Twain and Faulkner, delivered as toxin in Strindberg and Proust, kept at bay in Joyce and Morrison, commanding the field in still others. Literature's very signature—like, at times, life's—is the cashiering of old (beloved) beliefs, as new (unsurvivable?) truths emerge. Literature is about the birth and cost of knowing.

It is also about expansion, about discovering one's emplacement in far-flung networks. Oedipus arrives at a form of fourth-dimensional portraiture, and that bristling portrait, coming into view over five acts, explodes forever the tidier coordinates he had thought were his. Art writes large. It bursts open the contours we knew, to show us others, including ourselves as others. Here, too, I believe our current informational model plays us false, because it hews to our "comfort zone," our known and chosen linkages and connections, but it ignores the larger scene that both contains and interpellates us, that refashions our boundaries.

Why should the young (or the old) read such fare?

Because reading itself is immersive, for it enables us to *taste* the lives of others, to acquire a *sentient* awareness of another, and then—unharmful but armed, even “increased”—to return to life. Reading is never retrospective, no matter how long ago the text was written, but always of the present, hence prospective, cued to possible futures. That is its unique gift. In some grisly yet beautiful way, “they die so that we might live.” (This phrase would not have met with Aristotle’s pleasure.)

“A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us,” Kafka wrote. Kafka knew a great deal about frozen seas, and he located them where no geographer would have: within ourselves. Yes, the ice in the Arctic melts today, but the ice inside retains its thickness. (Each of us can gauge the truth of such an inconvenient claim, challenging all notions of charity and empathy.) In fact, Kafka’s own greatest texts are testimony to coldness of heart; his characters talk and think and talk and think nonstop, but there is little affect to be found and even less “shared” affect. One is astonished this is so, given the horrors he routinely depicts: being turned into a bug, being arrested for an unknown crime, being lost in bureaucratic labyrinths while trying to find one’s way to truth or salvation, being unable to heal the sick child, or to manage the beak-like machine that dispenses justice, or just to go on fasting forever. What kind of “ax” did he have in mind?

As I see it, Kafka’s narratives, unheated though they are, disclose nonetheless a remarkable structural pattern that goes a long way toward chopping through one’s frozen sea: *metamorphosis*. As a twin with porous boundaries, I batten on to this drastic logic of people becoming other, becoming altered, even transmogrified. Kafka limns the fundamental action proper to art: transformation. Figurative, vicarious, exorable transformation. Not for the doomed denizens of his stories, of course, but for his readers.

Claims for reader-identification with art have been argued before but would be scoffed at by most scholars in my field both yesterday and today. And the academy’s current interest in ideological matters—from race, class, and gender on to intersectionality and beyond—is at a huge remove from the emotional imperative I’m articulating.

And famous writers have targeted the notion of “identification” as well. When Rousseau—champion, one would have thought, of the bonds of feeling—wrote *against* the founding of a theater in Geneva in 1758, one of his most striking arguments had to do with the facileness and “short-windedness” of spectator-identification: one wept in response to the events on stage, and then, after exiting the theater, walked coldly right past the beggar on the street. Bertolt Brecht, in his programmatic efforts to found a Marxian theater praxis, railed against what he termed “kulinarisches Theater”; in such “bourgeois” theater, the audience “followed” the actors, laughing when they did, weeping when they did, whereas the kind of “episches Theater” he had in mind would bring about a radical critique by *reversing* this situation, so that the audience would cry when the actors laughed, and laugh when the actors cried, thanks to their new critical awareness of the “unnecessity” of the arrangements depicted on stage. It’s a noble aim. Can it work?

At my university, modern theory—in its many different guises, including “anti-theory”—has enormous sway in literature course offerings and in scholarly publications. Critique is desired, not identification. I cannot help thinking that theory’s great seductive promise is that it explains power, and that it does so in ways that appear to be historical, rational, unsentimental, scientific. In some sense, this is, for today’s academy, the humanities’ “last stand.” The scholars’ sights, like those of many of our best students today, are often on the ideological arrangements that subtend all moments and periods of history; and they rightly feel that literature is a rich quarry here. True enough.

