Geoffrey Galt Harpham

Politics, professionalism & the pleasure of reading

A few short years ago, the state of literary studies was a subject of public controversy. According to some commentators, the study of literature at the university level had been seized by a malign spirit. Rather than conserving and transmitting the cultural heritage, literary scholars had become at once inaccessible and moralistic, incomprehensible and politically correct, disdainful of the common reader and of literature itself. Worst of all, they enjoyed privileged access to two precious things – young minds and the literary tradition of the nation – both of which they were corrupting.

For many literary scholars, especially those under forty, these were exciting times. Having lost the attention of much of the educated public during the 1970s and 1980s – the period of internecine battles over deconstruction, feminism, and Marxism – scholars were now, in the 1990s, engaged with nonacademic opponents in the 'culture wars.' Suddenly, professors of literature were widely considered to be important, even dangerous figures engaged in significant debates. Scholars on the front lines of these debates did not see themselves as antipopulist, moralizing obscurantists; far from it. Many felt that as a consequence of battles they had fought and won, the study of literature had been made conceptually more stringent and politically more engaged than it had been in the heyday of New Criticism, when literature was held to exist in an aesthetic realm untouched by philosophy, science, or ideology.

A measure of 'difficulty' in critical writing was, in fact, often regarded as the mark of a new seriousness, a new self-confidence, a new level of ambition, and well worth the cost in terms of popular appeal. Such figures as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin had been impressive in their ways, but they did not have theoretical awareness of the kind that younger literary scholars took for granted during the 1990s. They remained, in the view of many during this time, impressionistic, unsystematic, belletristic, and therefore, in many cases,

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unwittingly conservative and even uncritical.

While the rhetoric of literary study had become inaccessible to the layman, many scholars felt that the practice of literary criticism itself furthered the cause of justice and truth; they felt that theory enabled them to 'conceptualize,' 'thematize,' or 'problematize' the political in their work, so that criticism could be seen as making a political 'intervention.' Through their efforts, many scholars felt, literary scholarship had positioned itself on the side of cultural democratization and social justice; most impressively of all, it had broadened its horizons dramatically, to the point where it was established as a master discourse in which inquiries formerly reserved for the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, or history could be engaged. Fashioning themselves as the standard-bearers for intellectuals in general, a great many leading literary scholars had come to feel that their enemies were intellectually or politically reactionary, and that their friends included everybody who counted.

Today, things have changed – and it is the literary scholars who are on the defensive. The battles of today are not being fought in the lecture halls or classrooms, and the combatants tend to be armed with heavier ordnance than arguments. It's (still) the economy, stupid – and AIDS, and SARS, and WMDs, and terrorism, and Enron, and the environment, and technology, and globalism, and nuclear proliferation – and professors of literature find themselves once again marginalized in a culture that neither heeds their critiques nor rewards their contributions. Many literary scholars, having touted their discipline as the reflective form of political struggle, find themselves in a state of political and professional bewilderment that is not without an uneasy self-awareness of their own anomalous position: now tenured, they are weirdly secure in an unstable world, their claim to affinity with the marginalized, silenced, and dispossessed undercut by their own success.

But the marginalization produced by tenure is not the only or even the primary instance in the recent fortunes of literary study of a success followed by unintended consequences. Three others from recent years stand out: literary theory, professionalism, and politicization. Each one of these marks a moment of intellectual excitement and institutional effectiveness, followed by a reaction from which the discipline of literary study is still trying to recover.

It was easy, in the excitement that first circulated around the names of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, de Man, Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes, Althusser, and others, to overlook or misconstrue the antihumanistic spirit that, in varying degrees, animated all of them and made theory itself seem a 'movement.' So fascinating did American literary scholars in particular find the new modes of thought, with their exotic vocabulary and alien concepts, that they often failed to recognize, or enthusiastically endorsed, the determination to undermine concepts of human creativity, human freedom, and the human capacity for self-awareness that informed them. For a time, literary scholars in great numbers abandoned the specifically human orientation and scale that had always characterized their work and began to talk about things that were much smaller than human beings, such as graphemes, signifiers, or tropes, or much larger, such as Western metaphysics, epistemes, or ideological processes – and to talk about them as if they were independent, even 'constitutive,' of

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human agency or human communicative processes. Drawn by the cosmopolitanism, novelty, and intellectual authority represented by theory, literary scholars worked to refashion their discipline, leaving the figure of the self-aware and self-determining human being out of it – 'effaced,' 'bracketed,' or 'under erasure.'