But power is not only ideological. Of course, literature illuminates the operation of power in the stories it tells, and we do need to attend to that. But the driving question (for me) has to do with literature’s own power: its experiential impact on readers, its payload. We process the books we read, and I believe they process us as well. There are no evident metrics for gauging such transactions, yet this is the central *commerce*, the unwritten pact, of both reading and teaching. I believe that these are primordial matters and that they underlie and underwrite our investigations and the work we do, both in our books and in our classrooms. And, inevitably, these are the issues that loom largest, as I come

to the end of my career and wonder what it has all been about. As quasi-Corsican brother, as readerly, temporary identifier with Oedipus and Gregor Samsa (and a whole host of others, waiting in the wings), as old man who has incessantly cheerleaded and pimped for literature for so many different audiences, this is my moment of exploring what it all amounted to.

## All Together Now

What I had not anticipated in this plenary volume was the surprise of seeing, at long last, the clear common ground in three distinct areas: my education, my teaching, and my books. This was my Ali Baba moment of discovering treasure. In recognizing these shared properties, in sensing that I have been cultivating the same garden in each of the major arenas of my career, I felt I had gained a precious “cohering” treasure. Or, put less flatteringly, I was reminded of Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain, who learns that he has been speaking *prose* all his life, even though he’d never heard of the term.

What, you might ask, do education, teaching, and books share? Each is about transmission, about the language bridge that can carry us into other minds and hearts. And these arenas cohabit, cheek to jowl, in this book. So, you’ll find here accounts of my schooling interwoven with commentary on my career, all of which is buttressed and outright writ large by discussions of the actual books that I have not so much taught as been taught by. That is who I am and what this book is. It may initially look varied and different, but it’s not. Drumstick and thigh and wing and breast meat have different textures and forms, but they’re all chicken. So it is here: my commentary on my writers probes and is fueled by the same existential questions that animate my career and life.

To begin with, each—as I have experienced them, as I present them—can be bristling, explosive, even lawless (despite all the rules we’ve ever learned), linked by a view of *language as armament*, language as the most powerful tool meted out to *Homo sapiens* for bringing our inner world to expression so that it is shareable, thereby bridging the immense divide that separates all living creatures in time, space, and

flesh. Yet I termed language “armament” for still other reasons: it possesses a charge, a potential violence, a kinetic power (of persuasion, of rending, of bonding, of transport) that runs roughshod over docile dictionaries and differential systems such as sign/referent or word/meaning. This isn’t always pretty or well behaved; this is not the familiar, steady, impersonal discourse of information. But it is my version of the Second Amendment: we are endowed with *words* as our most intimate and overlooked form of power; these are the arms we bear.

Second, I believe that *understanding* is keyed to this same array of unruly forces. I don’t know how to overstate this. “Understanding”—the goal of both teaching and reading—can often be a wrenching yet potentially transformative proposition. I want to challenge our staid, rational “safe” view of cognition, of knowing. Knowing can be lethal. Characters are altered, erased, undone; what seemed fixed and stable is blown apart or disintegrates. Characters bleed and die.

But—and this is quintessential as well as self-evident—there is no blood in my classroom. Elementary, my dear Watson, you’re probably thinking. Of course, reading is safe. But the question is, How have (unbleeding) readers nonetheless been changed? The answer I’ve spent my career arriving at is: they have encountered, vicariously, the cost of knowing. They have collided with a form of understanding that is unlike anything they meet in all other fields of study. Or on their phones and laptops.

Third, literature and teaching are kinetic forms of transportation, even though we may think them static. Both are fueled by words, and both may be said to yield energy fields, power systems, that are every bit as basic as the utility companies that provide you with electricity, gas, and water. Each quietly bids to wreck our conviction of being bounded figures, for they incessantly throw us into other times, places, and selves. This is not some form of cultural tourism on the cheap; rather, it extends our reach and thereby displays our truer actual dimensions. I said that words fuel this type of travel, but it is evident that imagination is the motor that drives our machine.

Mind you, this seemingly upbeat, perhaps overheated, liberal picture of the expanded self is also rife with threats. Without ever saying it,

literature is drawn, like moths to the flame, to the question of how much any of us can afford to imagine. I see something at once precious and troubling here. All of us have been told that it is ethically good to “walk in others’ shoes,” that occupying others’ subject positions may be the only way of understanding who they are, of understanding that they are real. But does such “outreach”—or “inreach”—have a price tag? Could some forms of identification be unsurvivable?

One thing is certain. None of our smart machines can even fathom such questions, much less exercise us in fathoming the answers.

### Literature’s Maps

Frequently in this study, I will speak of two religious philosophers—Pascal and Kierkegaard—who offer some of the pithiest accounts that I know of this type of understanding and boundary stretching. Let me acknowledge that Pascal and Kierkegaard are at pains to delineate the nature of *faith*, whereas my view of literature and my teaching are utterly secular. But, in ways they could not have intended, each of them is telling us that our ordinary cognitive operations—the machinery that enables us to understand mathematics or to read the newspaper—play us entirely false when it comes to the momentous affairs of heart and soul. Each of them challenges our conventional sense of epistemology, the nature of knowing. Each rebukes the lazy assumptions and outright hubris of the purely rational worldview, especially its defects as “search engine” (a term they would have understood if not used). Pascal has his sights on the immense stage of time and space that we, without purchase, inhabit, and Kierkegaard faults our traditional “reporting” habits (our reliance on “outcomes” and hence our ignorance of the “unknowing” experiential drama itself). Is this not literature’s very turf? Literature’s map?

As I said at the outset, the miracle that novels routinely pull off is to depict a person’s trip through time and space in the scope of a few hundred pages. But literature can also represent our doings, our actual comings and goings, both the external ones and the others as well, the neural ones, the emotional ones. It records the mercurial, kaleidoscopic activity that roils nonstop inside brain and heart.

That spread-out, layered, *networked* picture dwarfs today's electronic testimony. Yes, literature enlists the hoary old technology of print, but its rendition of the human subject nonetheless turns out to be *wired* beyond compare. Yes, you can now summon, with the flick of a finger on your iPhone, a humongous range of faraway things, but literature's storehouse has a drastically different salience and economy, for it registers entries and arrivals that are not subject to our control; instead, it follows a regime of breaking and entering, of nodal points that connect us unbidden, of long-ago linkages that flay us still, that sit inside us like radioactive or cancerous deposits. Or perhaps fill us with delight, enable a recovery or vision of lost or imagined love and beauty? To use an embattled term, literature brings to visibility a sentient *ecosystem* that no machine can capture but whose captive we are.

Is it too much to claim that a lifetime in the classroom is also a fourth-dimensional, far-flung exercise, with its peculiar nodal points? The teacher participates in an evolving human chain, no less than a cultural contract between the old and the young, and although no one can either say or map how much "life" goes into or remains vital in this project of dissemination, I'd argue it is the transport system that school is designed for. A single classroom looks bounded, although it isn't, and the composite classrooms of a career have serious scope. In addition, I've personally had rare luck in still farther-flung ventures, such as with video, audio, and DVD courses and with online programs, such as Coursera, in the past and with Zoom more recently, in our time of plague. What kind of face-to-face or shape-shifting could happen in these precincts so different from the brick-and-mortar containers we're used to? Teaching cargoes us into others' lives and is thus endowed with a futurity that outlives the classroom, sometimes outlives the teacher.

### Literature's Knowing, Teaching's Mission

Likewise, the "cost of knowing" is, I firmly believe, a signature feature of teaching, inasmuch as one seeks not only to impart information but to convey something even greater: its *value*, its wider reaches, its stakes in human life. Young people approach instruction the way animals



regard food: as sustenance. Or not. Perhaps the most fateful decisions in a classroom are rarely conscious as such, for they involve the young (and the not young) determining whether they do—or do not—find nutrients in what is presented. I actually think this true for every field, for every classroom, but it is the very rationale for teaching literature (a field all too easily dismissed as frills, or half-processed as merely dead letters). “Does this bear on me?” is the unstated but severe test question that students put to what they read, and the teacher, as well as the text, either passes or fails it. The best books interrogate their readers—jostle their assumptions, challenge their own sense of “me”—and the teacher’s calling must be to convey this “live.” There are myriad ways of doing so.

What, you may ask, does literature teach? Literature’s news has nothing in common with what you might find in so many other sources: CNN or the *New York Times* or your smartphone or a politician’s tweets or Wikipedia or indeed the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. We are now awash in an era of suspicion regarding the veracity of what we read or hear, thanks in part to social media in all its forms. “Fake news” is, all too often, the term applied to news we disagree with. But my sights are elsewhere: could *all* of it—liberal or conservative, blogosphere or dictionary, rumor or historical record—be, at some key level, *fake*? I’m pointing not to conspiracy theory but, rather, to the actual reach and tidings of what we *know*, what has galvanized our heart as well as our mind.  $2 + 2 = 4$  is something I “know”; my feelings for my wife, children, and brother are something I know differently. What do we know? How do we know it?