A robust conception of human freedom, subjectivity, and creative agency may be expendable in many disciplines where human beings or their works figure as the objects of study, including biology, some branches of linguistics, some versions of philosophy, and even some social sciences. The study of literature, however, like the humanities generally, virtually requires us to posit individual acts of reflection, intention, and expression, as well as a social and historical context for such acts. The figures named above, who were often invoked as the master-thinkers of the theoretical movement in the United States, were not trained in literary studies, so this fact had little pertinence for them. But their arguments were imported to this country largely by literary scholars, who might have been expected to be suspicious of Trojan horses. And a Trojan horse it was, for by comparison with the masterly new force of advanced theory, the disciplines of literary criticism and literary history seemed woefully undisciplined, and seemed to shrink under its gaze. And the study of literature evolved: where scholars once discussed Dickens's depiction of women, they now talked about the representation of gender with Dickens as example, and eventually began to discourse on gender theory as such, minus the distracting examples.

While the worldly consequences of the profusion of theoretical discourse may have been slight, one of the many by-products of that profusion was a sharp spike in professorial self-esteem. This effect was closely linked to a new emphasis on professionalism in literary study and in the academy more generally. Professionalism had always been an unstressed element in academic life, especially in the humanities, where many scholars had scarcely even regarded themselves as employees, much less as members of a guild. But beginning about twenty years ago, and spurred by an influential series of articles on professionalism in literary study by Stanley Fish, scholars began to take more seriously such things as conferences and professional organizations, and to think more systematically about workplace issues. The annual meetings of the Modern Language Association became not ceremonies of decorous conviviality, but scenes of turbulence and upheaval, animated by political insurgencies, theoretical quarrels, and a sharpened awareness of the brutal economics of the market. In this highly stressed and volatile context, it was both exciting and reassuring for professors to think that an academic life might be not just a practice of routine and unmarked constancy undertaken over a succession of decades, but a career, with the kinds of structure and self-affirmation enjoyed by professionals in other fields. Under the influence of this new conception of the scholar's working life, 'the profession' (as it called itself with increasing conviction) of literary studies discovered a new solidarity and a new sense of its own prospects.

Others, however, did not always join in the excitement felt by the newly professionalized scholars. Undergraduates, to take one significant example, are often disturbingly unaware of the professional eminence of their teachers. They form their own opinions, and are unim-

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pressed by talk of 'the profession' when they are trying to come to grips with Melville, Dickinson, Woolf, or Swift, often for the first and last time in their lives. A professionalized professoriat may be in touch with their own careers, but they are not thereby placed in a vital relationship with their most essential constituency; nor can they easily, or at least consistently, claim the special kind of cultural authority or prestige traditionally associated with deep intimacy with the literary heritage.

Professionalism is often portrayed as a self-enclosed and self-protective state of mind devoted to hierarchy and group structure rather than to openness, innovation, risk, passion, idiosyncrasy, free inquiry, iconoclasm, or historical imagination – all of which are, or can be, characteristic of the very best literary scholarship. However valuable or even invaluable it may be in fostering group self-appreciation and support structures, the spirit of professionalism fails to solicit, when it does not actively suppress, undergraduate enthusiasm; moreover, it deforms the training of graduate students, who, having arrived at graduate school with a love of literature, are encouraged not to engage in a long-term project of immersing themselves in the traditions of literature and literary study, but immediately to think of themselves in an entrepreneurial sense as publishing and conference-going scholars whose business is to make assertive but essentially agreeable little interventions in the ongoing and self-sustaining conversations conducted by a narrowly defined subgroup.

Perhaps the most curious feature of literary study over the past generation has been the odd coupling of a vigorous professionalism and a subversive anti-authoritarianism. One of the primary justifications for developing robust professional structures has traditionally been to organize resistance to political pressures that would deform conscientious practice. This justification was especially pertinent in the case of literary study, which traditionally conceived of itself as a scholarly practice ideally abstracted from the urgencies of the moment. The need for professional solidarity was reinforced by the hostility to the academy, and to literature professors in particular, that manifested itself from time to time, most notably during the reign of Lynne Cheney as head of the NEH. But the profession of literary studies did not respond to political pressures by reaffirming the apolitical nature of its work. Beginning with an attempt to enlarge or to abolish the canon of traditional literature, and moving to an endorsement of a variety of minority-rights causes, literary studies in its dominant forms committed itself both to professional self-affirmation and to an often harsh critique of established power structures.