Philosophy might also be said to begin exactly here. I wonder how many people take seriously Socrates’s nugget of wisdom: “All I know is that I know nothing.” In my view it brings terrible news to us, and I have to think it especially noxious for young people, given that their entire education has told them the opposite, has claimed to increase their knowledge. And today, when we can access facts and data with a touch of a finger, this now labor-free belief is even more entrenched. By the time folks get to my classroom, they have good reason to feel they are already possessed of a serious amount of information, firmly documented by reams of grades and standardized tests. And they’re hungry to expand their base even further.



Hard to imagine Socrates a welcome guest at their feast, or to imagine him a tenured professor at a university today. Literature crawls with people discovering they know nothing. Do universities?

I invoke these critiques of personal knowledge, to continue pointing the way toward literature's peculiar endemic truths. And, again, I'll enlist as guide Søren Kierkegaard, whose astonishing *Fear and Trembling* (1843) not only straddles philosophy and religion but also posits the germinal thought that underwrites, as I've said, so much of my book, my life, and my career: what we think we know turns out to be fake news: not so much bogus or wrong as radically inadequate. All educated people believe they understand the story of Abraham and Isaac, but do they really? Remember Genesis 22. I've read it; I suspect you've read it. But even if you haven't, *you know what happened*. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac at Mount Moriah, but at the last minute the angel and ram appeared, Isaac was saved, and he went on to play his role in founding the Jewish people. Basic stuff: a story we know. Because we know how it ended.

But as Kierkegaard sublimely points out, Abraham went to Mount Moriah not knowing the ending. In this light, consider what you know of all recorded history, legend and fact, and ask yourself: how much of it is dependent on knowing the outcome? (Some outcome dates to ponder: 1066; 1492; 1776; 1789; 1861–65; December 7, 1941; November 23, 1963; September 11, 2001; and, for that matter, your birthday.) Kierkegaard has many purposes in this short, maddening text, but the one that matters most is signaled by the very title: *fear and trembling*. How much do you know about the fear and trembling that inhabited Abraham, that not only was the warrant for his faith but informs so much major human doing and undoing?

Literature's testimony teaches us about what never makes it into the world of numbers and facts and archives: human sentience. Any record that ignores—or cannot plumb—human feeling is alien to the actual texture of living. In that respect (and only in that respect) I will claim that the realm of data or information is, humanly speaking, fake news. The world of information is more Gothic than its believers believe, because it is so often ghostly, silhouetelike, deprived of human sentience.

The humanistic model is sloppy. It has no bottom line. It is not geared to productivity. It will not increase your arsenal of facts or data. But it rivals rockets when it comes to flight and the visions it enables (or the shibboleths it exposes). And it will help create denser and more generous lives, lives aware that others not only are other but are real, felt as such, encountered as such. In this regard it adds depth and resonance to the shadowy and impalpable world of numbers and data: empirical notations that have no interest or purchase in interiority, in values, notations that offer the heart no foothold.

### *Mitempfinden*, or Feeling With

In this sense, my job of the past half century—to impart a knowledge of literature—has been a great ride but also tricky, tricky. Students have every right to anticipate knowing something substantive by course’s end, whereas I am the Mephistophelian figure, the one bent on sabotage as much as discovery. After all, what do you know when you know a literary work? A reading of *Hamlet* produces nothing comparable to studying linear algebra or molecular biology or computer coding. As teacher, I have no ax to grind, no personal view of the world that I am trying to foist on either my writers or my students. Literature, I want my students to see, above all, is not window dressing, not an anthology of quotable phrases or beautiful language or stirring plots. Instead, it honors human sentience. It recognizes that our lives are bathed not only in fear and trembling, but in joy, pain, happiness, horror, excitement, anxiety, and much else that resists notation, that “passes show” as Shakespeare’s prince said, and thus eludes our monitoring devices and the public record, even as it underwrites our existence.

There is a line spoken by Goethe’s young protagonist, Werther (1774), that I’ve always admired, even though it is rarely quoted: “Only insofar as we empathize, is there honor in speaking of things” (Denn nur insofern wir mitempfinden, haben wir Ehre, von einer Sache zu reden). Goethe rightly enlists the word *Ehre*, honor, as the prerequisite for judgment or commentary, and I see something programmatic here: our discourse *must* embrace feeling if it is to be worthy as well as

credible. *Mitempfinden* means “to feel with.” There is nothing touchy-feely about this assertion; it acknowledges human feeling as life’s very ground, and it goes on to mandate a rule: your account must include this. What it does not quite say is, How do you get there? How do you “feel with”?

## Try It On

When approaching a piece of literature, I frequently urge my students to do something rather intimate: “Try it on.” I then remind them that they’d never purchase clothes or shoes without first trying them on, and they then remind me that online shopping has turned my exhortation into something quaint and nostalgic. OK. But visualize those angled mirrors that still exist in clothing stores, whereby you see yourself not only in the front but also from the side and even in the back. You see your butt. (The mirror is indispensable: you can’t do this without it.) Books of literature are mirrors of this sort. They see “inside” their characters (we can’t), but they also see their characters in the round (also off-limits to our vision of ourselves and others).

And they often see into the “beyond,” a place where the individual can be lost or eclipsed. This can range from delivering an entire city rife with change, even alienation (as Baudelaire does for Paris and as Joyce does, in countless different modes, for Dublin in *Ulysses*), to imagined, fantasized voyages (such as the masochistic speculations of sexual betrayal generated by Proust’s jealous narrator or the Faulknerian one made, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, by two Harvard students in 1910 into a Confederate camp in 1864). Or the fictional voyages can be literal, such as the one on a raft on the Mississippi undertaken by a runaway white boy and an escaped black slave. Sometimes literature reprises actual historical documents, such as Melville’s narrative of the real sea captain Amasa Delano who encountered things on a Spanish slave ship that exploded his worldview entirely, while challenging ours.

Readers who have never been to Dublin or Harvard, or on a raft or slave ship, find themselves fellow travelers, and this strange readerly perch opens onto the truer mysteries, the ones involving ethical and

spiritual transformation, confronting us with the shocking truths of art, reconfiguring—sometimes obliterating—the players themselves as well as the things we thought we knew. As said, the literary characters thrust into these larger realms can be transformed, undone, annihilated. But what happens to the reader who negotiates such landscapes? This would be literature's knowledge.

## Take It Out for a Spin

The discussion sections in my courses used to take place in Brown's science and engineering buildings, and for years there was a beguiling poster on one of the bulletin boards that spoke directly to my heart: it was a picture of a human brain (not a heart). This particular brain was figured like an automobile chassis, and it was outfitted with four spiffy wheels. The caption under the image read: "Take it out for a spin." This is sage advice, and eminently more palatable than Socrates's severe insistence that we know nothing, because it aligns with the outward voyage that all new learning generates inside us. In the past I chided my undergraduates, telling them that they seem willing to engage in the most strenuous physical exercises imaginable (such as I see in the huge, crowded gym rooms I walk past, with their shiny equipment and their sweating youths), whereas the exercise I am urging on them is different, at once cardiac and neural, but distinctly undisplayable by today's electronic monitors, whether EKG or EEG.

That brain-on-wheels, making its way through time and space, is unsurpassable as image, for it figures the very engine itself that is needed for the explorations and trips that lie ahead. Try it on! Strap yourself in! Far too long we've subscribed, in our schools, to a *work ethos*, drumming into our students the need to labor mightily, to strain with all their might—as if they were constipated—so as to absorb and ingest the materials we put their way. Have we missed the larks of it all?

Very often, today's literature courses are courses of correction: how the author was either blind or ideologically at fault. And I know how much good can come from this. Of course, we need to know about the sins of the past and the present, and we need to see how tenacious old,

encrusted beliefs can be. But we are nonetheless talking about literature. Writers and artists are not primarily trying to reform the world; their mission is to imagine it, to deliver it. Yes, there can be a profound ethical payload in such work, but it is rarely prescriptive or amenable to legislation. Works of literature do demand work, but, as I see it, of a different sort. What sort? The academy's reply is often: rigor, objectivity, theory; those have their place and their value, but you won't find very much of them in my classroom or in my book. In my crazier moments I think that rigor may be akin to rigor mortis. I am after other game: synthesis as well as analysis; connections that both bind and expand; even might-have-beens that never came to fruition but still live in the human heart.