The connection may have been made on the grounds of a growing sense that literature professors had long since lost whatever influence they had once enjoyed as guardians and exemplars of a coherent cultural tradition. Attacked for promoting both elitism and antitraditional populism, but losing ground to scientists on the one hand and to popular culture on the other, many literary scholars felt they had to band together for group defense and consolation, and to form common cause with others who found themselves outside the mainstream, including women, African Americans, and gays. Their vocation as critics could be easily adapted to a social rather than a literary context, and their theoretical sophistication gave them access to a comprehensively 'radical' posi-

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tion. Speaking up for the silenced, the ignored, the disrespected, the stereotyped, and the marginalized, many literary scholars felt themselves to be doing many things at once: performing a cultural service, undermining an oppressive established order, promoting a more egalitarian society, and asserting themselves as a cultural and political force.

Of course, literary scholars have the right to speak out and the right to free assembly; indeed, as articulate and presumably informed citizens, they have something like an obligation to enter the public realm wherever they might contribute. But this responsibility derives from citizenship, not from academic credentials. It does not derive at all from literary study itself. The relation between the immediacies of the political arena and works of art – which become regarded as art by virtue of their ability to detach themselves from their contexts and speak to people across boundaries of time, space, and culture – is never more than indirect, analogical, and, above all, variable from reader to reader, moment to moment, context to context. Literary study may be political in some larger or more general sense, but it has no necessary political directionality, and can easily accommodate positions on the left, right, and center of the political/cultural spectrum. To suggest otherwise, as many on both sides of the culture wars have done, is to attribute to literary study itself a kind of purposiveness and commitment that properly belongs to individuals in particular circumstances.

The unanticipated and unintentional consequence of these three powerful currents – antihumanistic theory, professionalism, and political engagement – blowing over the scene of literary studies is a distinct lack of confidence among today's younger scholars about the purpose, audience, and value of their work. I suspect that this uncertainty is experienced most acutely at the top research institutions, which have been most eagerly responsive to new energies. This lack of confidence has aggravated the current ailment of literary study – a persistent uncertainty concerning the object of attention. Since literature consists of the representation of human thought or action, the literary artifact can be approached from the point of view of any humanistic discipline. Indeed, one could argue that literature cannot be studied 'in itself' at all, and that literary study actually requires assistance from some other discipline that provides an angle of vision and limits and sorts the evidence. Over the years, philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and history have been remarkably effective in providing such support, but the dominant discipline informing literary study today is the weak form of anthropology known as cultural studies, which is, by comparison with these others, theoretically and methodologically undefined. With 'culture,' and sometimes 'material culture,' invoked as the context for literary study, younger scholars often find themselves wondering about such fundamental and preliminary questions as what they are talking about, what counts as a 'fact,' and what constitutes an 'advance in knowledge' in their field.

The situation sounds dire, but literary scholars have one very important and constant ally as they struggle to regain their sense of purpose and cultural value: the enduring power of literature to attract serious interest from young people. With its direct but noncoercive address to readers, its invitation to engage with it on one's own terms, literature has always elicited live or stray psychic energy of the sort that college-age students have in great abundance, and pro-

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vides ways of thinking about experience that experience itself does not always afford. Teachers are necessary guides through literary texts, and thus, indirectly, through the life experiences that seem to be illuminated by them. By mediating the experience of literature for students, professors can borrow some of literature's charisma, and can even take some credit for it.

More so than any other subject, literature lends itself to powerful teaching. In their desire to assert a professional identity as serious as that of research scientists, literary scholars have, however, convinced themselves that the best teaching jobs are those that involve the least, or least strenuous, teaching. This disposition is both ill suited to the times, which are skeptical of the bottom-line value of literary studies, and out of step with the mounting crisis among university presses, which is constraining opportunities for traditional forms of publication. It is, in this context, not irrelevant that when alumni recall their most memorable college experiences, they frequently single out a particular teacher – often a professor of literature – who managed to provide instruction about the text, and about far more than the text. Countless films, stories, plays, and novels have taken the university as their setting, and the vast majority of these involve professors in the English department, which is, for the culture at large, the site within the university where the desire for knowledge braids most intimately with the hunger for experience. Literary scholars should not waste their time protesting the inaccuracy of their image in the media, but should see in such portraits a recognition of the ability of literary pedagogy to reach deep into a student's growing self-understanding and understanding of the world. Learning how to make the most of this ability is a professional necessity for literature professors – even a survival skill.