### Dead Letters, Live Letters

But the tenor of the text, whether comic or tragic, whether declarative or subjunctive, does not alter the basic exchange in play. The umbilical cord linking teacher and text and student—with its implied imperative of nurturance, from the one to the other, of hallowing *life's* basic needs—that compact, indeed that covenant, writes large the very rationale of school as institution. Teaching, as I've said, is a vital generational compact, involving teachers and learners, hinging on the fact that *books do not speak for themselves*. Teachers speak them, make them live, help convert them from dead letters to living script.

Dead letters. You recognize the words but you don't get the meaning. Think about that. How much of your verbal world—books you've read, conversations you've had—consists in dead letters? Any honest tally would be immense. As my own mind starts to rot, I find this generic threat even more depressing than usual. We're not far from Kafka's frozen sea either, since the failure of communication is more often existential than merely lingual. Is there anything more miraculous than the unsimple event of words becoming alive, real? This entails more than some linguistic view of sign and referent; it is closer to magic, to the kinds of faith central to Pascal and Kierkegaard, when the language bridge works.

Education = to lead out. It's a trip. These matters are *vehicular*. The teacher does more than guide or contextualize; he or she lights the fuse, explodes the dynamite, sees to it that it goes off, where it is meant to, in the minds of the students who are brought into this age-old contract between the word and the life. For too long, we've thought these matters to be docile and discreet, a quiet affair of language and pedagogy; but they can be eye-opening, heart-opening, as the ceaseless semiotic miracle takes place, and we discover how volatile these forces are, how inflammable they and we are. I've intentionally enlisted melodramatic, fiery language here, because good teaching, even when it proceeds via whisper or wink or ironic aside, opens doors, so as to blow you through them.

## Going Out, Coming Home

How does one put teaching and writing—the two activities I've poured my life into—together, in such a way that highlights their remarkable common ground? My solution is: I want this book to do justice to the exploratory, expanding vistas of literature and teaching, while also attending to the pitfalls and reversals that can stud the entire enterprise. These two perspectives do not cancel each other out. One way to describe this two-way street is to see it as the “voyage out” and the “return home,” a round-trip model that is at once kinetic and reflective, or centrifugal and centripetal, committed to both the life voyage each of us makes and the sense we might make of it, before, during, and after. These terms risk seeming esoteric, but I have my sights on elemental things.

I have learned that my books inhabit me every bit as much as I inhabit them. The cohabitation makes clear boundaries and origins impossible. If I opine on any topic whatsoever, it is likely that the usual suspects (Sophocles, Shakespeare, the Brontës, Melville, Dickinson, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Twain, Strindberg, Kafka, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee, the whole crowd) are financing the party, whether or not I quote them, whether or not I even know they are there. The opposite is no less true: when I teach or write about the books that

matter most to me, I not only find/bring myself into the equation, but I seek overtly to translate them into the sentient and existential terms and issues that impact on my students, our society, our lives. Transport, *transport*.

However, I am acutely aware that the above paragraph could not possibly make sense for my students. For them, the words of the whole gang, from Sophocles to Morrison and Coetzee, are likely exotic, new, unknown. Untried. Perhaps even soporific. Certainly at risk of being or becoming dead words. And I wonder what they must think of the old man who seems larded with them, who claims his own inwardness is stocked with these words and thoughts, making up this payload he seems so intent on delivering. It is as if my mission were to dig into my own depths—for that is where my writers now live—and find ways to get these materials into theirs. I have no shovel or pickax available. Just a classroom with a couple of hours a week.

Isn't it odd that we know more about the etiology of disease than we do about the origins of thought? Or the deposits and transfers that take place in the dark?

For all these reasons, this book is *interwoven*. I write about my life path, about teaching as career, and about literature itself.

The account of my voyage from Memphis six-year-old to senior Brown University professor displays a version of those centrifugal energies I earlier mentioned, whereas my looking back with questions obeys the homecoming injunction no one escapes: what does it all mean? The very enterprise of teaching is cued to this same duet of exploratory and critical moves. Finally, the book harvest that will be central to many of these pages is no less keyed to these same matters: the cost of knowing, the dimensionality of narrative, the gathering retrospect. The books I discuss, and the "I" who is discussing them, have kept each other company, had their affair, for many long years. I don't want to separate them.

Yet that particular couple—the books and me—live by different rules, despite my conviction of what they share. Life itself has a way of talking back, and a half century in the trenches can teach the teacher a great deal that is not in the lesson plan. I am not speaking about the predictable failures: that the students don't read or understand either



the books or the teacher; that particular booby trap is baked into the system. There's worse. Anyone who has put in fifty years doing anything becomes a specialist about other types of wreckage as well, going well beyond classroom fiascoes to further more intimate threats involving the teacher's own machinery. There'll be a place for this too.

## Working for Your Bread

"Old men ought to be explorers," T. S. Eliot wrote, but exploration carries its own risks, especially for the old. And my openly incendiary account of what teaching entails has, as anyone can see, little in common with the subtle Socratic manner of gentle prodding and strategic indirection. (I wouldn't have gone far in a philosophy department.)

*Working for your bread*: my guess is that everyone reading this sentence has, at some time or another, come across or invoked this venerable phrase, to denote what they do to earn a living. It states a core algorithm in human life: the relation between effort and reward. It may surprise you that my mentor, Kierkegaard, explicitly brings it up—"Only one who works gets bread"—in order to blast it as blatantly untrue: many people work and receive no bread; many others receive bread without working. Here would be the elemental material injustice that resides deep within so many social and economic systems. Yet the philosopher goes on to claim that things are different in the soul. There, he says, it does not rain on the just and the unjust alike. There, in the soul, labor and reward align. What does he mean?

Kierkegaard is, I believe, talking about the severe law of *understanding*. You have to work through to knowledge. You cannot merely receive it or log on to it. His primary example, as I've said, is Abraham: you won't understand him until you factor in the fear and trembling he experienced, in obeying God's command. But we are free to apply this austere, beautiful notion to our own labors and to our grasp of mankind's efforts at large. We are awash with outcomes, but do we grasp the human drama that preceded and produced them?

"Working for your bread" has, of course, an unmistakable further fit with this book as well. After all, I am writing about fifty-plus years of



working for my bread: what I did, what it meant, what its value was. My students received grades, I received a salary, yet I am still pondering that critical relation between work and reward. There was a time when these matters seemed more self-evident and required no special pleading. It seemed to make obvious sense to study literature. CEOs even told us that the critical skills we were teaching would be highly valued in all walks of life. And few argued that it was foolhardy to spend time (and money) reading Shakespeare. These issues were uncontroversial.

But the world has changed. Today's students come to our universities well aware of the great prestige of STEM fields, and of its inevitable corollary: that a major in the humanities is impractical at best and a dicey choice or even death sentence at worst. Therefore, in a gnawing, unwanted way, the phrase also applies to the basic dilemma of my field itself: students (and their tuition-paying parents) today must suspect that the study of literature fails exactly this stubborn real-life test: it will not lead to a job or career; it will not yield bread. So, at least, the naysayers say.

This book is about what it does yield.

## Satyr Play

And here's the rub. We know the books are ageless. We also know the books are unflinching in their bookkeeping, about comeuppance, lost illusions, and cashiering of prior beliefs. What about teachers? The Greeks mixed comedies with their tragedies, and they included satyr plays as well. I cannot quite fill the bill on that front, but my retrospect would be hollow and fraudulent if it did not shine its critical, indeed satirical, light on the teacher (*moi*), to expose the foibles, hubris, failures, and other asserted messes that are threaded into my career but that I've never acknowledged or earlier noticed. I've come to see them all too clearly now, shiny and embarrassing, in the murky mirror. I now see that my end-of-career tale is also one of occasional pratfalls and error, of occasional purblind ignorance regarding my audience, of frequent arrogance and benightedness. Of only sensing now how inflated and pretentious many of my moves and claims might actually be.

And so there's a late chunk of this otherwise drum-beating book that delves into what the French call gaffes—errors, mistakes, or screwups. I don't find it easy to laugh at myself—my tone is frequently exalted, puffed up, declamatory; I suspect you've noted that—but these lower-to-the-ground gaffes have their own overdue, corrective, salty truths to deliver. They are owed in late reckonings. They demand their place in the trip home. Maybe, maybe, they will allow the teacher to learn some belated final lessons. Or, if not, at least they round out the story. We're never through discovering who we are.

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