One of the most stubborn of the aesthetic mysteries that professors must learn to talk about productively is the peculiar nature of aesthetic pleasure, which can attach itself not just to comedies or lyric poems, but also to representations of human misery, pain, and suffering. The spectacle of King Lear wandering the plain in his madness, of the gnawing self-consumption of Dostoevsky's underground man, of the wittily articulated hopelessness endured by Kafka's heroes, even of Anne Frank's unbearably poignant self-discovery – all give us an intense but inexplicable and even disturbing pleasure. Our own reactions seem to implicate us somehow in the suffering we are reading about, and lead us deep into the chasm that separates the aesthetic representation from the thing represented, and thus to the specificity of art. By suggesting a certain capacity for detachment, our pleasure in the contemplation of pain also troubles the image we may have of ourselves as morally sensitive people, and so provokes a critical self-scrutiny and thus a sharpened and refined self-awareness.

Even when we are reading about pleasurable experiences, our own pleasure in reading is of a different kind, and the discordance between the events represented and our interest in those events suggests a human capability to take things in a different sense than they seem to demand – an ability to understand something against the grain or construe it according to our own interests. Becoming aware of this ability leads us to the recognition that the world as given does not necessarily determine our responses to it. We learn from literature what we want to, when we want to, and this deferred and independent process

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of learning constitutes an experience of dawning freedom to which undergraduates more than anyone should be exposed.

The distinctive form of aesthetic pleasure we take from the literary experience gives us the sense that we are being deepened, empowered, and enriched even as we are being entertained or charmed – pleased in the deepest sense. Such a complex experience is difficult to theorize, professionalize, or politicize, but it is a vital and essential dimension of literary study, and should be maximized wherever possible. Indeed, just as one rough measure of literary merit is the degree of aesthetic pleasure the work creates, an equally rough measure of the merit of literary scholarship might be the degree to which it brings out or awakens an otherwise latent capacity for such pleasure in the work under discussion. This 'degree' cannot be measured, and is rarely mentioned in promotion reviews, but a critical practice that does not expose itself to such a test cuts itself off from its only durable support – the desire people have to turn and return to literature even when not obliged to.

There is a diffuse kind of politics here, but literary study cannot be considered as a superior or refined civics, for what it really fosters is an ongoing and open-ended project of individual and, perhaps, social self-examination and transformation. Professors of literature are in a position to encourage this project, but must learn to accept the principle of pleasure (rather than the desires for enlightenment, virtue, or justice) as its engine, and deferral and indirection as its conditions. As citizens, literary scholars may commit themselves to any position, any ideology, any issue, any candidate they choose, but in their roles as professors of literature, they participate in a small yet critical way in a process with a much longer time frame and a far greater range of possible outcomes. What they teach is not just a set of facts about an archive of texts, important as the record of literary history is; they also inculcate an informed and disciplined responsiveness not directly connected to advantage, utility, or immediate needs. Transmitting the literary heritage in all its astonishing variety, scholars are engaged in the constant rekindling of the capacity to experience aesthetic pleasure and the sense of imaginative freedom, even wonder, that accompanies that experience. Part of that wonder might be directed toward the remarkable fact of cultural survival and transmission across the continents, the cultural boundaries, and the millennia. Such a project may not satisfy many short-term interests, but it is not without honor, and those who are engaged in it have no need to question the value of their work.

Despite the noisy ideological quarrels that seem to beset literary studies, the best kinds of literary scholarship in any school are characterized by a few constant qualities: scrupulous attention to the text and to its various contexts; an equally scrupulous attentiveness to that aspect of the text that detaches from those contexts and speaks to readers today; and the ability to make interesting connections between the text and ideas that are current today but that are addressed in the literary text only indirectly or analogically. Especially given the crisis character of so many aspects of contemporary society, there is no shortage of such ideas today, and therefore absolutely no reason why literary scholars should not continue to discover new ways of making these connections, thereby renewing the literary tradition and providing contemporary debates

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with resources they would not otherwise have.

What literary scholars need today is, then, not a new set of intellectual masters, or a new fortification of professional structures, or a more effective way of articulating political opposition. What is needed is more general and fundamental – a renewed sense of confidence and mission, especially among younger scholars. The profession can be most useful in nurturing this confidence by reminding its members that while professional structures do provide a certain measure of affirmation and solidarity, and thus a degree of autonomy from extra-academic or anti-academic pressures, professional concerns do not form the horizon of their interests or even their ambitions. The kind of confidence needed now will be based on a clarified sense of the long-term processes of cultural and individual self-interrogation and self-transformation to which literary study contributes, and a keener understanding of the forces that drive them. If literary scholars can reconnect their practice with these slow and uncertain but deeply necessary processes, they will have performed an immense service for themselves, for their students, and for the larger community whose precious artifacts are, for a brief moment, in their care.

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